

COACHING

Coaching Is a Viable Alternative to Mentoring



Sharon Machrone

It's not just a matter of semantics: While both mentoring and executive coaching help develop and retain high-performing leaders, ensuring future organizational bench strength, not every potential leader has access to a sufficient pool of potential mentors — and not every leader is capable of being a good mentor.

What is becoming apparent is that executives — even those with formal mentoring relationships — can further benefit by employing an executive coach. Before looking at what coaching is, consider what it is not.

- Clearly, coaching is not mentoring, which requires a long-term commitment and connection between the mentor and the individual. Coaching is usually a short-term relationship (three to 12 months) where the focus is on expanding the executive's awareness of how she can be most effective in the organization.

- Coaching is not training, which tends to emphasize skills development. Coaching, instead, allows the executive to receive information from a focused point of view. Everything relates to the context of her job and the very specific areas she wants to address.

- Coaching is not therapy. While personal issues may be touched upon in the executive coaching process, the focus is on job content and performance, leaving the more personal and historical issues for another type of professional.

With coaching, the operative word is "partnership." The executive coach serves as a committed listener, providing observations and, most important, asking the right questions to help the client deepen her learning, improve her performance and develop herself as a well-balanced leader. A coach guides the client in shaping a strong and effective

professional identity, helping her design the conversations that will support that identity in the workplace. A coach can also provide more objective guidance than a mentor, whose advice is often tied to a "company line." Moreover, an executive may feel less reluctant about revealing insecurities and lack of knowledge with a coach than with a corporate mentor.

Even executives who are part of a formal mentoring program or who have a more informal relationship with an organizational mentor can benefit from having a coaching relationship at the same time. The mentor can help bring the executive along in company-specific ways through dialogue and example, while the coach can provide an objective "world view" that plays to the client's strengths, helping her address the challenges of her present situation.

There are many excellent coaches in the marketplace today, but finding someone who is a good match is critical to the success of the relationship. Seeking referrals from other executives is an excellent way to find a good coach. Also, most corporate learning and development departments maintain lists of the independent coaches already screened for experience and competence.

Remember: Mentoring is generally a long-term relationship between a junior and senior executive in the same organization that helps bring the junior executive along over time, while coaching is a short-term partnership between an "insider" and an "outsider" that focuses on making the executive more effective in her organization today. Being clear on the distinction between coaching and mentoring will make either relationship a more powerful tool in career development and professional growth.

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