

EXECUTIVE COACHING IN 2002:

SOME HIGHLY PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

by Kathleen G. Strickland

The "state of the art" for executive coaching has, over the years, both evolved and remained the same. But in going over my writings recently, I came across the following paragraph that I had written in the economic "boom" year of 1998, which now seems so long ago.

"Regardless of the direction of the economy, the future of executive coaching as a fact in American business is assured. If our current level of growth continues unchecked, coaching will be in great demand. But even if the economy takes a downturn, coaching will likely be used as a coping tool. Whatever the business climate in the years to come, we cannot 'unlearn' what we've discovered about the importance of empowering people to change and grow. That's what executive coaching is all about."

I share that passage with you not to brag about my powers as a prognosticator, but simply as a way of pointing out that, as expected, executive coaching is adapting in these challenging times -- and that it is as urgently needed a discipline as it ever was, if not more so.

Recognizing this fact provides the opportunity to offer a current "snapshot" of the field, and to make the following brief observations.

Observation #1: Executive coaches must be better prepared, and more highly gifted, than ever.

The best executive coaches combine knowledge, experience, and expertise in the business world with some psychotherapeutic knowledge and background.

Many good executive coaches are men and women who have themselves come out of very senior executive positions in corporations.

Ideally, a good executive coach has much in common with the superb corporate executive -- he or she harbors a natural "mentoring" ability, thinks strategically, and communicates effectively. He or she also has an intense passion for problem-solving, an innate curiosity about people, and a genuine belief that individuals can change their behaviors.

With the increasing complexity of global business and our personal lives, more than ever, the truly great executive coach - the "super-coach," - possesses multiple distinguishing characteristics. He or she ideally offers the wisdom of a sage, the insight of a mind-reader, the

focus of a mountain-climber, the business understanding and experience of a Fortune-100 CEO, and, for good measure, the humor of a James Thurber.

Needless to say, such coaches aren't found on every street-corner. It is up to the buyer of coaching services to be completely familiar with the qualifications and track record of the executive coach that he or she is thinking of engaging.

Observation #2: The business culture has changed in ways that are increasing the need for coaching.

Today's increased need for coaching is a direct result of current business pressures. Today's corporate executives are increasingly "having to do more with less" . . . with fewer resources, lowered head counts, demands for increased productivity and ever higher levels of profit, growth, innovation, and expansion. The resulting pressures can be overwhelming.

In many corporations, entire levels of middle management executives are gone, spreading the sphere of influence, heightening the responsibilities and pressures of everyone remaining. Increased globalization, is offering whole new areas of challenge, as executives and their families find

themselves in unfamiliar areas of the world, coping with foreign cultures, business misunderstandings, and feelings of isolation and alienation. The frequency and duration of business travel alone has also had a profound effect on executives and their families. The "safe haven" of executive coaching can be a godsend to executives and their families in these situations.

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Observation #3: Executive coaching has come to mean different things at different levels.

There are times when the term "executive coaching" is a misnomer, since the "executive" level is merely one tier at which coaching can be useful. A more accurate term would probably be, simply "coaching."

At the lower rungs of management, coaching is becoming increasingly relevant. In some ways, this level of coaching is more properly termed "executive training," and/or "Executive Development." In today's business world, young men and women move quickly up the career ladder. Success and money can come at such an early stage and at such a young age. Coaching is often used to train these high potentials on very basic levels. For example, how to be "citizens" of a corporation, and function within a company.

At the next level, middle and upper-middle management, the coach becomes a confidant and a "choice provider." Coaches offer advice and counsel in terms of business leadership and management issues, personal challenges, and balancing personal life and career.

On the very highest level of management, the coach becomes a "sage," offering wisdom, insight, and experience. The coach brings an invaluable outsider's perspective on life at the top, on leadership in general, and, more often than you might think, on "existential" or "philosophical" questions.

Observation #4: The "decision-maker" about executive coaching is crucial.

There is an all-too-common belief that coaching is a kind of panacea, an easy solution to any problem that might come along. It simply is not.

The buyer of executive coaching services must have a respect for the coaching field, and demand professionalism in coaching. Equally important, the decision-maker in a corporation must function at the level of coaching required - otherwise his or her judgement on the selection of coach may well be ill-informed, and compromised..

Observation # 5: There is a familiar "cycle" that corporations go through when it comes to coaching.

There is a common pattern that organizations follow when approaching the subject of coaching for the first time.

Initially, corporations will embrace coaching wholeheartedly, once they're seeing substantial results for a few key executives. They will then want to spread coaching's benefits throughout the corporation, and they begin to over-use it, creating an unnecessary dependence. Following this will be a swing the other way, where they will cut back and actually under-use coaching, failing to employ it in instances where it actually could provide solutions. After this seesawing, a complete re-evaluation of the concept of coaching, which will almost always result in a reformed coaching initiative with rigorous guidelines.

Often, the changes that come out of such a cycle include the decision to bring in selected coaches to be educated about a corporation's specific business and culture. Here, the coaches are provided with a high level of specific business knowledge; the imposition of standardized fees; and the establishment of specific criteria. Customization and flexibility are essential for coaching success.

**Observation #6: Coaching doesn't exist independently of
"the world at large."**

Among many lessons we have learned in the last year is that our world is an interconnected one, both for good and bad, and that the effects of crises can be complex and far-flung. Using executive coaching in times of disaster or trauma is a positive step, without question. At no level of business can managers be expected to leave their personal feelings and anxieties at home. Executives' reactions to catastrophic events are part and parcel of their psyches, at home and in the executive suite. When such challenges are compounded by a worsening business climate, executive coaching can come to the rescue in a significant way.

It's been particularly rewarding to me, this last year, to learn that helping executives cope with trauma, sadness, and anxiety can be added to the long list of functions performed by a great coach. That list includes enhancing leadership skills, defining goals, understanding personal and strategic differences, and "helping people get out of their own way," so that they can, "relax into their competence and perform/live well beyond their previous expectations."

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