

Are Executive Coaches Too Nice?

Brian Underhill, Ph.D., PCC

There is a particular brand of ice cream I do not eat.

It has nothing to do with the product ingredients, flavor varieties or even the brand's political views. It has to do with (yes, I know this is immature) a long-held grudge from one of the few times I was fired as an executive coach.

About 15 years ago, five of us were inaugural coaches for an ice cream company's first-ever 360 feedback and coaching program. We were thrilled to be included, as this looked like a *fun* company. We each dutifully reviewed the top brass' 360 reports and worked individually with them one-on-one in sessions that (at the time) felt quite productive and fulfilling.

Three days later, we received our feedback scores verbally. I was expecting decent-to-wonderful results, especially since I'd only received great scores in all my past efforts. So the words seemed to strike my eardrums in muffled slow motion: "They aren't rehiring you. They said you were too tough on the participants. All the coaches were. We're replacing all of you."

What?? I was too *tough* on the participants? If anything, I thought I was too *nice*! Now that feedback was "cold" (pun intended).

Over the years, I've put up with plenty from my coached executives: missed appointments, uncompleted homework, not practicing the new desired behavior in between sessions, etc. I'm sure you're familiar with the line, "We've just been absolutely up to our necks, so I had no time to try to be nice to people this past week!"

As coaches, we constantly struggle with finding the right balance between:

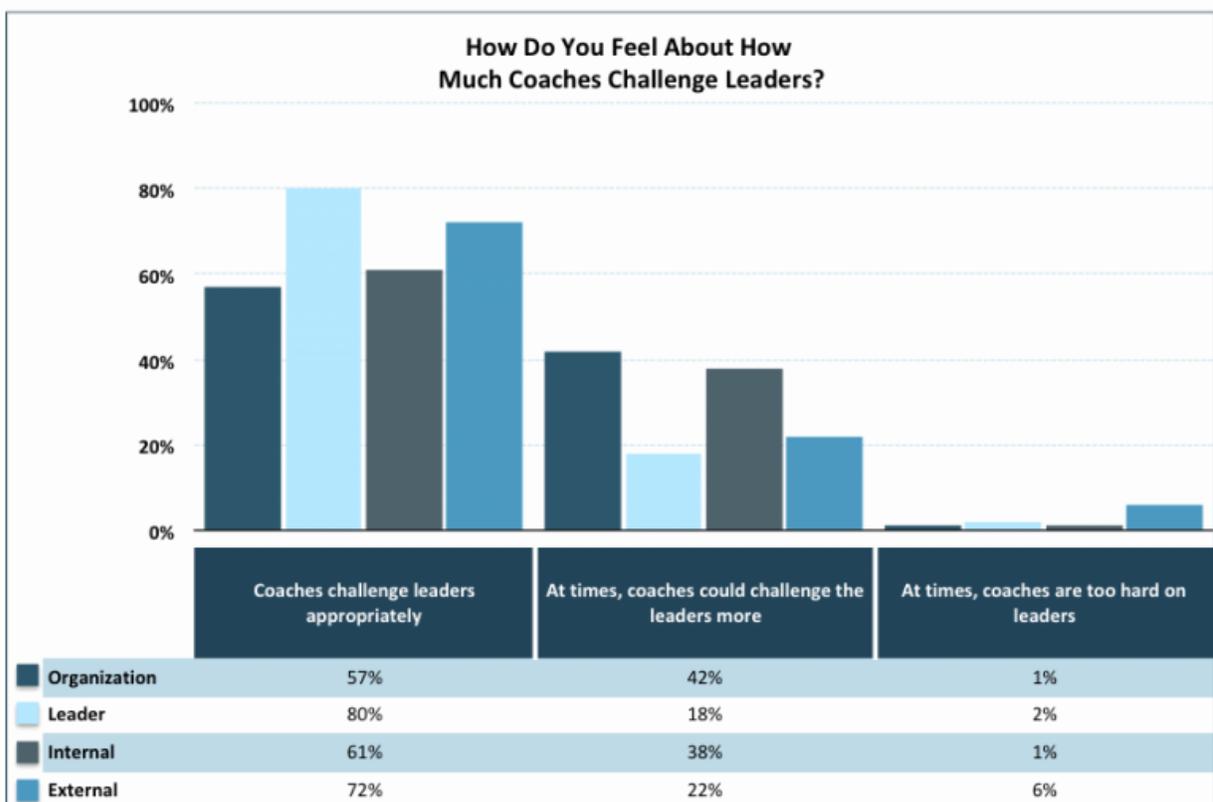
- Offering a friendly, safe place to dialogue versus holding executives accountable
- Opening new positive avenues of growth versus hitting them over the head with harsh, negative 360 feedback
- Balancing offering encouragement and support versus speaking truth

