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## Maximizing Potential

Executive Coaching Identifies Issues, Offers Solutions

BY NEIL McGIFFIN



When a Cincinnati Reds player is struggling to find his swing, the whole team can suffer. The solution? Spend a little extra time with the batting coach to identify the issues and set things straight. The practice has found its way into corporate America as executives use coaches to shore up their game.

According to the 2012 International Coach Federation Global Coaching Study, revenues from professional coaching has nearly doubled in recent years, reaching nearly \$2 billion worldwide<sup>™</sup> evidence of the growing demand for executive coaching programs and validation of their success in the workplace.

### Maximize Strengths

The role of the coach in the executive setting is surprisingly similar to that of coaches in the sports world: addressing weaknesses while maximizing strengths in order to create a better-rounded performer. But instead of improving a player's swing, an executive coach tackles a manager's shortcomings in skills like communication, prioritizing, problem solving, and task delegation, to name a few.

The goal, according to Sherpa Coaching vice president Brenda Corbett, is to bridge the gap between a person's present capabilities and that person's true potential as a leader in his or her workplace.

And while bridging that gap is a challenge that varies from client to client, Corbett has executive success down to an equation: To lead a company effectively, she says, a manager must be capable of demonstrating positive skills and positive behaviors. "If you're missing either side of this equation you cannot have a positive impact on your business."

### Communication is key

The most important skills and behaviors a successful executive can demonstrate are based on communication, according to Corbett. "What's the biggest mistake in corporate America?" she asks. "People don't talk to each other." Her philosophy at Sherpa Coaching: "When you're sick and tired of communicating, you still haven't communicated enough."

But talking is only one component of communication. Managers must also be active listeners, open to hearing the ideas of colleagues and customers. Body language is key when it comes to presenting oneself as a welcoming listener, according to Corbett, and that's a skill coaches often have to work on with clients.

Pinpointing strengths and weaknesses is vital to developing a personalized coaching strategy, according to Top Level Coaching President Rob VeVerka. Because executives are often unaware of their personal weaknesses, this information is gathered through varying approaches. "Sometimes managers wear rose colored glasses and don't see their own issues and their own problems," he says.

That's where coaches step in, VeVerka says, gathering material through company-wide assessment surveys and direct observation. The most essential method, however, is personal interviews with both clients and those who surround the client. These meetings help to create a comfortable, trusting relationship between the two parties, which is vital to a successful coaching experience.

"When you're coaching someone, you become their advocate," Baker & Daboll Senior Executive Coach Amy Katz says. "You become identified with them and you understand their story and the context around that story."

She says it's the task of the coach to understand what's happening within the organization as well as within the individual. Because coaching is a goal-oriented process, coaches need to be well-versed on each of the client's strengths and weaknesses that need addressing, according to Katz.

### What Must Be Fixed

Corbett describes coaches as truth seekers when it comes to pinpointing the underlying shortcomings an executive is struggling to correct. "People don't tell truths, but not because they don't want to. It's just hard," she says. "We are like dogs looking for bones when it comes to finding the truth about what an executive must fix."

Once that truth is found, a coach must be able to present it to the client in a constructive manner. Honesty is a major component of the coach-client relationship, according to VeVerka. "A good coach can look into someone's eyes and tell them the truth "" tell them what's holding them back, why it's holding them back, and how making changes can benefit them in the future," he says. "If you can get people to buy into that, anything is possible."

One of the biggest challenges, according to Corbett, is teaching clients to manage their weaknesses spontaneously. A coach can't provide the solutions "" only the tools, she says, which in turn allows them to create their own advice. "We don't give the answers," she says. "We give them techniques to help them look at things differently."

VeVerka stresses that attitude as the fundamental difference between the role of an executive coach and that of a consultant. A consultant, he says, analyzes the situation and presents a solution. "An executive coach works with clients to explore a variety of strategies, allowing them to choose the ones they're committed to following."

