

What can go wrong with Executive Coaching and how HR can help ensure good practice

Managing Perceptions

There are many situations in which Executive Coaching can be valuable. One of the issues about its introduction into organisations is clarifying the precise purpose(s) for which it will be used. Sometimes it is introduced for high-fliers; other organisations introduce it to help someone with a performance problem. The difficulty arises if Executive Coaching becomes too closely associated with one particular application. If strongly associated with high potential, success and career development, having a coach can become a status symbol, and very desirable, even where there is no specific developmental purpose to be served. Everybody wants one and individuals may be reluctant to end the coaching relationship.

Conversely, if coaches have been used only in a remedial capacity - to help people with performance problems - then suggestions that someone could benefit from a coach may be met with resistance. This is why it is useful for HR to think through in advance how they expect to use Executive Coaching. Then they can position the approach in ways that don't compromise some intended future application.

Flavour of the Month

Approaches to training and development can come in and out of fashion. Technology-enabled learning, action learning, management learning using the outdoors etc., have all enjoyed waves of popularity. Right now Executive Coaching seems to be on the rise. One of the dilemmas is that a particular approach can be used too widely, and for purposes that it doesn't really serve well. Disillusionment sets in, and then it's out with the old and in with the new. HR need to think through where Executive Coaching fits into the overall repertoire of learning and development strategies. It is an expensive option for development needs that don't really require this degree of customisation and confidentiality. More importantly, more expensive and exclusive doesn't automatically mean better - at least not better for everything. Some needs are better served by other approaches - for example learning in a group of peers.

Coach as Security Blanket

One of the dangers of a coaching relationship is that instead of progressively building confidence and competence, the individual becomes increasingly dependent on the coach. They may not want to make decisions unless they have discussed them with their coach, or they may prolong the relationship simply because they find it comforting to sit down and talk things through on a regular basis. Even more problematic are cases where the coaching strays into a form of therapy. It is not unusual for personal issues to be part of coaching discussions. For example, if the individual is going through a messy divorce or is suffering from stress or any other health problem, it would be quite legitimate to discuss matters such as personal values or work-life balance. However, few coaches are trained psychotherapists and they should no more stray into the therapy arena than they should give medical advice. Signals that should alert HR to potential problems with dependency include:

- Coaching relationships that go on indefinitely
- Absence of clear objectives
- No measures or progress reviews
- An individual who does little on their own behalf between sessions.

Choosing Coaches

There are three important considerations in choosing a coach:

- Firstly, does the coach have the relevant qualifications, skills and experience for the coaching assignment?
- Secondly, what sort of coach are they? Are they a good fit for the particular requirement?
- Thirdly, is there a good personal fit? It is quite useful for the person being coached to have a choice of coach so that they can find someone with whom they feel comfortable. For example, a woman executive who is working to establish herself in a predominantly male environment may prefer to work with a woman coach.

HR can add value by bringing together a pool of 'approved' coaches and providing specific guidance on their particular strengths and specialisms.

Behind Closed Doors

One of the dilemmas when engaging an Executive Coach is the highly confidential nature of the coaching discussions. When the service is delivered in private how can the bank be confident of its quality and effectiveness? The key distinction is that whilst the confidentiality of the **content** of meetings between the coach and the executive they are coaching must be maintained, HR does have a legitimate interest in the **process**.

Pricing the Service

Executive Coaching can be very expensive. A good Executive Coach usually has breadth of experience and a broad repertoire of skills to draw upon - they are rarely found in the bargain basement of the consultancy world. Other factors can influence the price. Because an Executive Coaching assignment is broken into chunks of several hours at a time, the coach may not be able to fill the remaining part of the day with other coaching work - after all it is very much a service organised at the convenience of the Executive.

Another factor is whether the coach is part of an organisation or works independently. The brand image of a large established consultancy certainly provides some reassurance, but independent consultants can often offer a more flexible service at a better price because they do not have similar overheads.

HR may be able to negotiate a more competitive rate with suitable Executive Coaches by utilising a retainer agreement. But the bottom line is that Executive Coaching is a highly skilled, highly customised service and there is little to be gained by treating it as a commodity and going for the lowest price.

In summary then, HR can do much to help make appropriate and cost effective use of Executive Coaching by:

- Using coaching selectively and well to ensure a good return on the investment of time and money
- Positioning Executive Coaching vis a vis other development strategies
- Providing clear guidelines about the purposes for which it should be used
- The establishment of 'best practice' guidelines for executive coaching
- Checking the credentials and experience of potential coaches
- Providing a range of coaches to cater for different needs and preferences
- Conducting progress checks with coaches during assignments
- Assisting with the development of agreed coaching objectives, measures and overall review processes

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