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As the economy began to soften in 2007, I observed that a number of Human Resource leaders were becoming conservative in managing their organization's investment in leadership development. Several coaching clients and prospective clients indicated that they were cutting all coaching programs and related activities as part of the firm's overall "belt tightening." While many of these HR leaders acknowledged that they believed in the benefits of coaching, they offered that they were hard pressed to argue the case for retaining budget dollars for coaching when it was difficult to point to the impact of the expenditures. As a consequence of not making a business case for coaching in the budget, several of these individuals told me that money would not be allocated for coaching in 2009. While this is certainly not the case for all organizations across all industry sectors, the downturn has impacted many organizations. Unable to justify the impact or effectiveness of coaching when budgets are tight, they have chosen to eliminate or defer spending on leadership development, including executive coaching.

While investment in executive coaching has continued in some organizations, organizational expectations have also increased, and in many cases, rightly so. This led me to consider the question: What factors or practices might positively influence the effectiveness of executive coaching?

To begin, below are two observations I have concluded from a review of the body of research on the effectiveness of executive coaching:

What is coaching effectiveness and how do we measure it?

The research suggests a number of ways in which the effectiveness of coaching may be measured. Many articles cite studies conducted using the four levels of training evaluation (reaction, learning, behavior, and results); and most of those that cover attempts at establishing a "return on investment" in dollar terms agree that the methodologies are contrived. Seemingly, many studies raise more questions than offer answers on such issues as to whom coaching efficacy matters, organizational and client readiness, coach qualifications and experience, and the impact of feedback on the process. Many studies acknowledge flaws in the research, such as the absence of control groups and changing organizational environmental context (priorities, roles, feedback, and the introduction of other developmental activities during the study period).

How important is it to organizations and clients to measure of effectiveness of coaching?

Although much is written about executive coaching and its many benefits, proportionally few articles have documented its effectiveness. For the most part, clients and organizations have not demanded rigor in measuring its effectiveness, as the literature indicates only about a third of the organizations attempt to evaluate it. Why? As one leader of executive development programs at a privately held billion dollar firm explained to me, "Executives would not recommend it to others if they didn't think it was valuable… the fact that executive coaching has continued here for over 15 years even with ups and down in business cycles speaks volumes about its value."

Recommendations

In this context, what might an executive coach do to realize optimal outcomes with clients? Conversely, what facets of a coaching process or coach characteristics or skills should executive coaching clients, their managers, organizational sponsors, and other stakeholders consider in evaluating prospective coaches when coaching effectiveness is considered important by an organization? I suggest several important guiding principles for coaches, coaching processes and systems, and coaching competencies below:

What does "effectiveness" mean to the coach and how will he or she measure it?

The coach should have a clear definition of the level or levels of evaluation used to guide his or her practice. The coach should be clear on the value of measuring effectiveness in terms of reaction (Level 1), learning (Level 2), behavior (Level 3), and results (Level 4), as well as the pluses and minuses of each level relative to his or her coaching practice. While the coach may prefer to focus his or her practice based on a particular level of measurement, it is important to be clear on one's flexibility in determining which level is appropriate for various situations.

The coach should articulate a personal philosophy that aligns his or her competencies, focus and interests, and key factors for realizing positive outcomes from coaching.

In defining his or her practice, a coach may decide to focus his or her practice in terms of client readiness. For example, the coach may decide to only work with clients who demonstrate a high level of performance and no behaviors that pose a risk to derailment. Similarly, the coach may set parameters that narrow the range of organizational clients to those with a commitment to supporting executives in coaching through feedback and other means fundamental to achieving a positive outcome. If the client's manager and/or corporate sponsor is seen as not being supportive of the client, unwilling to provide the necessary feedback, or unwilling to engage in progress evaluations or end-of-program evaluations, the coach may decide that the organization's lack of readiness precludes any reasonable level of coaching effectiveness.

The coach should address the importance of confidentiality and privacy in evaluating coaching effectiveness.