### Setting Stage

Depending on the executive's needs, an engagement between a coach and client can last anywhere from three months to a year with meetings upwards of twice a month, according to Katz. The exact number of meetings can vary by a client's availability and needs. "Keeping to a schedule can be very important in terms of forming a relationship and setting the stage for learning," she says.

It's the coach's ability to achieve success while catering to the manager's needs that has made coaching a viable option for companies. The ICF Global Coaching Client Study shows individual clients who used executive coaching reported a median financial return of more than three times their investment.

And the physiological return is immeasurable, according to Katz. "An executive is often dealing with an enormous responsibility for many people's lives," she says. "Their choices make a large impact on the company as a whole."

But managers don't seek coaching exclusively when they're struggling to live up to the expectations of their position, according to VeVerka. He says the coaching experience is also beneficial to those taking on a new role with a company, or even those who feel stagnant in their careers and want to develop their skills to reach the next level.

The ICF Global Coaching Study also found that 80 percent of clients report they have gained greater confidence in the workplace as a result of partnering with an executive coach. Likewise, clients also reported positive changes in work relationships, communication and interpersonal skills, and a greater ability to balance work life with home life.

"The biggest compliment I receive from a client is when that person says I've given them the gift of time," Corbett says. -

## ASK THE PROS

**PAUL HEAGEN**  
*Founder and Executive Coach*  
*Defining Moments Consulting*

**Q: Why is this notion of "purpose" so important?**

Merely developing new skills or behaviors is training. Coaching, as I approach it, gets to the heart of how you see yourself and what purpose you want your life to serve. When you get clarity around that, a lot of things fall into place, your energy is focused, and people are drawn to you.

**CHRISTINE ROEDIGER**  
*Client Services Director*  
*Interpro Team Building*

**Q: There are so many different types of coaches and approaches to coaching in today's marketplace. What is important to consider as I select a coach for my organization?**

Find someone you trust so you will candidly share. A trust-based relationship creates space for deeper exploration and allows the coaching conversation to go to hard places in a non-judgmental atmosphere. The result will lead you to more comprehensive and sustainable solutions.

**JANA ALVERSON**  
*Associate*  
*Lynn McInturf Associates*

**Q: How do I hire a salesperson who can and will sell?**

Take time to identify what type of salesperson is needed. Do you need someone who can create demand or fulfill demand? Long or short sales cycle? Consider four critical elements: desire, commitment, self responsibility, and belief. We also recommend sales assessment tools to help our clients choose wisely.

**LAURIE ALTHAUS**  
*Founder/Personal Coach*  
*Now & Next, Personal Coaching For Professionals*

**Q: How will I know I have the right coach?**

When you have found your coach you know it because you are inspired. You are focused on your individual goals, people around you are noticing shifts in who you are and how you are showing up.

Most importantly you know it's right because your coach truly cares about you and your success.

**BOB VINEY**  
*Business/Executive Coach*  
*ActionCOACH Business Coaching*

**Q: I'm a "baby boomer business owner." When should I begin taking steps to grow the value I'll get for my business when I retire?**

Every business owner should take regular action to grow their business value. Value depends on EBITDA and adjustments made in the value factor multiplied by EBITDA. We develop business plans to maximize those adjustments over time, so the business owner can get the highest possible value when they sell or retire.

**BRENDA CORBETT**  
*Author/Educator*  
*Sherpa Coaching*

**Q: What's the state of the industry today?**

Coaching has arrived as a permanent fixture in the executive landscape. Our 7th annual survey showed the credibility of coaching at an all-time high. We're proud to have been part of that, with our books, our research, eight university partnerships and more on the way.

**DAVID HABISH**  
*Chair*  
*Cincinnati office, Vistage International*

**Q: Why do I feel like it really is lonely at the top sometimes?**

The general make up of a CEO/business owner is we take care of our families, business, employees. We want to be liked and desire that our company be a friendly and productive place to work. As a result, we really don't take care of ourselves. We worry, wake up at night, don't exercise, we don't eat right! We stop outside learning and really have no place to totally vent our frustrations and our ideas (good or bad).

Coaching provides an outlet for all these, as well as the number one issue of personal accountability. Once you start moving, the company will move!

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