

The Coaching Jigsaw Puzzle

By Jeff Cohen

We hear a lot about coaching these days; it seems that everybody is some kind of coach. The overselling of coaching is outrageous at times. Even TV commercials for smoking cessation and diets claim they use coaches. In our society coaching has become the latest “in” method for improving one’s life. Calling yourself a coach is easy; being a great coach is not. While getting input from an outside source surely has some value, if an expert coach is assisting a manager, you want truly professional coaching from someone who has an advanced degree in social science, extensive leadership experience in numerous businesses and a methodology that has proven effective across time, positions and industries. Moreover, a great coach has developed a flexible process that helps executives make significant changes that stick throughout their career.

Executive coaching has been around for many years and is an integral part of the fabric of many corporations which seek to ensure the rise and success of its most valued and promising performers. It is a means to assist key managers to develop and hone skills that are essential to their mastery of human interaction as they move up the corporate ladder.

Top performing executives do not come to their leadership positions without learning and acquiring new skills along the way. Those skills range from teambuilding to organizational structuring to one-on-one influencing and motivating skills. Perhaps the most important contribution of an executive coach is his/her ability to work with different managers and tailor a program for each by understanding and addressing their client’s strengths and weaknesses – using their strengths as the stable foundation for change. It is similar to developing a personalized form of a SWOT analysis that exposes the strengths, developmental needs and opportunities of the manager.

Executive Coaching is a highly interactive, tailored process that entails working closely with the client, his or her manager and often peers and direct reports. For a professional, there is a good deal of upfront analysis before the actual coaching commences. Those pieces form the framework of the coaching itself, the inside of the jigsaw puzzle. Done right, the process is complex but it can be broken down into key steps, none of which can be skipped.

- **Contextual understanding** – Before the actual encounter with the target manager, it is vital to identify what the organization’s objectives are in engaging a coach and what their expectations are in terms of outcomes. Know what the strategic requirements of the company and the client are upfront. Without such alignment in advance, the process is doomed to failure.
- **Data Gathering** – The next step is to gather information about the company, the relevant subsidiary or division and the people surrounding the client: the manager, his/her boss, direct and indirect reports as well as colleagues, even customers. Equally important are the strategic

imperatives of the client and how those need to be implemented. Quantitative data is also important and enables the coach to ground the puzzle that is the coaching assignment. It is not unlike working on a jigsaw puzzle of 1,000 pieces; first you select the straight pieces that constitute the frame and only then do you devote your attentions to the more difficult center.

- **Assessment and Feedback** – This phase focuses on the client’s career expectations and challenges, particularly how the manager is viewed at the firm. The coach needs to explore the boss’s perception of the client and circle back to the boss periodically to ensure that the client is achieving the agreed-upon objectives. During the 360-degree assessment phase, a range of the client’s colleagues are interviewed without attribution. These verbatims are then presented to the client in person to obtain reactions on how he or she would interpret those quotes. This is an essential part of coaching as the manager develops greater self-reflection and self-awareness. These sessions congeal into themes that become the basis for both understanding the manager’s issues and helping him or her to modify behavior.
- **Evaluation and implementation**– Once all these jigsaw pieces have been assembled, the process of putting them together to get a full picture begins. This is where the professional coach earns his keep. In sessions with the client, the coach’s skill in asking probing questions is pivotal in supporting the client’s change effort and in determining what steps need to be taken. This will usually require behavioral modification. As the devil’s in the details, the coach may assist the client in how to implement the objectives that were agreed upon, making sure that the steps fulfill both the objectives of the company and of the manager. At this stage the manager has seen himself in the mirror and has bought into the solutions. This is, after all, a journey of self-knowledge, which often is somewhat surprising and even painful.
- **Follow up** – As in any change process, the coach must follow up periodically with all parties involved to determine if it is on track and that things are playing out in the desired manner. Often, there need to be some adjustments made, e.g., the boss has raised the bar too high or the manager may need further encouragement or prompting to fully realize the coaching objectives.

It is wise to remember that at the higher levels of management, the stakes can be high for all involved and that the coaching process is not the same for everybody. Some managers may be threatened by it while others embrace it. That is why to succeed, the process requires a coach who is extraordinarily sensitive to the nuances of both the hardcore business concerns and those of flesh and blood human beings. That said, the rewards to all concerned can be very significant as the company finds that it has enabled a manager to move on to the next level of leadership.