



Smoothing Out The Rough Edges

by **Stephen Xavier**

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In an executive coaching engagement, the goal is never to change the coachee's personality. Rather, executive coaching is based on the premise that the coachee is already doing the job right, and the goal is simply to enhance existing strengths with complementary skills or fine-tune skill sets. In other words, the intention is to smooth out an executive's rough edges so that the individual can perform even more effectively and with increased capacity.

Fine-Tuning Executive Talent

It's surprising how many intelligent, accomplished people don't see the value in standing back to reflect upon and contemplate their behavior. If more did, they would recognize executive coaching is an opportunity to remove themselves from the comfort of their existing routine and guide them to the next level of professional distinction.

In particular, two general skill sets represent the areas of improvement addressed most often in executive coaching. Fine-tuning either of them is typically what pushes the coachee higher up the corporate ladder.

1. Delegation ■ Some leaders considered capable of great corporate accomplishments carry the burden of a colossal workload. While chasing the belief they can do it all, they delegate only to micro-manage and nit-pick their way into becoming terribly ineffective. Their plate is always too full; therefore employees reporting directly to this type of individual never learn and grow from the experience of being delegated to effectively. Or, if these executives delegate a project, usually it's accompanied by so much reprimand that the boss may as well have completed the project himself or herself. Delegation isn't an easy task for executives to undertake; rough transitions are the norm. In fact, more often than not, getting comfortable with more effective delegation is a real struggle for most.

2. Interpersonal & Related Communication Skills ■ Executive coaches are often successful in helping executives modify their style of how they interact with others. The two types of styles most commonly addressed are those of the under-communicator and the over-communicator.

■ **The Under-Communicator.** This executive is typically introverted in nature and, as a result, tends to under-communicate. For this type of individual, getting out among the troops doesn't come easily, which in turn tends to create gaps between employees working directly with him or her. As such, anyone managed by the under-communicator is often deprived of ever really knowing what expectations to fulfill.

■ **The Over-Communicator.** These executives are not short on communication, only on taking ownership of a tactful style with which to express themselves. Often using some form of negativity or forcefulness to fuel their communication efforts, they walk away unaware of the impact they've had, and employees walk away even further frustrated with their sinking morale and counterproductive thoughts.

Although these descriptions represent broad generalities, chances are most people can easily place a name of a current or former boss into one of these categories and easily recall the struggles faced being managed by either type. While individuals who possess these styles are not bad people, they are likely to be ineffective managers who need to improve.

Making Good Leaders...Great

Unfortunately, on their journey upward, the vast majority of executives rarely stop long enough to evaluate how closely their skills and style actually match their job responsibilities or enhance their effectiveness as leaders. All they know is they're moving up. In such cases, executive coaching creates the environment for the level of self-reflection that never occurred on the way up.

As the most customized form of training currently available, an executive coaching engagement is tailored specifically to the needs of the executive. Before the engagement can begin, the coach conducts a battery of assessments, interviews various people, shadows the executive in group settings and does a great deal of observing. The sum of all the assessments and observations allows the coach to keep the engagement targeted

into no more than two to three specific development areas for the coachee to work on.

Moving coachees through such a process eventually leads them to the place where they take a close look at what they say, how they say it and the likely impact they've been making all along. Here is where the value of a well-designed 360 assessment, oftentimes coupled with interviews, can help open executives' eyes to the reality of the impact they have – both positive and negative – on those around them. Self-awareness at this level allows them to take responsibility for the need to change, which is the investment an individual needs before reaching success. From that, deeper, more meaningful relationships can develop with those they manage, as well as those to whom they answer. Hopefully, a new level of effectiveness is in the works. Rough edges that were previously limiting these individuals from achieving greatness become smooth pathways towards success.

Scripting Behavior - A Roadmap for Change

If all engagements moved along that easily, executive coaching would not have grown to what is now a \$1 billion industry. In an executive coaching engagement, as the preliminaries are in the works – so is the groundwork for a foundation of trust and rapport. The process actually benefits by the use of a script. As a coach learns the errors of a coachee's ways, the coach's challenge is to script new ways for the coachee to conduct business – all of which are contradictory to the way he or she typically operates. The scripting process helps a coachee grow incrementally so that each step is used to build confidence along the way. Specifically, the coach must map out what to say and not say, and to whom. An experienced coach never assumes that just because the client now has awareness of their shortcomings that they can now charge right in and start doing things differently. They cannot.

Trying on new behaviors is a process where it sure helps to have some direction – as well as victories along the way. Stretching the process out allows for them to experience this. The process cannot be rushed. At this stage the coachee also becomes far more willing to move along in the coaching process. This is also the point at which a coach begins to deliver the deeper-level feedback that serves to drive real and lasting change.

Resistance to Change

One reality that hasn't been addressed is the frequency with which executive coaches deal with coachee resistance. It shouldn't be such a surprise considering these individuals are being asked to step outside their usual and accustomed way of being. Furthermore, one truth they know (and may cling to dearly) is that somehow they were capable and smart enough to reach their current level by being who they were, doing what they were doing and being rewarded for it. By challenging their core beliefs, resistance can almost be guaranteed. This is the point at which a coach either stands up to the changes believed to be necessary or caves to the resistance. Unfortunately, many coaches find ways to defend behaviors because they're not otherwise sure how to eliminate them, without eliminating the business (source of revenue) altogether.

Here, the choice for the coach should be a simple one – if you want the client to take a risk, take the first step and model the behavior. The coach has an obligation to demonstrate the value of the change being recommended as well as to outline the potential increased success they can anticipate and enjoy provided they're willing to make these changes.

Using candor to describe the changes necessary for improvement helps, but resistance builds when the right mix of sensitivity isn't added. Rather than dwell on how poorly the job has been done in the past, an insightful coach might explain that the individual has reached a plateau. No longer will the old ways of managing work as a stepping-stone for this individual, so it's worthwhile to instigate change and try a new approach. Here the focus should be on what is required to rise up within the organization, versus what the coachee is doing wrong and must change in order to survive as an employee.

Meeting the Goals of the Business

Above all, an executive coach's role is to help the coachee produce business results for employers. This translates into helping leaders adapt to new responsibilities, aligning individuals to collective goals and enhancing teamwork. And what matters most is that a coachee understands the potential benefits of change – increased effectiveness for themselves, their direct reports and in the end, a better bottom line. Here is where the real value lies. ■

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



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