

Focus on Leadership

EXECUTIVE COACHING DEFINES PROBLEMS, STRATEGIZES SOLUTIONS

By Brianna Bodine

Being in charge doesn't automatically make someone a leader, and poor executive leadership can be costly.

It leads to negative consequences for organizational culture, productivity and employee morale, says Bob Parsanko, president and founder of Executive Insights, a coaching firm for presidents, CEOs and management teams.

Executive coaching is a proven approach to developing leadership. Parsanko's process often is based on a series of one-on-one coaching sessions, beginning with assessing the issues and defining outcomes, which leads to developing options and reviewing results. Some coaches work over a series of months; others over years. Sometimes efforts focus on one leader; other times, a management team.

The pace of business is one issue.

"Most executives are going too fast, they're fighting too much, and they're forcing too many decisions," Parsanko says. "These are very contemporary issues. It's having very negative consequences on their organizations, especially in terms of culture, because people emulate their executives."

Parsanko has worked as an executive coach for more than 20 years, providing coaching services to leaders around the world. He works with executives to assess their strengths and weaknesses, develop tools for improvement and incorporate best practices of other business leaders.

Coaching is a process that helps individuals, teams and businesses "maximize personal and professional potential," according to the International Coaching Federation (ICF).

The ICF's 2009 Global Coaching Client Study found that when companies



"What we're seeing is a poor allocation of the time that an executive is focusing on non-executive level issues."

– Todd Uterstaedt, President & CEO,
Baker & Daboll

exploited the services of professional coaches, they reported a median return of investment of 700 percent. The typical cost of coaching is about \$200 to \$500 per hour, unless the contract is a fixed rate, and most coaches require that clients commit to at least a three-month period to see effective results, according to President of the ICF Ed Modell.

"Invest the time (in coaching) now, so that the crisis down the road might not be so intense and it might be more manageable," says Todd Uterstaedt, President & CEO of Baker & Daboll, a Cincinnati based international executive coaching firm.

"Our key purpose is helping people to grow in their capacity," he says. "We all love to watch people grow, and love to be a catalyst for that growth... It's intoxicating."

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

For Parsanko, the process starts at a retreat cottage on the edge of the Ohio River, about 35 minutes east of downtown Cincinnati. "It's important for me to get these executives away from the office environment," Parsanko says. "My whole idea is to slow them down long enough to hear themselves think."

Parsanko engages his clients using three cornerstones of effective leadership: awareness, acceptance, and abundance, also the subject of his upcoming book with co-author

Paul Heagen, president of Defining Moments coaching company.

With awareness, executives confront the root causes of their challenges, which leads to acceptance.

Once executives accept these issues and their causes, they can stop fighting, according to Parsanko. "They actually lean into their problems then, and for the first time they can sort of associate with it without trying to hide it or push it away," he says.

Solutions are not always simple or obvious, but abundance means finding multiple solutions.

"We've all heard the either/or dilemma, but ... I won't accept either/or's," Parsanko says. "There really are multiple solutions to every dilemma. Most of us just don't take the time to find those, so we force too many decisions. We go the easy route."

Those root causes are key, agrees Laurie Althaus, a Cincinnati Action-COACH. "Most important to me is finding out what's really behind the issues. I'd say nine times out of 10, it's more about what's going on with that individual person."

In other words, the visible, surface-level problems are often only the symptoms of a deeper issue within the individual.

Coaching helps executives by "uncovering of behaviors that are not

Executive Coaching Guide

conducive to running a good life,” and then developing action plans for redressing those behaviors, according to David Habisch, a chair for the Cincinnati group of Vistage International, a global coaching company.

“Ultimately, what it gets down to is how you choose to run your life and manage your life, and then everything else emanates from that,” he says.

THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

The fast pace of technology and industry has led many senior executives to focus on putting out “fires,” rather than growing the business, according to Uterstaedt.

“What we’re seeing is a poor allocation of the time that an executive is focusing on non-executive level issues,” Uterstaedt says. “A lot of leaders, not just executives, they are challenged with asking the right questions at the right time, to the right people, to influence the core vital behaviors that

are necessary to success.”

Executive coaches step in to fill that void: asking the right question, at the right time, to the right people, with the goal of increasing organizational success and personal potential.

“I ask the tough questions ... that nobody really wants to ask,” Habisch says. He holds executives “accountable” by asking them about the worst decisions they made in the past six months, how much money those bad decisions cost their company, and what they were thinking when they made those mistakes.

It’s not a question of providing the answers.

“My job as a coach is not to give somebody all the answers, but to help them discover the answers in themselves,” says Chuck Proudfit, Founder and President of SKILLSOURCE, a national business building company. “(Executives) can be the solution to their own problems.”

Instead of always putting out fires, Proudfit seeks to develop “strategic thinking” in his clients. “Strategic thinking trumps strategic planning,” he says. “We live in a much faster paced marketplace than we did 20 years ago.”

The ever changing business environment often require executives to make on-the-spot critical decisions, without the benefit of counsel and planning. Testing and developing products extensively before deployment are luxuries of the past.

“While it’s still important to test things and make sure they’re good enough, the market is moving so fast now that somebody else will take the idea, get it to market, and beat you to the punch,” Proudfit says. “You don’t want to throw out quality, but you’ve got to move faster forward, and you’ve got to take a risk to fail forward.”

