

WHY EXECUTIVE COACHING? SIGNIFICANT LESSONS LEARNED

Barbara Pate Glacel, Ph.D.
www.glacel.com

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SUMMARY

Executive coaching is a popular technique for improving the performance and job satisfaction of successful leaders. To benefit from coaching, executives must be open to learning about themselves, receiving sometimes-difficult feedback, and making changes to improve their performance and relationships with others.

This article cites examples from a year-long coaching engagement with an already-successful leader who was able to reflect on the benefits of the coaching and the feedback she received. While her lessons learned are particular to her case, there are universal lessons for good leaders about successful performance by organizational executives.



INTRODUCTION

During the past few years, executive coaching has become de rigeur for leaders who are good, challenged, motivated, and productive. It is not reserved for those who need to be “fixed.” In fact, those executives who are already successful are the ones who benefit the most from executive coaching because they need only improve around the margins. They are aware that no one person is good at everything, so they seek out opportunities to improve themselves, to build on their own good ideas and to engage in conversations with others who represent diverse points of view.

On the other hand, the executives who engage in coaching to be “fixed” are often the very ones who believe that leaders must have all the answers. They, therefore, are less inclined to be receptive to different points of view. This is an attitude of new managers who somehow have been led to believe that the mantle of “manager” means that the holder of the title must always have the answer. That manager does not know how to ask questions, and therefore, this limits one’s ability to learn.

Executive coaching, at its best, uses a Socratic method of questioning that allows the executive to reflect on behavior, on situations, on alternatives and consequences. The questioning opens up various perspectives and options that allow for better solutions to both business and personnel decisions. Only when the executive admits to NOT knowing can the executive learn more about better management and leadership.

Executive coaching relationships are built on both trust and interpersonal chemistry between the coach and the executive. It takes time for this foundation to be built, so most coaching relationships last from six months to two years. During this time, the coach becomes an alter ego with whom the executive can discuss current situations, tactical maneuvers, and strategic decisions that impact the leader, the team, the organization, and the business result. Utilization of a coach in this manner is not a crutch. It is, in fact, the

addition of a resource in an executive's toolkit that allows for better decision-making.

LESSONS LEARNED

At the end of a yearlong coaching assignment, one executive reflected on what she had learned during the previous year. During that year, she had received real-time feedback through her coach that was based on qualitative responses to interviews with her boss, subordinates and peers. She took that feedback to heart, deciding what specific actions she could take to improve her leadership and her business results. Her learnings are significant examples of improvement at the margins that have made this already-effective executive even more successful than she had been before.

Perception is Reality

The executive reflected that, "I was aware of most of the challenges that were reported in the executive assessment feedback. However, I was stunned that I was perceived as too much like (another female executive in the company who was not well regarded). I needed to work on the perception of others."

The higher that one progresses within an organization, the less feedback one receives. Women, throughout their careers, typically receive even less feedback than men receive. So, the opportunity to receive feedback through an executive coach may provide a real eye-opener. This executive, in fact, was "stunned" to view herself through the eyes of others. The fact that this executive accepted the feedback and did not become defensive about it enabled her learning and her ability to deal with the situation. Others' perceptions of her behavior were limiting her effectiveness and her ability to get things accomplished through others. When she understood that the perception of others was, in fact, their truth, she could deal with changing their perception.

One technique that she used to change their perception was the practice of "pre-calling." She began explaining her behavior and her reactions to others before she acted. She allowed them to understand what was going on in her mind and what led her to behave in certain ways. She reached out to others more frequently, particularly those in remote locations from her own. She allowed others to get to know her as a person. All of these efforts began to pay off in changing the negative perception that others had of her.

Trust and Credibility are the Basis of Business Relationships

The executive observed that, "I learned that it is important with a new business to quickly develop a relationship to build trust and credibility. One must do this in the beginning." The feedback she received revealed a problematic relationship with a business unit located 3000 miles from her location. Their remoteness made relationship building more difficult. The fact that a relationship had not been built in the beginning meant that a poor relationship needed to be repaired. This was even more difficult with a 3000-mile separation.

During the coaching period, this executive worked very hard to repair the problematic relationship. She began making routine telephone calls to key players to share information. She copied them more often on key reports and memoranda for record. She included them on conference calls with partners, clients and suppliers. She learned how to listen first, and express her opinions later. This practice demonstrated that she wanted their input and valued their ideas.

