

Get good **coaches** for your leaders

Do you know how to select coaches you can trust?

By **Barbara Walsh**

In an environment where everyone is a coach, the quality, professionalism and standard of the executive coach is crucial to your results.

Research shows that the selection of coaches is still largely unstructured in South Africa and many organisations do not understand what to look for – selection is through referrals, internet searches or standard procurement/tender processes, where price is a high consideration. Consequently, sponsors face significant risk that coaching will not deliver expected results.

Senior coaches reflected on how aspects such as systemic appreciation, understanding of levels of complexity, values alignment, specific experience and competencies, and proof of ongoing professional development are rarely considered. One pointed out the difference between hiring senior leaders and hiring coaches to work with senior leaders, reflecting that, “You’ll spend thousands on a selection process for people to work in your business, and have virtually no selection process for the coaches you pay to work with them”.

Organisations should ensure they select their coaches as appropriate to their intention for the coaching. Yet only one third of sponsors interviewed had a process for selecting coaches suited to organisational requirements and the levels of their leaders.

Sponsors from more ‘coaching-mature’ environments use coaches with whom they have built trusted relationships. Prior to engaging them, they checked qualifications, experience and alignment with culture and values. They warn that credentialing alone does not guarantee ethical practice and competency, and recommend interviewing coaches with the same rigour as one would a potential employee.

What to consider when engaging executive coaches to work at senior leadership level:

- Proof of practitioner qualification with a respected coaching body or institute. Increasingly organisations are seeking academic degrees in addition;
- Membership of a professional body with a code of ethics;
- Proof of experience through documented coaching hours and client references;
- A documented process and sound methodology, fostering independence of the leader;
- The ability to articulate their successes and failures, and the reasons for these;
- A process for effectively balancing confidentiality

boundaries with feedback, progress evaluations and other requested information;

- Accountability for results;
- The integrity to terminate coaching when it is not working for any reason;
- Participation in regular coaching supervision with a qualified supervisor;
- Values which match those of the organisation;
- Good insight into the complexity of corporate environments gained from personal experience. Demonstrated interest in the client’s organisation – coaches need not have specific industry knowledge or experience; and
- Strong consulting skills in the process of negotiating and maintaining contracts and dealing with the client organisation.

Coaches can assist organisations in developing and integrating a coaching strategy. It is however important that coaches are selected with the skills to fulfil this function. Of the coaches interviewed, only 30% consistently referred to the systemic alignment of coaching in the various contexts of the interview. This is not a reflection on the coaching expertise of the other coaches. Rather, it highlights that there is a difference between a coach who focuses on the individual alone, and one who focuses on the individual within their broader environment and comfortably holds duality of client. The latter may be considered a true executive coach.

While most coaches are still contracted independently, in line with international trends, some South African organisations now prefer to consult and contract with specialist coaching companies. These develop an in-depth understanding of the organisation, and will screen, appoint and supervise suitable coaches. In fully managing the process and taking single-point accountability for results, they make it easier for HR professionals to deliver on their mandate.

On the other hand, caution was recommended in including coaching services as part of a wider contract with generalist intermediaries. Irrespective of whether individual coaches are contracted directly by the organisation, or through a specialist coaching provider, due attention should be paid to the processes of consulting and contracting to ensure that the interests of all stakeholders are taken into account. ■

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