The Do's and Don'ts of Executive Coaching

By Richard Gauthier

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Experience in organizations has taught me that leadership matters. Leaders set the course, establish values, create productive environments, build capacity and manage operations. Even the slightest improvement in strategic ability, delegation, competence or emotional intelligence has a significant impact on the results an organization achieves. The better the leadership, the better the organization.

One specifically focused way to better both is through one-on-one coaching for the development of high-potentials, influential senior managers and executives. Popularly known as executive coaching, this emerging practice has proven successful enough to attract professional management consultants, organizational development experts and internal organizational practitioners who seek validation through certification.

My firm and a number of other consulting firms specialize in executive coaching and provide certification for others after codifying what has evolved as accepted practices based on what has worked and what hasn't. The more people certified and practicing the more we share experiences that lead eventually to general practices, accepted rules, evolving methodologies and practical tools; all executed within a generally standardized cycle consisting of some variation on the phases of contracting, assessment, goal setting, action planning, coaching through execution and measurement.

My experience in this evolving profession has consisted of coaching in a variety of industries with a full caseload and certifying hundreds of independent external and internal consultants. These activities, along with considerable collaboration with my colleagues in the profession, have been formative and instructive in helping me figure out what's most effective, somewhat effective, effective, or hardly effective at all. Given my philosophy of leadership (Great leaders create leaders-not followers) and style (I guide through process-I don't direct), I think I've figured out what generally works and what doesn't for my clients. And if asked to guide an aspiring coach through what trial and error has taught me, the do's and don'ts of coaching, if you will, I'd offer the following for each phase of the coaching cycle:

Contracting

Do include in the contract discussions clarification and agreement on arrangements and confidentiality: Who will schedule? If either of you has to cancel-by when? Where you'll meet: how frequently? By when should the coaching cycle have been completed? (Six to 16 months is generally accepted depending on the complexity of the issue). Confidentiality-what does it mean to you and to the client and the terms you can both accept?

Don't hesitate to make it clear that the only time you'll break a confidentiality agreement is if you learn of actions by your client or others that would clearly result in serious physical or emotional damage to any individual, group or the organization.

Do reconsider your decision to contract with an individual if, early on, it becomes obvious that your client is suffering from severe depression or shows signs of a problem with drinking, drugs or violence. Reference your client to a social worker, psychologist or the organization's Employee Assistance Program and move on.

Don't contract to coach someone whose boss or direct report you are also coaching. You'll soon abdicate the role of coach and too easily evolve into a mediator, or worse, a broker for one side or the other.

Do avoid contracting to coach clients whose fundamental principles, values and subsequent behavior you simply can't abide. You'll want to change these clients and that's not your job. Leave that to their wives or husbands. Your job is to help them change what they want to change and make your clients better at what they do. If you can't buy into what they do and why, you don't want to make them better at it.

Don't contract to coach clients as part of an organizational documentation process for demotion or termination. If the decision has been made, coach the organization to step-up to that decision as soon as possible. Avoid the seduction to pull off "last hope" heroics-it seldom works.

Assessment

Do assess. At best, use a 360 and interviews; at least, interview. Your clients represent one point of view, and their good intentions color their perception of how they show up in organizations. Only others, who experienced your clients, can offer an accurate reflection of what they actually do and how and why it translates as effective or ineffective. Reassess informally every three to four months and formally every six to eight months.

Don't quote directly when presenting confidential interview feedback to clients. Repeated phrases, familiar comments, favorite words or expressions will identify the person interviewed and betray the process of anonymity.

Do use the following criteria when deciding with your clients whom to interview: People who experience your clients frequently, whom your clients perceive to be honest and forthright, whom your clients trust, and whose opinion your clients value.

Don't move directly into goal setting at the same meeting where you provided assessment and interview feedback. Feedback is never easy and clients need time to absorb and process the information. Give them a week or two. This reflection time is especially important if the feedback was tough and clients are in denial or see no benefit in addressing the obvious development opportunity. If clients are in the same place a week or two later, they are not, at that time, open to coaching and you must patiently bide your time. If possible, avoid talking clients into what they deny has to be done.

Do request to see your clients' prior assessment reports, no matter how dated. People change, yes, but themes will emerge and if strongly evident in former evaluations, they may still be around in varying forms. The sooner you know the better. That said-you must remain open to the possibility that the issues have been resolved and are not influencing the development opportunity you're working on.

Don't allow yourself to judge assessment information on your clients as "good" or "bad." It is for them to react to, not you. When presenting assessment data, remain neutral and objective in mind, attitude, and tone of voice.