During the same period of time, she was paired with another business unit for the

first time, and they were jointly tasked to bring a new product to market. Having learned the lesson that trust and credibility are the basis of good business relationships, she set out from the start to get to know her new colleagues. She purposefully spent time with them, learned their technology, and listened to their goals. She found ways to help them achieve those goals, building both trust and credibility in the relationship.

Common Ground Overcomes Interpersonal Difficulties

Inevitably, disagreements or personality conflicts may arise in business relationships. Strong leaders are equally able to create allies and adversaries. However, adversaries may add value and it may be important to keep them on the same team. This executive reflected that, “I no longer avoid people with whom I am uncomfortable. I seek the person out in order to work on bringing down the barriers between us. I reach out to connect to the person with whom I have a problem relationship. It is easier to be tolerant about someone’s behavior when I like the person. I get to know people with whom I work so I can find common ground. Not liking someone raises artificial barriers so I don’t trust their competence.”

A key behavior that she learned was the ability to swallow a quick retort when she did not agree. In her words, she learned to “stop and think before I react. I ask myself, ‘what are they really telling me?’ so that I do not damage the relationship. I try not to be catty or nonprofessional back to them. I let them talk, realizing that they are trying to help me out.”

In order to improve her relationships with others, she worked to find common ground with those whom she needed to accomplish her work and those who might influence her career. She learned that she could not distance herself from others just because she found them difficult to work with. She had to find a common path and built coalitions with others. Sometimes, in fact, having a common enemy helped to bring together those with problematic relationships.

Blind Spots Matter

When leaders do not receive feedback, they can be excused from not knowing their impact on others or the perception that others have of them. But, when they receive feedback and disregard it, they are guilty of having a blind spot and not taking advantage of good feedback. This executive had risen to senior levels of a technical organization because of her outstanding leadership, but she had not paid attention to learning and keeping up with the technical skills of her subordinates.

At senior levels, leaders need fewer technical skills and more leadership skills. However, in technical organizations, they must exhibit knowledge of the technology and its relevance to their work in order to build credibility and to make decisions that have systemic impacts. This executive usually deferred to her technical experts and thus, others did not trust her judgment on technical matters. She typically dismissed this criticism as not a problem. Through the coaching, however, she learned that, “I need to exhibit the technical knowledge I have and become more technically informed.”

This realization was not startling, but it had been in her blind spot for a long time. In fact, her blindness to the situation had kept her from understanding the relationship of her group to others in the company. She reflected that, “I have had a blind spot revealed. My ignorance of some others and their connections to my work were an unknown. I have expanded my network. I keep my peers more in the loop. Last year, I did not know they were related to me, but my investment in learning the technology has helped me realize the

relationships.”

To exhibit her understanding, she began making the technical presentations rather than deferring to her technical expert subordinates. This increased the trust that others had in her and also demonstrated to her subordinates that she had a real interest in and understanding of their work.

Coaching Improves Performance and Job Satisfaction

At the end of the year’s coaching, this executive’s boss summarized that, “I see (her) growth happening right before my own eyes, and it is excellent.”

Moreover, the executive herself reflected that, “Through my relationship with a coach, I now see things differently. I feel more valued by the company since they invested in me as someone they wanted to develop and keep in the company. (My boss) was the champion to ensure that I received all feedback possible.”

Specifically, the executive increased her satisfaction level in working with difficult people. She was better able to deal with them to get the job done and did not feel she had to hide from them.

By working with a coach, she received validation of her judgment of subordinates. This gave her confidence to deal with difficult personnel on a daily basis and increased her confidence in personnel decisions. And, while she was not used to asking others’ opinions before she acted, she became more aware of asking others and sharing information rather than being dogmatic in her approach.

CONCLUSION

Executive coaching is not a “one size fits all” exercise. Each executive who participates in a coaching relationship will learn different lessons based on that executive’s own performance and own needs. What is most important is that the executive is open to feedback and willing to listen to others’ perceptions and ideas. Good leaders do just that. The belief that the manager must have all the answers is a huge fallacy that limits success of executives and prevents them from learning the lessons that come with time and experience.

Dr. Barbara Pate Glacel is principal of The Glacel Group of Virginia and Brussels, Belgium. She is author of a business bestseller on teams. She works with individuals, teams and organizations in the Fortune 500 and not-for-profit arenas. She has over thirty years experience in executive coaching and leadership development at all levels of organizations. She is a well-known author and public speaker and has consulted in Europe, Asia, and South Africa. You can contact her at BPGlacel@glacel.com.