



*When choosing an executive coach,
experience counts and so does ROI*

The Right Match

by **Stephen Xavier**

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Sally was an executive in management at an aerospace firm. One of the most frequently repeated complaints about Sally was that she left no room for error. She constantly put her direct reports under a microscope and pushed them so hard that, unbeknownst to her, she was driving them toward failure.

Although everybody respected Sally's drive and detail-orientation, they also did everything possible to avoid working on her team. At the time, Sally was recognized as a tough, hard-working manager, but she was not as successful and effective as she could be.

Something—namely her attitude, communication style and behavior—needed to change, which was an assignment perfectly suited to the right executive coach.

Finding and selecting the right coach are prerequisites for success in any mission to help individuals in positions similar to Sally's. Clearly, not just any coach could walk in and show her the error of her ways.

Instead it would take a person who could interpret the situation for what it really was and work with her to effect change. In this particular case, the goals were achieved, and employees now go to great lengths to be part of her team.

The Groundwork

Hiring an executive coach involves a defined process. Stated in its most simple terms: Do your homework. This doesn't mean using the Yellow Pages or any specialty directory, for that matter.

"Homework" consists of accomplishing a few defined tasks that include getting referrals. This is one of the first and most effective means of finding the right coach.

Referrals can come from internal sources (for example, management that used a coaching firm in previous employment), as well as external sources (such as human resource executives' involvement in their own trade associations,

boards, networks, committees, etc.)

Talk to executives who enjoyed great success with their coaching experiences as well as with executives whose engagements failed miserably. Ask appropriate questions about why there was success or failure.

Zero in on what qualities and skills a coach must possess as well as what to avoid.

You should also adhere to established criteria. In many ways, hiring an executive coach mirrors the process for hiring someone for a job. Certain nuggets of information are gleaned from the resume and/or bio, but how a coach looks on paper and how a coach acts in person can be two entirely different matters.

What to Consider

Although both resumes and interviews are considered critical to the final hiring decision, nothing speaks louder than the face-to-face meeting. Between paper and presentation, here are coaching criteria to evaluate:

- **Years of experience** You should require three to five years of previous coaching experience, minimum.
- **Nature of experience** Certain aspects of experience matter in a coach's past. For instance, some work for large corporations while other coaches target firms with fewer than 50 employees.

In general, the size of a company for which a coach has worked in the past is normally the best indicator of that coach's ability to qualify for another company of the same size. The larger the company, the higher the level of complexities when it comes to organizational structure and ensuing dynamics.

On the other hand, time spent coaching in the same industry isn't as relevant as some may think. Really, the ultimate qualifier here is that people are people. No matter where they work, they have the same types of performance challenges.

Rule of Thumb

Other important criteria are:

- **Recent references** Insist that coaching candidates provide recent references of their coaching success. A good rule of thumb is to ask for references from completed assignments from the last one to two years. Any coaching firm that is worth its weight won't have a problem turning over the information you requested.
- **Presentation tactics** Different companies approach it uniquely, but one way or another, they have a method to determine the ability of a coach to respond to the problem at hand. Watch to see how interested or prepared a coach candidate is when it comes to asking questions about the company's problem.

Pay attention to how coaching candidates use the interview time. Do they ask the right questions about behavior, performance, and other team members in order to get a truthful angle on the issue or challenge is at hand?

Or, if the HR representative makes a general statement about the company's problems, and then asks the coach what he/she would do to approach that problem, how thorough or insightful was the response?

- **Personality pluses** Even though some still deny how much emphasis they place on a coaching candidate's personality in the hiring process, many people have learned the personality match between the coach and coachee might be more important than any other criterion. In these politically correct times, personality often takes a back seat in an effort to respect and remain mindful of discrimination and diversity.

Yet, if personality types are known for not mixing well from culture to culture—and they're brought together for a coaching engagement—the company will spend more time managing conflicts than nurturing a coaching relationship.

Buyer Beware

Today, the watchwords for hiring executive coaches are "buyer beware". Running rampant in the field are different consulting types who would make prospects believe they are qualified coaches.

Examples can include management consultants, organizational development consultants and even some out-of-work corporate executives.

Another caveat when hiring a coach is to resist relying solely on a coach's affiliation with coaching certification bodies. Many companies naively pick coaches because of their memberships in and certifications by these associations.

The truth is that neither guarantees a particular coach is qualified or skilled at the craft. This isn't to say that affiliation hasn't made some coaches strive for more in their profession. It's only to warn that coaching certification or coaching trade association membership should by no means weigh heavily as apart of the final decision; in the end, it's experience and business savvy that count.

Not a Panacea

A final word of warning: coaching isn't the right answer for all companies or all situations.

For instance, if the person who needs coaching isn't a willing participant and doesn't care for any part of the coaching process, the engagement is likely to fail. Remember, coaching isn't a punitive action; it's usually offered to help employees who are eager and willing to engage in the process.

Ensure Attractive ROI

Companies interested in hiring an executive coach have their own commitments to make before expecting a return on their investments. For one, they have to commit to finding the right coach.

Companies that get the most ROI from coaching engagements are those that realize it's one of the best tools available for developing their talent pool, as long as the coach they select is a good match.

Because it has proven its effectiveness at the executive level, companies continue to count on coaching engagements to impact business directly.

It can and will make its mark—but give ROI a real boost by hiring the right coach. It's far too valuable a process to err on the side of poor hiring. Avoid becoming a victim to this error by deciding to be part of the solution. ■



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