Adhering to high standards of ethical conduct also demands that the executive coach honor confidentiality and privacy when dealing with a diverse set of stakeholders. Stakeholders may have different expectations for access to client/coach information as they seek to assess the impact of coaching's effectiveness on performance improvement, behavioral change, or other desired outcomes. If demonstrating coaching's effectiveness is an essential aspect of the agreement with a client and his or her organization, it will be important to protect client confidentiality and privacy in the course of working with a diverse set of stakeholders on measuring the effectiveness of the coaching intervention. Developing a clear set of confidentiality guidelines relative to measuring effectiveness and gaining agreement on these terms at the onset of coaching will be important to avoiding conflicts later in the process.

The coach should focus on his/her client's agenda.

It is essential that the coach align organizational representatives to a common definition of coaching and, in particular, to the importance of the client's agenda implementing an effective program. When the client's agenda and organization's agenda appear to diverge the coach should work to help stakeholders align expectations.

The coach should build commitment through organizational involvement.

The body of literature on coaching efficacy conveys the complexity of factors affecting coaching outcomes. While the client clearly remains central to the coaching engagement, promoting an effective program demands that the executive coach build organizational as well as individual client commitment. Engaging other organizational representatives such as the client's sponsor, direct manger, and/or the organization's human resources function/department helps these individuals collectively understand the coaching process and their support role and responsibilities. This understanding and support is important to increasing the effectiveness of coaching as a development activity for the organization. Although the client has individual accountability to engage others in supporting his or her agenda for personal development, the coach can support these efforts. The coach can involve organizational representatives and the client in meetings to provide program updates, reinforce organizational roles and responsibilities, exchange feedback, and consider roles in measuring effectiveness.

The coach should help clients make explicit the progress they have made, not only for themselves but, if appropriate, with others in their organization. In doing so, the client further involves those key organizational representatives in supporting the client's development. Also, communication between client, organizational representatives, and coach increases the likelihood of alignment between organizational and personal goals.

The coach should be deliberate in the entry and contracting phase of the coaching process.

In addition to working with the coaching client, working with the organizational sponsor, client manager, the human resources function/department, and/or other organizational representatives is essential to gaining alignment on a number of key areas. These areas include: (1) objectives/outcomes for coaching and how they will be measured; (2) related hopes and concerns; (3) confidentiality in debriefing, reporting, and measuring outcomes; (4) expectations for organizational representatives in supporting the coaching engagement to optimize effectiveness; and (5) a thorough description of key tasks related to evaluating coaching effectiveness (creating a baseline; establishing an appropriate time to measure learning, behavior or results, etc.).

The coach should collaborate with his/her clients to create a coaching plan and SMART goals.

The importance of SMART goals takes on added meaning when specific measures of coaching effectiveness are part of the coaching engagement. As before, three-way meetings between client, coach, and organizational representatives may be appropriate for confirming alignment of goals with personal and organizational priorities. This may be particularly important when client goals have evolved since the onset of the coaching engagement. This step in the process may also be the point at which agreement is reached on the particular point of time when effectiveness will be measured.

Conclusion

What implications do the above points have for executive coaching going forward?

Many clients and organizations will likely continue to deploy executive coaching for development and performance reasons, and not necessarily expect measureable outcomes. However, some clients and organizations who will continue to strategically engage in investing in coaching will expect it to have a measureable return. Some may simply look to the coach to make explicit his or her guiding principles while demonstrating core coaching competencies in the engagement. Others may look for sustained behavior change or specific results, and expect evidence of same. Regardless of organizational expectations, the guiding principles, process steps, and competencies suggested above should positively affect coaching's impact for all organizational stakeholders.

As Principal of Talent Effects, Inc., Donald Lang supports senior leadership teams who seek to increase their effectiveness in selecting, developing and advancing leadership talent to enhance organizational performance and growth. He leverages a diverse background that spans human resources management, line operations and account management, as well as P&L responsibility, to bring practical solutions that fit the context, culture, and resources of the organization.

He has over 15 years experience coaching professionals and executives from a variety of fields and industries in pivotal career situations including: assimilating quickly into a new leadership role, working through strengths and development needs in a current role as well as for future growth, and managing personal and organizational transitions. For leaders and organizations operating across borders, Don contributes key insights and perspective from over 12 years of hands-on consulting assignments in North and South America, Europe, Asia and Africa.

Don holds an MBA from Georgia State University and a Bachelors Degree in Economics from Lafayette College. He has achieved an Advanced Coaching Intensive in Executive Coaching from Columbia University.