Goal-setting and Action Planning

Do be sure that your clients choose their one or two key developmental goals, not you or the boss. Your job is to coach and guide your clients through a change they have chosen to make. Your clients own the content, you own the process. Over a sustained period of time, clients will stay the course if the goal is of their choosing and for their personal benefit.

Don't allow clients to use your coaching involvement to solve all the issues of their personal and professional lives. Given all else they have to do, one or two developmental goals relevant to their business or career objectives is reasonable and offers the best chance of success.

Do help clients frame the choice of development goal based on three criteria: their business objectives, the next step up in their career, and the feedback relevant to the former two. Ask what change can or should they make to better meet those professional and personal career objectives.

Don't just set the goal by defining the current state and the desired future state. Once the goal is defined, the key is the action plan to attain the goal. What's to be done? How will it be done? Who is needed to help? By when will it be done? And how will we measure whether or not we are on course? The best action plans outline both behaviors that have to be unlearned as well as new behaviors to adopt.

Do recognize that the key to improvement in action planning lies in "how" they're going to do the work, not the "what" they plan to do. "What" simply defines their intentions, the improvement, the work, the blueprint and guidepost for your coaching is in the "how" column. Take your time on this part of the action plan; it will keep you both focused going forward.

Don't settle for just goal-setting and action planning: complete the session with a cost/cost/benefit analysis. The repetition of "cost" is not a typo, but a reminder that cost has two parts. First, have your clients describe and record what it's going to cost them if they don't address the issues and develop according to plan. Second, have clients describe what it will cost them personally and professionally to make the changes defined by the plan. Finally, clients should describe the benefits of changing and accomplishing the desired change. Clients must do this with guidance but minimal input from the coach because when they hit the inevitable rough spots, it's their words and their thoughts on what's in it for them that will better sustain them.

Coaching

Do prepare an agenda for each session to guide the discussion, but never to direct it. Take time, after each session, to take notes on key insights and progress toward the goal. Formally document and file-but only what you'd be willing to submit to court of law.

Don't socialize with clients. You jeopardize objectivity and render yourself more accessible but less effective. Also, avoid actively probing into clients' personal life unless it has direct bearing to the developmental goal or organizational situation you are addressing. If so, explain the possible relevance and ask permission before you explore those connections.

Do build an organizational support structure of coaches and mentors for your clients. Key people within the organization, who experience your clients on a regular basis, should be invested in their transformation, supportive of the effort and willing to give feedback. Spend time with each and teach the fundamentals of constructive feedback.

Don't ever talk to one client about the issues of another without permission.

Do monitor your coaching session as the conversation develops by asking yourself if you have been talking more than your client in the past 10 minutes. If so, change the dynamic so that the answer is different 10 minutes further on.

Don't ever answer the question "What should I do?" if it relates to your clients' development objectives. Or if you find yourself in the middle of a sentence that started with, "If I were you I'd..."-cough, sputter and leave the room for a drink, but don't finish the sentence. What you, the coach, would do is not relevant. It's always about the client's ability to change in some critical area, make decisions from a shifted framework, and get on with doing things more efficiently or effectively. She must answer "What should I do?"-not the coach.

Summing up in the spirit of good coaching, I'd like to close the "do's and don'ts" on the "do" side with two positive recommendations. One is an admonition and the other a fundamental belief that has sustained me throughout my coaching experiences.

I admonish you to remain flexible and recognize that the general rules that experience teaches us do not apply in all times, with all clients, under all circumstances. The do's and don'ts that guide us should not direct us. They are guideposts that help keep us on course but we must always be willing to make an exception if something tells us that doing so will better serve our client. I recommend you do the same with my list and your own of what works and what doesn't.

Finally, coaches are in the change business and change is hard. Coaching seldom has to do with changing the people or situations our clients encounter but rather changing something within our clients relative to how they respond to people and circumstances. I'm convinced that's the essence of our work and what has sustained me in this profession is this paraphrase of a fundamental belief expressed centuries ago by Marcus Aurelius: "Man's greatest liberation is the realization that he has the ability to choose his attitude and reaction to any set of circumstances.

Do good work. Coaching matters.

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Linkage is a global organizational development company that specializes in leadership development. We provide clients around the globe with integrated solutions that include strategic consulting services, customized leadership development and training experiences, tailored assessment services, and benchmark research. Linkage's mission is to connect high-performing leaders and organizations to the futures they want to create.

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