

Coaching in the Real World: One Size Does NOT Fit All

By Mary Jo Ammon

In any coaching practice, it's safe to say that the clients we meet come to us in a multitude of ways. For some, they themselves recognize a clear (or unclear) and specific (or not so specific) need in themselves that they want to address. It may be that they are unhappy in their jobs and are seeking ways to be more fulfilled at work. It may be that they are looking to change course in their lives, taking on new challenges, and don't know where to begin. Or it may be that they are continuing on journeys of self-awareness and self-discovery, want to show up as their best selves, and are seeking another lens through which to see themselves.

Others may come to us through a formal program that their organization offers for developing leaders. Often these are people who have demonstrated competence, reliability and consistency in their current role, and are assessed to have the potential to take on a leadership role. Or maybe they are fortunate enough to be part of an organization that understands and values the long term and far reaching benefits of having a group of leaders who have the awareness, tools, and confidence to lead.

We also work with clients who are required to work with a coach as a condition of a performance improvement plan (PIP). In some cases, continued employment is predicated on their completing a series of sessions with a professional coach.

In Issue 8, Bill Carrier wrote: "But none of those important distinctions really address what we might argue is at the core of our work as coaches: the enhancement of individual lives." So in the most fundamental ways our work in all of these scenarios is to help our clients step into their own magnificence. While that fact remains, in this article we are going to explore the contracting constructs, rules of engagement and process, and outcomes of each type of engagement mentioned above.

Self-sponsored coaching engagements

Contracting

Contracting for this type of engagement is the simplest. It usually takes the form of a one page letter, which lays out what each of the parties will commit to in the relationship, including the coach's commitment to adhere to the International Coach Federation's Code of Professional Ethics. Terms are clearly defined, including how the engagement will be carried out (i.e., phone, Skype, in person), how many sessions are included, frequency of sessions, begin and end dates for the engagement, coaching rate, process for scheduling changes, and payment terms. As with all contracts, both coach and coachee agree to terms and sign the contract prior to beginning coaching.

Rules of engagement and process

This is the most flexible of all coaching engagements, as the coach and coachee are free to determine the terms of the coaching arrangement. There are no external reporting requirements, restrictions on where and how meetings can be held, or schedule restrictions driven by organizational/program requirements. The coach and coachee are free to adapt their arrangement in a manner that best suites the needs of the partnership.

Outcomes

We have said that the “enhancement of individual lives” is the core of our work as coaches. How is that measured, you may ask? The quick answer is: through self-reporting by the coachee. There are other ways that we can measure return on the coaching investment. For this type of coaching arrangement, one of the most common, and arguably most important, outcomes of coaching is increased self-awareness—awareness of strengths, preferences, predispositions and blind spots. Clarity about these things allows the coachee to make clear-eyed decisions about the strategies and practices that will be most effective in moving the coachee towards hisⁱ personal and professional goals. Specific outcomes of this type of coaching include: a decision to change to a career field that is a better fit for the coachee, successful advancement in a current job, and improved interpersonal relationships. All of these outcomes enhance personal wellbeing which yields innumerable benefits to the individual and the business, personal and societal systems in which they operate.

Organization sponsored coaching engagements

Contracting

Contracting for this type of intervention is typically more involved than an individual coaching engagement. There are more stakeholders here, including the coachee’s manager, development program sponsors, peers and colleagues of the coachee, the legal department, contracts and finance departments, and human resources. Each of these stakeholders will have their own requirements and expectations of the coaching arrangement which range from compliance with established standards and rules for an organization wide coaching program, to periodic progress reporting and check-ins with key stakeholders (which may include the coachee’s manager and the contract administrator), to reporting against project budgets. Coaches can expect more administration of the coaching agreement necessitated by required reporting by the various stakeholders.

Rules of engagement and process

There is not a singular experience that defines coaching in an organizational context. In some cases, clients are part of a development program; in others, an astute manager may simply understand the benefits of providing coaching for her people. This is often the case when a manager has had the experience of being coached herself. In either case, what distinguishes this type of coaching from self-sponsored coaching is that there are typically several entities within the organization who have a vested interest in the process and outcome of the engagement in addition to the coachee. First and foremost, the coachee’s management has an interest in their employee coming away with a greater awareness of who they are, where they are going, and what they need to do to get there. The manager needs to understand his role in helping his employee to succeed along the way. Also, whoever is footing the bill for the engagement, whether it be the manager or a component within Human Resources, has an interest in getting a return on their investment and making sure that expenditures are accounted for and are within budget. The legal or labor relations department may want to make sure that the arrangement is compliant with organizational contracts and agreements with employees. All of these influences can burden the coaching process; our job as coaches is to create a sanctum for the coaching sessions that keeps the space free of the externalities so that the coachee is free to do the work, and play, of the coaching dynamic in a protected space. It is important that other stakeholders understand and appreciate the importance of keeping the coaching space clear. Managers must also understand that these are confidential conversations, the content of which is the property of the coachee, and can only be shared by them.

Outcomes

Outcomes of this type of coaching include all of those mentioned for self-sponsored coaching, with a few notable additions. Organization sponsored coaching is often focused on a set of competencies that the organization is seeking to develop and/or reinforce. For some, coaching that is offered by the organization is the first time they have had a space to talk about where they themselves feel a need for some shoring up as they progress in the organization. Some of the fundamentals of leading are often discussed here, and coaches may offer specific tools and practices around leadership that become part of the coachee's offer to the organization. There is a potential for significant return on investment here; as the coachee practices and builds her leadership muscle, she becomes a model of leadership for those she comes into contact with. This produces a multiplier effect of the coaching, where the benefits extend well beyond the individual coachee.