Yet slowing down is necessary to make sound decisions even under



Executive Coaching Guide

pressure, according to Parsanko.

“Coaching helps simplify things that appear complex,” says Mike Habel, president and CEO of BHDP Architecture, and Parsanko’s client. “It helps solidify visions ... and build structure for the future.”

THE RIGHT CANDIDATE

Not everyone is a suitable candidate for executive coaching. “I won’t work with somebody coming right out of college,” Parsanko says. “I need to know that somebody has achieved a level of expertise in at least a functional area.”

The executive and the coach must be a good fit. Althaus says coaching is an extremely personalized business. “There’s absolutely no competition when it comes to coaching, because it’s such a personal relationship,” she says. She often refers clients with diverse needs to other coaches.

“The most important thing is the success of that person,” Althaus says.

Besides basic business-wise skills, Parsanko also looks for coaching candidates who have a healthy ego, self-awareness, and willingness to learn.

A healthy ego is not too big, not too small. “There’s a lot of vulnerability ... because they are doing a lot of self-awareness and introspection,” Parsanko says. “And I just need somebody to have a healthy enough mental state that they can work within that system.”

Self-awareness and introspection are not always easy processes.

“It’s not time intensive, it’s mind intensive,” Uterstaedt says.

Deep rooted fears, self-doubt and isolation can make coaching a difficult endeavor.

Executives often have “no one to vent to, no one to talk to, really no one to confide in,” Habisch says. “When you’re running a business of any size, you have fear.”

One of the biggest hurdles to overcome is the fear of failure or the fear of making a mistake. “(Executives) won’t make decisions they need to make because they’re so afraid of failing, but the only way we learn is through failure,” Althaus says. “Obviously, we want to create an environment where the failures aren’t going to be devastating, but that’s the only way we learn.”



The relationships between people and organizational culture play a vital role in the success of a business, especially as technology continues to dominant the landscape in which businesses interact.

QUESTIONS

to Ask a Prospective Coach

- ▶ What is your experience?
- ▶ What coach-specific training do you have?
- ▶ What is your specialty?
- ▶ What is your coaching philosophy?
- ▶ What is your specific process?
- ▶ What are a couple of your success stories?

SOURCE: *International Coach Federation, www.coachfederation.org, or (888) 423-3131.*

Executive Coaching Guide

ASK THE EXPERTS



AMY J. KATZ, PH.D.
Chief Learning Officer/
Senior Executive Coach
BAKER & DABOLL, LLC

Q: I will be managing a 500-person division in a large organization.

This is the first time I will be in a senior leadership role. How can I be successful?

Moving into senior management roles, the ability to project confidence, inspire trust, and engage employees becomes as important as technical expertise. “Executive presence” best describes these qualities. Leaders with a strong executive presence are keenly aware of how their behavior affects others. They develop credibility by listening attentively, telling vivid stories, and asking thoughtful questions.

As a senior leader, you will have everyone’s attention. Take the time to develop your own executive presence: It may be the greatest source of your success.



Many executives might suffer from mismanagement of their personal lives more than their business lives. Executive coaching addresses root causes of the issues to help executives reach their full potential.

THE RIGHT ORGANIZATION

Identifying problems and solutions is not enough: Action must be taken and results assessed. Through coaching, executives learn new skills and tools to test and implement within an organization.

By taking action, executives move out of the “doom loop ... where they don’t do anything and fester over the same issue,” Parsanko says.

Sometimes new behaviors work. Other times they don’t.

“Often times in a coaching engagement, someone’s trying on new behaviors, so it’s not quite perfect yet,” Uterstaedt says. “They’re refining, they’re trying to make it their own, they’re trying to be authentic.”

Changing behaviors requires the support of the organization and the other members of the management team.

“You can’t separate the individual from the organization,” Uterstaedt says. “It’s an ecosystem that’s dynamic and changing.”

Without openness and willingness to learn in both the individual and the organization, success is unlikely. Increasingly, the ability to adapt to changing environments and expectations is key to success.

“The new normal in work is that change is what it is,” Proudfit says. “For most people, change is a hostile act. For coaches, we need to get better and better at helping people conquer change.”

It doesn’t mean everything old is out. For example, using technology for technology’s sake might not be the best option. Old-fashioned face-to-face interaction, storytelling and shared organizational cultures are still very effective in the business world.

“We potentially, maybe, over-rely on technology to supplant some things that need to be done a little more analog,” Uterstaedt says. “Business and organizational life is still about the (relationships) between people, about

the mutually beneficial relationships based on shared trust. Trust is not something that’s granted, but developed. Purposefully.”

Though Parsanko works primarily one-on-one with executives, going as far as sailing in Belize and hiking the Grand Canyon with his clients, he still focuses on the whole organization.

“Right now, I’m focused on helping executives create stronger cultures,” he says. “I think that’s where our breakdown is. We’ve got to get the humanistic side back into the organization.”

Building a sustainable culture creates an environment where employees and leaders can be “deliberate and collaborative,” working through problems and not fighting among each other to resolve them.

“I give executives tremendous kudos for very, very tough jobs, but it’s really the leaders who will break those patterns ... and build something that’s sustainable,” Parsanko says. ■



Knowing yourself
is the beginning
of all wisdom.

Aristotle

Executives

Professionals

Healthcare

Military

513.339.1007

www.bakerdaboll.com