



# Get **G**AME

in the

*Six critical points to consider if your company wants to initiate an effective coaching program for its top people*

by **Stephen Xavier**

*President/CEO, Cornerstone Executive Development Group, Inc.*

**E**xecutive coaching has been around in some form or another for a decade or longer, although only recently has the term “coaching” been associated with business. It often is applied to many talented and gifted businesspeople that—in spite of these talents and gifts—oftentimes may not have it in themselves to realize or actualize their true potential.

In its most recent stage of evolution, the role of executive coach seems to be taking on a more influential role than ever before. Some believe that its growing influence is only in reaction to the business environment in which it’s being practiced.

Ever-expanding globalization, pervasive competition, clean-up from the dot-com bust and the ongoing aftermath of 9/11 all blend to set the stage for a very vulnerable corporate America—one that can no longer operate effectively under the “old rules” of business.

Even the most well-seasoned business leaders are seeking guidance to conquer these obstacles. Many are finding that the answer lies in hiring an effective executive coach. As such, this column will examine the practice of executive coaching from many different angles. It all begins with the six most important considerations when initiating an executive coaching engagement.

## **Identify the Coachee**

Profiling the coachee’s situation into one of two common model types is a good place to start. Typically, the executive in need of coaching is either an “executive with potential” or an “executive with a problem”.

The executive with potential case represents up to 80 percent of all coaching engagements. This model is set up to polish the executive who is slated for much loftier horizons. This type includes:

- **Improving or gaining hard skills** Among the skills more commonly coached are strategic planning, technical and finance.
- **Presentation skills** When executives have to master the art of speaking to a public group, coaching can make all the difference for them.
- **Interpersonal skills** For executives who still have trouble coming out of their shell, this type of coaching teaches any executive how to engage,

relate and communicate more effectively with others.

- **Political savvy** Popular among the IT financial types, this focus of coaching teaches executives how to abandon their introverted nature and proactively develop relationships. Doing so helps them navigate successfully through their organization as a means to manage their careers.
- **Executive presence** More often than one might imagine, the halls of corporate America are rife with executives who are fashion-challenged at best. The issue of poor executive presence has done considerable damage to many rising stars.

A highly valuable executive is identified as “having problems”—usually behavioral, sometimes performance—that may derail the individual’s career. The coach’s purpose here would be to intervene, assess the executive’s future viability and recommend a course of action for saving the person’s career or devising an exit plan.

## **Find a Qualified Coach**

Firms that apply a unique combination of the two related forms of executive coaching get better results. One HR executive at Disney focuses primarily on two qualities of an executive coach, with the first one described as “fit” – or how the coach fits in with the organization.

“A coach has to be able to understand the unwritten rules,” says Glenn Rosen, director of global leadership and organization development for Disney’s Consumer Products Division. “A coach who could do this for the banking or pharmaceutical industry probably couldn’t be nearly as effective in the entertainment industry.”

Rosen defines “fit” as a coach whose experience would have a great deal in common with an organization’s size, industry type, complexity of business nature and style of corporate culture, among other areas.

“I also look at specific expertise,” Rosen explains. “the field of executive coaching is growing so rapidly that HR and senior management types are calling themselves executive coaches. So, I try to learn about the candidate’s forte in order to better understand the individual.”

## Assess the Coachee

Learning how an executive can become more effective is done through the use of many different assessment tools. Interviews with management, colleagues and staff; 360-degree feedback instruments and self evaluations are among the tools commonly used.

Equally important is that the coachee's development goals are closely aligned to his or her department goals and to the organization's long-term goals. This ensures the coachee's growth path is in synch with that of the organization and will more likely keep the individual on a path toward assuming higher responsibility.

A key to the success of this process is a meeting at the start of the coaching engagement between the coachee, his or her boss and the executive coach. During that meeting, the three discuss and agree on specific development goals. It is that level of very open and honest discussion and agreement that further ensures success in the process.

Typically, this meeting revolves around a completed set of assessments that gives the boss, coach and coachee clear points of reference with which to build the conversation around. These data points are critical to the successful launch of an engagement.

## Establish Expectations

Coaches typically share only information that is directly related to helping the coachee achieve stated goals. They might also prepare an action plan to help managers continue the coaching process in the workplace.

Other organizations involve an HR rep to participate in both initial goal setting meetings, as well as any mid-engagement reviews or check ins. This ensures the boss, coach and coachee are aligned to previously agreed-upon development goals and that some progress is occurring.

## Establish the Length of Engagement

In order to allow the maximum time possible for behavioral change to be understood and developed, coaching can take anywhere from six months to one year. It all depends on the coachee's level of involvement and the specific development needs being addressed.

Typically, those below a vice president rarely see an engagement lasting more than six months, while those at or above vice president level typically see a nine- to 12-month engagement. During that time, the coachee meets one-on-one with the coach for several hours—usually two meetings per month at 90 to 120 minutes each—for a period of six to 12 months.

## Understand What it Takes

Obviously, this isn't the place to outline all the responsibilities, but knowing key characteristics of the role each participant has can be valuable:

- **Coach** The importance of finding a coach who fits the company has already been mentioned. But, also look for a corporate coach who understands what it takes to become and remain

successful in today's extremely competitive and ever changing business climate.

This is a person who has in-depth knowledge of organizational systems and cultures and knows how these factors influence individual performance. Certifications and advanced degrees, although helpful, don't promise a good coach-like business savvy and great interpersonal skills do.

- **Coachee** A good candidate for executive coaching is a professional who has a strong desire to develop in a very focused way. These individuals have been identified, usually by internal processes, as "ready now/high potentials" and are on a track toward higher levels of responsibility in their own organization.

Although virtually anyone can participate in coaching, it is most beneficial for people who are open to feedback, flexible about making changes and willing to see themselves as others see them—whether they agree or not.

- **Coachee's Boss** At the launch of the engagement, the role of the boss is critical to ensure the direction and focus of the engagement is clear and on target. From there the role moves on to one of side line—a second coach. Here, the boss is busy observing behaviors, looking for change and most importantly, serving as a support for the employee being coached.

Lastly, at the end of the engagement, the boss is brought in again to debrief the engagement, review the final coaching plan and support the employee post-coaching.

- **HR person** This person's involvement includes reviewing the 360 data, when appropriate, and assisting the lead coach in making the best match of coach to client based on needs

## Customized Corporate Coaching

With the number of executive coaching firms on the rise, remember to take the time to select the right one. Using the six considerations listed here, initiate the process intelligently by taking the time to understand the implications of this level of learning. Executive coaching is a very rewarding experience for companies that understand how to get lasting changes from its use: and the only way to do this is to enter the process well-informed and prepared. ■



**Stephen Xavier** is President/CEO of Cornerstone Executive Development Group, Inc., a global firm specializing in executive coaching and related leadership development. [Xavier@cedg.com](mailto:Xavier@cedg.com)

**Cornerstone**  
Executive Development Group, Inc.

**Executive Coaching**

**Leadership Skills Development**

**Team Building & Development**

3717 Thousand Oaks Blvd.  
Westlake Village, CA 91362  
**805-492-8263**  
[www.cedg.com](http://www.cedg.com)