

Have You Considered An Executive Coach?

By Joyce Brocaglia

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In last month's column I defined executive coaching, discussed why coaching has become so popular and how it differs from traditional development programs with Executive Coach Barbara Poole. Poole is the President and founder of Success Builders, Inc., a South Carolina-based executive coaching and organizational consulting firm. Barbara has an M.S. in Clinical Psychology and a B.A. in Psychology and is a Master Certified Coach (MCC) through the International Coach Federation, the only Master Certified Coach in the state of South Carolina. Poole's coaching approach focuses on helping clients increase their capacity to achieve results in a manner that is both professionally effective and personally fulfilling.

Q. *What's the difference between coaching and therapy? Between coaching and consulting? Between coaching and mentoring?*

A. These distinctions are really important, because like anything else, coaching is not a panacea. Therapy springs from a medical model and assumes that the client has some inherent dysfunction from past history that needs to be "cured". Coaching has more in common with an athletic coaching model. It assumes that the client is a fully functional person who wants to take a good game and make it world-class. The focus in coaching is on today and on the future, rather than on the past. It represents a partnership between coach and client, rather than a doctor-patient type relationship. Consulting is different in that it derives from the consultant's expertise and ability to give appropriate advice to a client or organization. Thus, it's really more about the consultant. Coaching, on the other hand, is about helping the client to unearth their own wisdom and see things from new perspectives, thus leading to more effective behaviors and choices. Mentoring is the classic sage-apprentice relationship. It typifies the elder who takes a learner under her wing to "show her the ropes". Again, this is about teaching and advising, not about unearthing the client's own resources, which is the essence of good coaching. It kind of goes back to the distinction between giving a man a fish and teaching him to fish for a lifetime.

Q. *I've heard that a lot of companies hire coaches for leaders who need "fixing" in some way. What's that about and is it even possible?*

A. Some people call this "remedial coaching" and I would agree with that label. The typical scenario goes something like this: The executive making the request says, "We promoted Attila because his technical prowess is legendary. But at this level in the organization he's highly visible, both internally and externally. He's blunt and abrupt and he's damaging critical relationships that we've worked hard to build. Help him develop his people skills before he derails." Now, surprisingly enough, this actually has the potential to be a viable coaching assignment. But that's if, and only if, Attila sees the same needs on his own and is motivated to truly engage in the coaching process. Coaching is not something you can do "to" someone. If Attila is willing to seriously focus his energy on his own developmental needs rather than claiming that the problem is "out there," this could be a coachable situation. I must emphasize could be—no guarantees here.

Q. *The concept behind coaching makes a lot of sense, but what data exist to justify its impact? How can you measure its efficacy?*

A. That's a great question, and a really important one that represents a huge factor in an organization's decision to invest in coaching. The truth is, because this is still a relatively young specialty, we're playing catch up to

amass the data that speak to the results of coaching. There are a few studies out there, including one by Manchester and one by MetrixGlobal, that speak objectively to the healthy return on investment for executive coaching. But we need more. Fortunately, that's a major thrust in the field these days and I believe we'll see a lot more hard data in the next couple of years that reinforce coaching as an organization's investment in its own future. In the meantime, there are anecdotal stories galore that attest to the value of coaching in helping leaders to play a bigger and stronger game.

Q. *If I wanted to hire a coach how would I go about it? It seems like everyone is calling him or herself a coach these days, so how do I make sure that I'm considering someone who's qualified?*

A. Hiring a coach is truly a matter of buyer beware. Because coaching is hot these days, and because it is currently an unregulated field, there are a ton of people coming from other disciplines like trainers, consultants, human resources specialists, and even psychologists who are simply hanging new shingles and calling themselves coaches.

This is dangerous, because like any other field, coaching has a distinct technology and set of practices that aren't learned simply by osmosis. The professional association that serves the field, the International Coach Federation (ICF), has worked hard to establish stringent standards for coaching training programs as well as a rigorous certification process for coaches desiring independent verification of their qualifications. The ICF certifies coaches at the Associate (ACC), Professional (PCC), and Master (MCC) certification levels. There are currently approximately 1200 ICF certified coaches around the world. That database can be searched at www.coachfederation.org. It's also important for leaders to carefully interview coaches before making hiring decisions to ensure that there's a good match. Coaching involves a technology, but it also involves good chemistry. At the end of the day, coach and client have to be on the same wavelength for it to work.

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