And this balance is not an absolute; every coaching engagement is very different.

Research Says Coaches Are Too Nice...depending on who you ask

CoachSource polled nearly 100 organizations, several hundred external coaches, internal coaches and even 60-plus executives for our study *Executive Coaching for Results*.

We asked: “How do you feel about how much coaches challenge leaders?” The results are reflected below.



Eighty percent of executives who had worked with a coach indicated that their coach challenged them appropriately. This is great news for coaches, as it seems like we are hitting the mark in this always elusive balance.

In fact, executives represented the most optimistic group in this category, compared to external coaches (72% agreed with "coaches challenge leaders appropriately"), internal coaches (61%)

and organizational respondents (those managing coaching, 57%). So executives are more pleased with our level of challenge than any of us practitioners are!

Interestingly, 18% of executives indicated coaches could challenge them more versus just 2% that feel coaches are too hard. ***The learning for coaches: When in doubt, err on the side of more challenge.***

Organizations Definitely Want Coaches to Challenge More

At my coaching business, we collect countless “intake forms” each year from organizations requesting coaching from us. More often than not, we see statements such as:

- "Coach who needs to challenge him."
- "Need a strong personality who can hold this leader accountable and really challenge her to tell things as they are."
- "She is a really upfront person and is not patient for anyone subtle. Just cut through the chase and tell her."

Our intake form offers a choice: Would the leader work better with a coach who is “relational and subtle” or “clear and direct?” I’ve only seen “relational and subtle” checked once—ever.

Perhaps organizations are hoping an external coach can deliver a hard message that they themselves have been unsuccessful—or perhaps unwilling or unable—to deliver to high-powered executives. In fact, our coaches who portray a strong, pervasive demeanor during HR interviews are often those put forward to meet the executive.

So, what do we take from all this?

- In the eyes of executives, coaches are generally doing a good job in the balance between clear/direct and subtle/relational.
- If anything, coaches should lean toward being more direct.
- Our corporate HR clients will often prefer a coach with greater directness.
- When in doubt, always ask your coached leader how they feel you are doing in this balance.

Coming Full Circle

A great coach should know better than to hold a grudge. Given my night job is as a church musician, I should know how to forgive. And so that's what I did—I went to the store to treat myself to this brand's finest mint-chip ice cream. As my good friend, Marshall Goldsmith, continuously says, it was time to "Let it go." Boy, that ice cream was good!



Brian O. Underhill, Ph.D., PCC, is the founder and CEO of [CoachSource](#), the world's largest executive coaching firm, with over 1,000 coaches in 51 countries. He is also the co-author of *Executive Coaching for Results: The Definitive Guide to Developing Organizational Leaders*. Brian previously spent 10 years managing executive coaching operations for Marshall Goldsmith. Some of his clients include Dell, Microsoft, Genentech and the State of California. He holds a Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology and is an internationally sought-after speaker. To receive your complimentary copy of the 40-page executive coaching industry study referenced in this article, please [visit the CoachSource website](#).