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Dispelling the 7 myths of executive coaching.

by: Dr. Sabine Dembkowski and Fiona Eldridge

Summary:

During the past year consultancy firms have experienced a slowing of business growth. As a New Year starts the task is how best to maximise the potential of consultants and put the firm in a strong position. One tool that is widely used to develop individuals is executive coaching. Although coaching is a 'hot topic' most consultants do not have a clear idea of how it works in practice, may have misconceptions about the process and have yet to experience the benefits for themselves. This article thus seeks to dispel some of the myths of executive coaching.

Body:

Consultancy life is still challenging and rewarding and most consultants who join and persist within the profession have the ultimate goal of progressing through to partner level. To achieve this consultants face the challenge of developing a balanced personal approach that engages a client on an emotional level yet provides rigorous analysis and a strong knowledge base.

It is relatively straightforward for early career progression through the ranks from business analyst to senior consultant but from manager level onwards the challenge can increase for you. And herein lies the crux of the matter - not only do consultants have to possess excellent analytical skills and a strong knowledge base they also have to be able to develop new business for the company. The ability to develop accounts and establish close client relationships becomes much more important. For firms it is clear that the individuals who possess all the relevant skill sets are indeed a rare breed and will always be in demand regardless of market conditions.

Management consultancy firms have long realised the challenge and utilised internal and external training sessions but these do not necessarily address a consultant's individual needs. To address this most consultancies have put a mentoring system in place but all too often internal politics and time pressures intervene to prevent the consultant getting the most from this relationship and focussing on what really matters.

This is where an external executive coach can help. By working with the consultant, and being dedicated only to him/her, the coach can help shape personal and professional goals, develop and assess different options, put a concrete action plan in place and provide the necessary encouragement to ensure that the consultant maintains momentum towards the goals. However, executive coaching is not fully utilised in the consultancy profession. One of the reasons is that there are many unanswered questions surrounding executive coaching and myths have developed. The aim of this article is to address the most prominent ones.

So, what are the most prominent myths about executive coaching?

Myth 1: There are no clear definitions of what coaching is

In the early days coaching was not clearly defined and coaches seemed a little like magicians helping to effect changes in executives without really explaining the process.

Coaching can be clearly defined as the art and science of facilitating the development, learning and performance of an executive by expanding his/her options for behaving.

Confusions particularly exist when trying to distinguish between coaching and mentoring. Coaching is clearly distinguished from mentoring, which usually involves a more experienced consultant guiding a less experienced consultant through the maze. Almost all consultancies provide a mentoring scheme. Mentoring usually implies a long-term relationship whereas coaching tends to be time limited. Coaching is very much a 'do with' process placing responsibility on the consultant being coached whereas mentoring is more 'do to' and usually involves fairly directive teaching of skills and knowledge as well as providing support as a protective 'older sibling' and helping with providing access to the established network.

Myth 2: Coaching is a fad that will go away

The term 'executive coaching' first appeared in the early 1980s. By the 1990s, a market for the service was beginning to emerge and professional bodies such as the International Coach Federation were formed to establish practices and processes.

In its simplest form coaching is helping another person to develop and grow. We have been coaching one another since the earliest people taught each other to hunt, build shelters and to plant seeds. The prehistoric hunters who taught youngsters how to throw a spear were coaching, as were the master carpenters during the Renaissance who took on apprentices and taught them the craft. In more modern times football trainers coach their teams and executives coach younger executives.

Different techniques or terms may be used to describe the activity and process of coaching but coaching is an activity that is here to stay.

Myth 3: If you coach people successfully they may leave the organisation

If coaching is all about uncovering latent potential and encouraging individuals to realise more of their potential and goals then surely they might leave? Well, yes, it is true that the excitement and buzz people get from releasing untapped potential might catalyse a move. More often than not, however, the impact of revitalising the consultant has a very positive effect for his or her sponsoring organisation and its bottom line. Greater loyalty to the company is likely to be the result and greater productivity.

After all, the company has demonstrated that it is interested in the professional and personal development of its consultants, recognises them as individuals and is prepared to put money into development not just use it as a phrase in a recruitment brochure. Even if the consultant does move, the loyalty will remain and may be the source of future new relationships and business for the company. It is a win-win situation as some of the most respected consultancies demonstrate as they benefit from a thriving alumni community.

Myth 4: Coaching takes up a lot of my time

In a busy world of heavy travel schedules and deadlines to be met, many consultants may be loath to give time to 'just' sitting and talking. There is a fear that it is going to eat into precious personal time. Although the process may take anything from a few months to two years depending on what the individual wishes to achieve, the truth is that the coaching process increases personal responsibility, personal efficiency and time management so that time invested is returned many times over.

