



# Seeing Eye to Eye

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**E**ffective as it is, executive coaching is a slave to management. Without a manager's support and belief in the process, little can come from an executive coaching engagement that is truly lasting. As such, astute executive coaches begin any engagement by identifying communication channels established (or not) by the company and how well they do or do not work.

## Set the Stage for Success

Actually the two players in this scenario – management and their direct report(s) – have one interesting complaint in common: both believe they are deprived of being able to send or receive clear communications as a result of the other's shortcomings. What executive coaches help them understand is how critical both their roles are to making the most out of this professional relationship. Executive coaches report that the complaints heard most often – from both sides – demonstrate they're in need of established, dependable communication channels and a system by which they should be used.

### Participant Management

#### Direct Reports

### Complaint #1

Direct Reports don't perform up to expectations.

Management doesn't give clear feedback about direct reports' performance or behavior.

### Participant Management

#### Direct Reports

### Complaint #2

Direct reports have difficulty delivering quality results.

Management isn't clear about *exactly* what's expected of direct reports (e.g. volume of work, timelines, expected quality of end product).

### Participant Management

#### Direct Reports

### Complaint #3

Direct reports aren't clear about what tasks come next in a given project.

Management fails to offer critical direction regarding a project's next steps.

When an executive coach is hired for an engagement, and soon after learns the blame game is being played between management and coachee (person to be coached), that signals the need for intervention before any further coaching can take place. And, while both management and direct reports may find it necessary to justify their positions, the initial resolution really rests in the hands of management. It is a manager's job to clearly define boundaries and expectations. Even the most well-educated and capable employees can run amuck without them. Expect executive coaches to encourage management to step up and provide the clarity that's critical to further improvement.

## Coaching with Clarity

Once an executive coach has management's approval to bring more clarity to the communication process, four key steps can move one forward quickly:

**1. Align work priorities.** To "align work priorities" is just another way of saying "to identify the current status on all active projects." Then, management learns where the disparities are on a current project list by asking direct reports to complete these steps:

- Compile a list of all current projects/accounts.
- List projects from most to least important.
- Make special notes that help explain the prioritization of the list.

After these three tasks are complete, the manager mirrors this exercise by listing what he or she believes the direct report is or should be working on – again, prioritized from most to least important. Subsequently, the executive coach holds a meeting with management and the direct report to compare notes. The key indicator is the ratio of "same-to-different" items because it's what more clearly determines logical "next steps". Experienced executive coaches know the wider the gap between perceptions about workload, the less likely management and direct reports are working from an established set of standard operating procedures.

**2. Create standard operating procedures.** Everyone knows that the closer one gets to something, the harder it is to see the big picture. Executive coaches don't have

a problem seeing it and leading managers and direct reports to making sure they do whatever it takes to work from SOPs in the future. Think of standard operating procedures (SOPs) as the insurance that guards against unacceptable 'same-to-different' ratios. SOPs provide employees with a map to follow so getting to their desired destination becomes much easier. In situations where SOPs haven't yet been created, the ideal way to begin is for management and direct reports to work together. The more employees are involved in processes from the outset, the more buy-in they are likely to have, resulting in more motivation to complete a job. For companies without SOPs, there's no time like now to begin creating them – but keep these tips in mind:

- Know each employee's roll and how it impacts others.
- Know each employee's responsibilities and how well he/she executes them.
- Know the extent of each employee's capabilities.
- Know the extent of each employee's potential.
- Determine all points at which tasks can be delegated in advance to give employees time to plan and ask questions.

**3. Understand time management.** Executive coaches address time management in terms of defining what it means from both sides. Until managers and their direct reports work under the same system of at least understanding time management, conflicts will arise. Overcoming this is usually easier if both sides start by shedding the idea that time management has been a problem in the past because of the other's shortcomings. Instead of revisiting the past, both sides can now channel this energy into finding a time management solution that is mutually reasonable and agreed upon.

**4. Offer consistent, effective and constructive feedback.** Improving the way a manager communicates to a direct report may sound easy to apply in theory, yet the manager's inability to practice this regularly is part of

what derails the effort. Creating an environment where feedback is delivered consistently helps it to become part of an employee's ongoing learning process.

Executive coaches do what is necessary to make sure a manager learns the art of giving feedback effectively. Whether it is for the purpose of sharing information with the goal of moving people toward action and improvement or to give corrective guidance when people are making mistakes, it should be part of every project status and follow-up meeting between the two. Coaches may also suggest ways of making it more worthwhile. For example, feedback means a great deal more when it is delivered non-judgmentally. Also, the meeting warrants a private place, which is always more effective when it's on management's turf. Managers are encouraged to prepare notes in advance to cite the specific behaviors being discussed. From there, managers are encouraged to use the seven-step model of feedback:

1. Make a clear statement of purpose.
2. State action/behavior being observed.
3. Describe management's position on action/behavior.
4. Encourage employee response.
5. Offer suggestions for improvement.
6. Summarize the meeting.
7. Plan follow-up meeting (60-90 days).

### **Moving Forward More Productively**

In executive coaching, a certain satisfaction comes from one ongoing truth: employees who are clear from the start about their roles and responsibilities are far more likely to meet management's expectations. But, providing an employee with such clarity doesn't just happen. As coaches are there to help point out – it is one more task that must be planned and managed. Using this approach, everyone works from the same foundation and the manager, employee and executive coach can and will all move forward more productively. ■

Executive Coaching ■ Leadership Skills Development ■ Team Building & Team Development

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