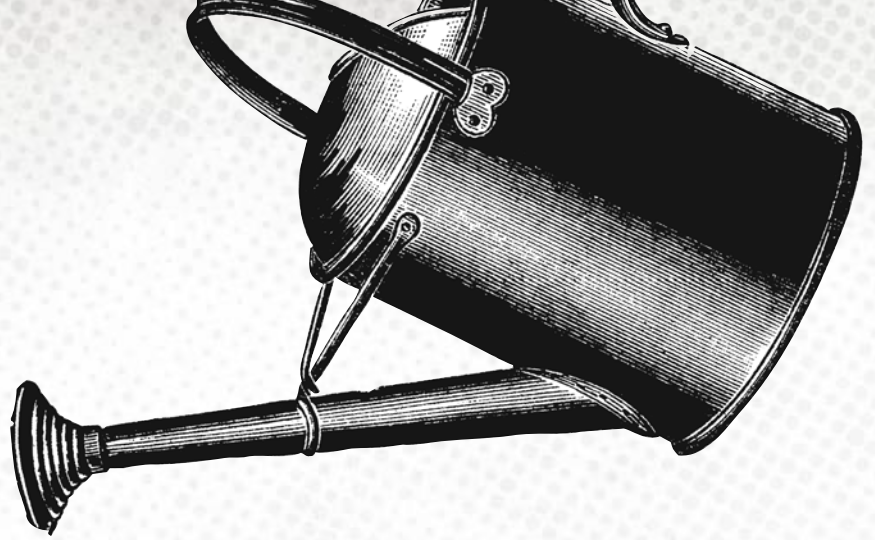


# Unleash and Build Leadership Capabilities

Executive coaching programs are beneficial  
for both existing and potential execs.

BY RITA BALIAN ALLEN





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ne of the areas of most attention and priority to executives in the 21st century has been talent—the ability to attract, recruit, develop, and retain employees. It can be the single differentiator to gain competitive advantage within any industry. Many effective practices engage talent within an organization once it acquires them. One such practice that has grown in demand and need over the years is executive coaching.

A variety of specialty areas within coaching have evolved through the years, including career, team, business, life, marketing, and writing coaching. Not only are employers partnering with coaches, but individuals are engaging them as well. While employers have accepted coaching as a welcomed practice, an area of high demand within a company's strategic planning is executive coaching.

### **A foundation for a competitive edge**

Executive coaching is about helping talented executives, leaders, and managers navigate through the process of growth, position themselves for success in building their leadership capabilities, and excel in specific competencies. It adds to a company's bench strength and elevates succession planning with intentionality.

Companies embrace and encourage executive coaching in many scenarios, including individuals assuming additional responsibilities and teams, transitioning into a new role, enhancing their ability to influence, developing executive presence, and moving from an operational to a strategic focus. They also embrace it for a variety of specific areas of personal leadership and social competency development.

Employers that invest in their leaders are illustrating the value they place on their talent's individual growth (and retention), in addition to enacting a

culture that believes human capital is their greatest asset. That requires establishing a strong commitment to executive coaching and determining appropriate coaching programs internally or with the use of external services.

As part of a proactive development strategy, prioritize partnering talented leaders with a coach. Embrace the value those individuals bring to the company by offering them an executive coach as an additional resource to enable them to grow. Doing so says, "We believe in you, your abilities, and your potential so much that we are investing in your growth." Great leaders are lifelong learners, and executive coaching is one piece of that learning.

Implementing a successful executive coaching program requires the endorsement of senior leadership who view it as a necessary strategic imperative. Without that support from both a time and financial commitment, it will be challenging to achieve success.

### **Coaching objectives**

Coaching is not ideal and can be problematic if the objective is remedial or to replace performance management. The best scenario for coaching is when employers approach it as a development opportunity for individuals to reach their utmost leadership potential, stretch out of their comfort

zone, and achieve greater value to affect both individual and business performance.

An executive coach's ultimate objective from the onset is to earn trust and build a relationship that creates a partnership with the individual they are coaching. The partnership's goal is for the coach to be a resource that helps individuals focus on their growth with clearly defined objectives. Coaches provide a neutral and objective perspective as a sounding board to encourage coachees as well as to challenge them to stretch in new ways and try new behaviors, strategies, and approaches. That trust is essential because it sets a strong foundation in the relationship to enable the coach to offer insightful and candid feedback needed throughout the process.

