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Executive coaching: the secret weapon for high impact leadership

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Executive coaching has become the secret weapon for the development of high impact leadership in organizations and the edge for aspiring executives wanting to make themselves more marketable in the war for talent.

At one time coaching was viewed by many as a tool to help correct under-performance, but today it is becoming more widely used in developing top performers. In a 2004 survey by Right Management Consultants, 86% of companies said they used coaching to sharpen the skills of individuals targeted as future leaders. HR professionals and career recruiters report that most high-level executives have turned to executive coaches to gain an edge in self-marketing and branding. Executive coaching has made such an impact on individuals and organizations, that an increasing number of psychologists are also becoming coaches.

One reason why executive coaching can have a significant impact on leaders is feedback. As executives advance in their career, developmental feedback is critical, yet becomes infrequent and more unreliable. As a result, many executives plateau in critical interpersonal and leadership competencies.

The use of executive coaches in organizations usually emanates from either HR or a leadership development expert. More recently, executives are seeking coaches to enhance their performance or career. There are specific times when executives can benefit most

from coaching, perhaps the most important of which is when executives feel that a change in behaviour or habits can contribute to their personal growth and the success of the organization. Transition times in career and life, usually signal a desire for coaching. Increasingly, senior executives—most of whom are now baby boomers—look to coaches to assist with the challenge of managing Generation X and Generation Y employees, many of whom have different values and expectations.

There is a culture of individualism attached to our notions of leadership—tied to the idea that everyone fails or succeeds on the basis of individual effort or abilities. Yet this myth is out of touch with the likelihood of success for new executives who must adapt to an interdependent world. According to a study by the leadership development firm, Manchester Inc., 40% of newly promoted managers and executives fail within 18 months of assuming a new job, with the highest failure rate occurring among senior managers and executives. In examining the reasons, the study identified executives' failure build relationships with staff and peers as one of the prime reasons.

I have coached scores of CEOs and senior executives over the last decade, and also observed the work of other highly competent executive coaches. It is clear that coaching can make a significant difference in organizational effectiveness, by improving teamwork and executive strategy. Further, coaching is most effective by driving behavioural

change, by focusing on positive performance outcomes rather than remedial or problem-solving issues.

Business leaders are under pressure to innovate, inspire and implement ideas, and to keep leadership skills sharp and current. While formal education equips leaders for the more technical demands of their role, leaders' personal growth and relationships skills development is better implemented through coaching. Not only can coaching improve leaders' decision-making and interpersonal relationships, executive coaching can also make a difference in leaders' self-awareness and emotional intelligence, which has a significant impact on the leaders' ability to influence others. In the process, not only do they improve themselves, they have a greater impact on their organizations.



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