Coaching for improved performance

Contracting

Contracting in this circumstance is often very specific and must be carefully navigated. A performance weakness has been identified, and the coaching is aimed toward understanding what may underlie the performance issue, then working with the coachee to develop strategies and practices to address gaps. There are always at least two important stakeholders to this coaching arrangement: the employee's manager and someone from Human Resources. Since this is often one of the last steps in the remediation process, it is important that the coach is provided access to information that supports the manager's decision to put the employee on a performance improvement plan (PIP). As a matter of fact, the coach in this case may stipulate that access to such information be provided as a condition of entering into a coaching contract. The aim is to not enter into coaching with a coachee who is a blank slate; that would not be appropriate here. The coach in this case would need to have the benefit of the contextual background, and to understand which diagnostic and/or development tools have already been used so that he can be effective quickly. As these are highly sensitive coaching arrangements, it is incumbent upon the coach to provide input and/or feedback to the sponsor on the specifics of the coaching contract, i.e., the duration of the intervention, the timing and nature of periodic check-ins with the manager, and the role of the manager in supporting the coachee as they engage in the practices developed with the coach.

Rules of engagement and process

In some cases, the coachee welcomes the coaching, as she sees it as an opportunity to move forward, either in her current organization or somewhere else. But this is not always the case. By the time the coach is brought in, the coachee has been evaluated, assessed, counseled and perhaps reprimanded. It is the coach's role here to provide a safe haven, a place where the coachee can look inward, process all of the feedback she has received (solicited or not!), and be self-determinant about her future. As with all coaching engagements, perhaps even more so here, creating a sense of safety is paramount. Willingness of the coachee to participate fully in the process must be assessed early on.

We have found that due to the level of investment the organization is making in the employee, there is often great curiosity from the myriad of stakeholders about the pace, nature, and sustainability of changes in the coachee's behavior. This is where it can get tricky. The time frame for seeing behavior changes is typically longer than a manager and other stakeholders are willing to wait, since presumably they have already invested in managing the employee's performance. It is the coach's responsibility to manage expectations around this; the behaviors that are not working did not develop over 120 (or insert other

arbitrary time horizon here) days, and the organization should not expect changes in behavior to occur that quickly either.

Lastly, it is essential that the manager be part of the solution here. In this scenario, the coach should expect to spend some time coaching the *manager*, who sometimes is an unwitting accomplice to the behavior he would like to see the coachee change. Often, at least one conversation about the importance of setting clear expectations and holding the coachee accountable is warranted.

Outcomes

In addition to the outcomes already discussed, there are some unique outcomes of performance related coaching. Through coaching, the coachee may come to understand that the reason for the performance gap is that there is a disconnect between his skills and interests and what the organization is asking him to do. The coaching conversation would explore possibilities for addressing the disconnect, perhaps by finding a role that is a better fit within the organization, developing missing skills required by the current role, or exploring options outside of the organization that better utilize the coachee's gifts. The return on the investment in coaching would be a more contented, and therefore productive, employee; an opportunity to reduce the cost of remediation over the long term; and/or the ability to focus investment on developing employees who fit well with the organization mission and culture.

Conclusion

So you see, there are nuances in how we as coaches serve our coaching clients and the organizations they are a part of, depending on how they present to us. The nuances are important for us to acknowledge and plan for so that there is a clear and sustained benefit to all parties. Finally, the aim of our coaching remains the same in any case, that is, to help our clients step in to their own magnificence.

About the Author



Mary Jo Ammon, President of Ammon Consulting LLC, specializes in working with leaders and their teams to optimize their own and their team's performance. Mary Jo hails from New Jersey, where she started her career helping leaders in Johnson & Johnson operating companies around the world adhere to a corporate set of internal control guidelines and procedures. Mary Jo started working at J&J as the Tylenol crisis was unfolding, and had a front row seat to a master class in leadership, as CEO Jim Burke expertly navigated the complex needs of a broad and diverse set of stakeholders. This experience clarified Mary Jo's calling to work with leaders in their quest to lead with integrity, nurture employees, and delight customers, all while navigating the myriad requirements levied by a host of stakeholders. Upon relocating to the DC area in 1985, Mary Jo got the opportunity to do just that. Between 1985 and 2004 Mary Jo worked for a single employer under three different letterheads as a result of mergers and acquisitions: Coopers & Lybrand LLP, PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, and IBM. During that time, Mary Jo honed her craft, always seeking innovative approaches for enhancing leaders' satisfaction, effectiveness and outcomes. After three years in a leadership position at Grant Thornton LLP, Mary Jo struck out on her own in 2007 so that she could do more of what she loves, advising and coaching leaders. Mary Jo is a certified coach, and has completed advanced coach training through Newfield Network and George Mason University. She is certified in the use of the Lominger[®] competency suite and 360 tools, MBTI[®] and other coaching tools, and is a Leadership Practices Inventory[®] Certified Coach.

ⁱ Rather than use “his or her” throughout this article, I will alternate usage of the male and female pronouns.