### Methodology and process

The coaching approach can vary and should be customized to each person. However, there is a methodology applicable to all coaching engagements. From the onset, it is a conversation and partnership between the individual, that person's manager, the coach (internal or external), as well as an HR or talent development professional. The degree to which HR or talent development is a part of the coaching process can range from being closely involved for progress and update conversations within the whole process alongside the coachee's supervisor to only being an advisor who is called upon if needed. A typical coaching methodology includes:

- Defining focus—identify the developmental need, the specific area of focus for coaching.
- Identifying appropriate options—outline options (internal, external) that include success factors, and determine which will be most appropriate for the individual.
- Developing a relevant model—establish a timeline, the necessary feedback, and other aspects of the coaching process that will be relevant for the individual.
- Individualizing and personalizing based on needs—engage in a needs assessment with the individual and manager to personalize the process based on specific needs.
- Creating a process and structure—define and lay out the coaching process steps and specific milestones.
- Selecting tools and resources—depending on the specific need and objectives for coaching, determine the appropriate assessments and other tools to be used.
- Determining goals and outcomes—along with the individual's manager, agree upon desired outcomes as a result of coaching.

Talent development's role can be as a liaison to creating and managing the coaching relationship. Whether the organization has a large internal coaching staff or seeks out an external coach, it is a best practice to offer two to three coaches' profiles to the individual (and often their manager) to review, select, and interview to assess fit and expertise within the areas they are seeking assistance. Talent development professionals can also proactively seek a range of coaches with expertise in various topic areas to vet and add to their network. That allows for a constant cadre of executive coaches readily available when needs arise. In addition to acting as the liaison in selecting coaches for the company's pool, talent development professionals can play a role in managing the process either through all the steps or at certain intervals, depending on how involved they intend to be.

Every coaching engagement should comprise:

- Contracting and objective setting between the individual, that person's manager, HR or talent development, and the coach to identify parameters, costs, length of engagement, and specific areas of focus
- Assessment and feedback throughout the coaching process, including commitment from the individual and key stakeholders for successful implementation
- Development and action planning to identify appropriate development needs and establish action items and strategies for execution with specific timelines
- Implementation and coaching to carry out the engagement period with a determined structure of meetings and goals
- Evaluation and follow-up for accountability and ongoing success in preparation for transitioning to a noncoaching scenario

Finally, a coaching plan requires metrics that the company can capture in a variety of ways and customize for each situation. One way to define those metrics can be broken down into four steps:

1. Initial—mutually agreed-upon objectives between the individual, manager, and coach
2. Midway—the creation and implementation of a clearly articulated development plan
3. Completion—assessment of the changed behaviors and achieved progress
4. Conclusion—formal evaluation of the coaching process, transition to noncoaching, and individual accountability

### Self-assessments

Embracing executive coaching as a developmental strategy provides an opportunity for employees to

play a lead in their own growth and career management. Creating an effective coaching structure is a vital part of success.

The basic coaching model starts with identifying the individual's needs, followed by engaging in a comprehensive self-assessment process that includes 360-degree feedback and insights from others, leading to the creation of a development plan with new behaviors, strategies, and techniques the coachee

must practice and have reinforced for ongoing success. That offers a process that enables coaches to equip executives with the tools, resources, and confidence that empower them to continue their development well beyond the coaching period.

The use of informal and formal assessments is extremely relevant and valuable in a coaching partnership. Leadership begins and ends with inner strength, and effective leaders are authentic and transparent.

## Establishing a Coaching Plan

Formulating a specific plan and structure at the start of the coaching engagement is critical. Coaches create and lead the plan in partnership with the coachee, the coachee's supervisor, and the talent development function. Ideally this plan will lay out meeting timelines, milestones, desired outcomes, and follow-up for evaluation and ongoing accountability of those outcomes. Coaching plans should include the following elements.

**Needs assessment.** Assess the appropriate objectives to be met during coaching via in-depth meetings with stakeholders. That could include, but is not be limited to, the coach meeting with HR or talent development, appropriate leaders, and the individual to assess current and future needs. The discussions could include detailed conversations around company culture, business goals, analysis of existing skill sets, and identification of any gaps in competencies or unrealized potential moving forward to define desired objectives.

**Self-assessment.** Begin working with the individual to conduct personal due diligence via formal and informal assessments, exercises, and exploration to better understand and appreciate their skills, competencies, values, strengths, interests, long- and short-term goals, specific development areas, and personal brand as a strong foundation for building their leadership capabilities.

