



Executive coaching is an effective business tool that is reaching widespread acceptance. A Google search for “executive coach” produces over a million hits. The New York Times has said that “. . . companies offer coaching as a prerequisite . . . in the understanding that everyone has blind spots and can benefit from a detached observer.” The Harvard Business Review wrote, “The goal of coaching is the goal of good management: to make the most of an organization’s valuable resources.”

Webster’s definition of coach as a verb – “to instruct, train, or prompt” and “to train intensively” – doesn’t quite capture what is going on in organizational circles today.

A more comprehensive definition is offered by Richard Kilburn, author of “Executive Coaching: Developing Managerial Wisdom in a World of Chaos” – “A helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization and a consultant who

uses a wide variety of behavioral techniques and methods to assist the client to achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and consequently to improve the effectiveness of the client’s organization within a formally defined coaching agreement.”

One way that I like to think of coaching is to compare it to what it is not. Consulting, in my point of view, is bringing in a “fresh eyes” perspective

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to help sort out specific workplace issues. There are as many categories of consultants as there are business problems – IT, financial, human resources, marketing, etc. The consultant must walk a fine

line between offering useful, realistic, and affordable solutions on one hand, versus imposing his or her reality on others in an unworkable way on the other.

Consulting often is a “here it is” process, in that it generally seeks to provide information built on the premise that individuals will then just implement the solution. Of course, sometimes this approach works well, and sometimes, old patterns that had nothing to do with the subject of the consultation simply reassert themselves.

Another approach to achieve different results in the business environment (often greatly overused, in my opinion) is training. Let’s put everybody through a comprehensive training program, and then we’ll get results!

Training can be very valuable for delivering information. The new safety procedures, the software upgrade, or the product information specs can all be transmitted reasonably well in a classroom style setting.

However, stand-alone training to change behavior almost always falls flat. Virtually all of us have been to a fabulous workshop where the rewards of doing things differently become crystal-clear, and we drive home thinking, “Yes, I’m going to incorporate this into my daily routine!” Two weeks or two months later, the evaporation rate is astounding.

Executive coaching is also not psychotherapy. Coaching in the organizational environment has a primary focus on the workplace, and if there are significant unresolved personal issues, like depression, substance abuse, or major life stressors, then psychotherapy is the valuable and necessary first step towards basic equilibrium. In my way of thinking, psychotherapy asks the question “How do we restore or support the psyche (originally the Greek word for soul) to achieve

optimal functioning?” and coaching asks the question “If you could have optimal effectiveness and satisfaction in your professional role, what would you need to know and change about yourself in that environment?”

An absolute requirement for a client to enter into a professional coaching arrangement with me is the willingness to accept appropriate vulnerability. A request from “the boss” who wants my coaching on how to “fix” others is met with a diplomatic discourse on why that method does not work, and that indeed, it has counter-productive elements. Coaching is built on the idea of someone taking primary responsibility for their own change, and the coach becomes the facilitator, not the impetus, the driver, or the judge.

Ideally, executive coaches provide accurate “mirroring” so that the client can see him/herself differently, and from that additional information, increase their awareness of how they interact with others. By enhancing their options in dealing with

challenging conversations and emotions, a goal of creating better alignment of their personal and professional selves is achieved.

Perhaps a case history will be illustrative. A plant manager of a manufacturing facility was interested in changing some of the interactions

with his ten-person management team. “Bob” would often find that he would ask for information about specific company objectives, and then get “edgy” when either the style or the content of the response did not seem adequate from his perspective. Bob would then berate the individual or the group until he got the answer he wanted, or he would project his frustration and move on without



resolution. He knew that this pattern was not producing the desired results for him or the team.

I started to sit in, with permission from all parties, on Bob's meetings with individuals and the group. After those meetings Bob and I would discuss his



goals for better outcomes, what he saw as his helpful and unhelpful contributions, and in hindsight how he could have shifted his tone or content.

After building professional trust, and getting a sense of our mutual objectives, I moved into a "live coaching" phase. This meant that I could stop a meeting at any time to offer real-time observations, and question Bob in the moment about how he saw himself.

Of course, the first time this happens in a group setting, jaws virtually drop. Here's some outsider challenging the boss in front of us! However, the participants quickly see that Bob is giving them a powerful demonstration of his willingness to build his skills in the service of the business, and they also get to see how a supportive confrontation works on the spot.

After some time, I knew it was time for me to transition out when, one day, Bob stopped mid-sentence, and said, "Wait, that's that 'edgy' thing again, isn't it? Let me rephrase that!"

The executive coaching work that I do is all in the context of my other organizational work. For a different coaching perspective, check out the Coaching Center of Vermont (www.coachingcen-

terofvt.com). Executive Director, Liz Dallas, has put together a strong coalition of affiliated coaches covering a wide variety of interest areas.

In today's ever-changing business world, people in a position of responsibility do not have the luxury of taking years to figure out how to get out of their own way. Success these days is based not just on financial numbers, customer service stats, or employee morale surveys. Feeling reasonably good more often than not about one's own effectiveness, congruency, and connectedness makes the biggest difference in how we assess our workday as we head home. Executive coaching has emerged as one valuable tool to assist in that goal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Flip Brown

Flip Brown is the owner of Business Culture Consultants (www.businesscultureconsultants.com). He can be reached at (802) 658-4111 or bizconsult@adelphia.net.

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