

EXECUTIVE COACHING: IMPROVING PERFORMANCE TO STAY AT THE TOP OF THE GAME

Executive coaching is about improving performance. The level of the position does not matter; those at the top want to continue to improve. Even Tiger Woods uses a coach.

What Coaching Can Do

Executive coaching can be effective for executives at all levels when they are confronted with difficult situations. An executive coach serves as a sounding board, someone to whom the executive can turn to discuss important personal and job-related issues objectively and confidentially. Often, coaching is provided to new managers or executives making the transition to a new role. Occasionally, it is provided because executives have problems relating to peers or direct reports. At PSP, executive coaching often is provided as part of an ongoing developmental process that includes executive assessment and benchmarking as well as 360° feedback. Sometimes only an outside coach can tell an executive that he or she may be off target and may be causing problems with a particular action.

The time required for executive coaching varies depending on the issues and the individuals involved. Regardless, a great deal of commitment is required on the part of the executive. If commitment is lacking, coaching will not be successful, no matter how capable the coach. Some individuals enter executive coaching because of a mandate for self-improvement, merely complying and going through the motions. A good coach can discern executives who are truly committed.

There are times, however, when executive coaching is not called for. It will not help when the individual has no future in the organization or when coaching is seen as the person's last chance to "turn it around." The purpose of executive coaching is not to save an executive who no longer has the trust of his boss, peers and direct reports. If the company's top executives are not committed to the individual's success, coaching is not the answer.



How to Select a Coach

Selection of an executive coach starts with a coach's previous experience in counseling executives. In addition, a good fit between the coach and the executive in terms of personality is important. It also helps when the coach understands the company and political issues that may be involved.

Assessment skills are required to determine what course of action and coaching will best assist the executive. Another key for success is the coach's ability to build a trusting and effective relationship and provide feedback in a manner that will be well-received. Finally, a coach needs behavioral change expertise in order to help an executive shed ineffective behaviors and acquire new capabilities.

A word of caution on selecting a coach is in order. There is no agreed-upon definition of executive coaching and no formal training is required. Since literally anyone can represent oneself as a coach, careful assessment of credentials, qualifications and results is imperative when choosing an executive coach.

Facing Reality

Of foremost importance to any executive is to deal in reality, whether looking at one's own strengths and weaknesses or those of one's organization and direct reports. Executive positions, however, are often isolating. Without people with whom to talk in confidence, an executive may find it difficult to reflect objectively about issues. An executive coach becomes a mirror that reflects reality and how one's actions influence the chances of achieving the desired results.

Executive coaching works well for executives who are committed to change, willing to look at themselves and to accept feedback even when it is unflattering. Like Tiger Woods, in order to remain at the top of the game, the executive needs constant feedback, coaching, continuous practice, and improvement. Executives who recognize this will continue to learn and continue to succeed.