**Information and feedback gathering.** Use a survey tool or conduct one-on-one interviews with a mix of leaders, peers, staff members, and other ap-

propriate stakeholders through a confidential and anonymous 360-degree feedback process. A best practice is for the resulting report to be shared only with the individual as part of their development.

**One-on-one coaching.** Begin biweekly, private, and confidential coaching sessions with the individual over a six-month period. The coach should be available for telephone calls between sessions should the need arise. During the entire coaching period, the coach's role is also to be a sounding board for real-time issues that emerge.

**Professional development action plan or goal setting.** The coach identifies and reinforces strategies, techniques, and tools targeted toward enhancing the identified areas within a development plan to address challenges in improving leadership skills, growing current relationships, and building heightened influence and working rapport. Prepare an action plan and execution strategy. Establish action items, goals, and strategies for execution with timelines, follow-up, and evaluation.

**Communication and follow-up.** The coach should maintain ongoing dialogue and collaboration with the leader and HR or talent development, as desired. Upon completion of the coaching sessions as well as at a midpoint interval, the coach should provide updates on progress, successes, and overall status of coaching. At the conclusion of the six months, the coach should offer insights on the need for any ongoing coaching services to achieve ultimate results.

Assessments enable individuals to explore more deeply and learn more about themselves as well as others, heightening their self-awareness and social awareness. The tools enable individuals to discover a level of personal depth regarding their personality, behaviors, style, strengths, preferences, and many other dimensions with which they would not otherwise have the opportunity to be acquainted. The process requires an openness to be vulnerable and dig deep to reveal their authentic self, and the results serve as resources to help individuals become their best selves in doing so.

While there are hundreds of excellent assessments and tools, selecting the appropriate ones is determinant on each coaching situation's objectives. For example, if someone is working on their ability to enhance interpersonal skills and relationships, the use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, DiSC, or BAR-ON EQi 2.0 would be appropriate to help the individual influence and communicate with others. On the other hand, if a leader is focused on developing executive presence, the Hogan Personality Inventory would be an effective tool to give them a deeper understanding of their needs, behaviors, and value-add. A mix of several tools is often the most effective approach to provide a comprehensive assessment of many dimensions that are valuable through the self-assessment process.

Whether a company uses an internal or external coach, talent development professionals can be an asset and resource in identifying or administering the assessments. Depending on the selected tools, the talent development function can administer them internally. However, it is important to maintain the integrity of the process in keeping the results confidential (between the individual and coach). Also, talent development professionals must ensure the coaching engagement remains independent from the individual's HR file. That is an integral part of the coaching engagement's success and is a key distinguisher between development and performance management. It's also a common reason companies seek out external executive coaches—to offer neutrality and objectivity.

### Case studies

Two scenarios with different coaching applications illustrate the value that executive coaching can offer.

**Strategic leadership.** A scientist within a biotechnology organization serving as executive director was looking to move away from a heavy research focus to one of business strategy, from both individual and team leadership perspectives. Offering a six-month coaching engagement using a variety of tools, strategies, techniques, and support to the leader enabled

the individual to use new approaches and shift their mindset to one of achieving results, not only through technology and research but through people.

**Executive cross-cultural awareness and effectiveness.** A senior marketing leader of a large major consumer products organization sought to enhance their cross-functional leadership skills with remote teams located in China and Brazil. The leader worked on developing skills in the areas of communications, conflict management, and emotional intelligence to provide greater impact on individual performance and team results. After a nine-month coaching period, the leader gained greater self-awareness and began the process of achieving a stronger ability to effectively understand, appreciate, and embrace cultural differences.

## Great leaders are lifelong learners, and executive coaching is one piece of that learning.

### Goals and outcomes

Through the coaching process, individuals can enhance their leadership potential and their value-add. It is a win-win all around because it enables the individual to grow and, in doing so, adds value to the person's team, department, and function, as well as the organization. That achieves a high level of engagement and commitment, empowerment, and accountability. It unleashes and builds leadership capabilities within the organization through their own growth as well as role modeling for their teams, which leads to increased effectiveness.

The end results include a direct impact on individual and business performance, which are drivers in building the business case for offering executive coaching. Organizations that choose to invest in their talent via executive coaching reap the rewards with highly empowered leaders who work toward reaching their utmost potential to be their best authentic selves.

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