In practice, at the beginning of a coaching relationship coaching is most likely to take up about two – three hours every two weeks. Later on in the relationship coaching sessions may be more infrequent. In addition, not all of the sessions need to be face to face. Regular contact can be also maintained using telephone and email, which can be essential for consultants on the move.

Myth 5: Coaching is a kind of psychotherapy

Psychotherapy tends to focus on considering the impact of an individual's psychological and emotional history on his or her current situation whereas coaching focuses on the now and how to move forward. It is action and future oriented rather than looking at what may have gone wrong in the dim and distant past.

While it is true that coaches come from a variety of backgrounds and it is helpful for them to have an understanding of basic psychology and counselling, the process is definitely not psychotherapy. For coaches it is more important that they have an empathetic understanding of the consultant's environment and a range of skills and techniques to take the consultants forward. An executive coach assists a client by assessing his/her current situation, creatively brainstorming alternatives to the current situation, honing the goals and initiating and evaluating options for behaving differently. Most of all an executive coach can help in designing a rigorous action plan, acting as a sounding board and encouraging momentum

Myth 6: Coaching is only for those whose performance is not up to scratch

Coaching is not about 'fixing' poor performance. The reasons why people come to coaching are as varied as the consultants who benefit from the service themselves. For example, a consultant may have great potential and demonstrate good performance but has one or two 'blind spots' or areas for development or coaching may be used to help a consultant who is making the move to a higher level position to grow into the position in less time or is taking on a new and high profile project where the stakes are high for the individual and the organisation.

Engaging a coach for a consultant is the same as any other investment decision. For those who receive a coaching service as part of their package from their employer they can be sure that their potential is judged to be far greater than the investment. The same is also true for consultants who hire a coach on a private basis. By doing this they are demonstrating that they believe that their potential is greater than their current performance. For these consultants, their drive to get to the next level and commitment is evidenced by hiring an executive coach who will help them to take a real step forward in their career. So, next time you hear someone has a coach be aware that this could be the company's rising star.

Myth 7: Coaching doesn't add to the bottom line

Coaching is a process, which helps consultants become more flexible and adaptable. Greater flexibility and adaptability can lead to increased individual productivity with a definite impact on the bottom line. Recent studies in the USA (Manchester Inc) have demonstrated a return on coaching investment of anything between 5:1 – 22:1. In addition to the tangible business results, coaching also brings many intangible benefits such as better relationships with direct reports, improved team work, lower stress levels, reduced levels of conflict, increased job satisfaction, greater organisational commitment and better relationships with clients. As coaching continues to grow we will undoubtedly see more research into the area and its effectiveness. Many of the current studies are based on self-reporting techniques and hence must be treated with some caution. Nevertheless, coaching does produce greater return than any of the more traditional personal development techniques.

As you now reflect on where you want to go this year and what you want to achieve, consider how best you can maximise your potential and that of your firm. Locating a skilful executive coach who has an understanding and empathy with management consultancy can be the first step in ensuring

that you achieve your personal and professional goals in 2003.

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About the Authors:

Dr Sabine Dembkowski is Founder and Director of The Coaching Centre. She provides coaching services to international executives in Professional Service Firms, Multinationals, Start-ups and assists Entrepreneurs and the Self-employed. Sabine has extensive business, strategy and marketing experience working in the USA, India and across Europe in Germany, England, Sweden, Switzerland, Italy, France and Spain. She has consulted to the world's leading organisations in a wide range of industries from the automotive, consumer goods, chemicals, financial services and IT industries. Sabine received her non-directive coaching training from the leading authorities in the US, England and Germany. She is a certified executive coach with the Lore Institute. As a Master practitioner of NLP Sabine has trained with the top thought leaders and developers of NLP. She is published in leading trade magazines and academic journals. Sabine is also the co-author of two major Financial Times Management Reports.

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Fiona Eldridge is Founder and Director of The Coaching and Communication Centre providing coaching and training services to Executives in the Public Sector and Education. She has extensive experience of senior team leadership as a company director and college principal and in educational and professional matters at a national level. She trained in the UK and USA with leading authorities in the field of personal development and communication. She is a Master Practitioner and Certified Trainer of NLP.

Fiona has appeared on television and radio and is a frequent contributor to newspapers and journals in the sphere of education. Her clients have been drawn from major city firms as well as education and the performing arts.

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