

Multi-Stakeholder Contracting in Executive Coaching

By Alison Hodge

Whereas previously a coaching assignment may have involved two key parties (coach and coachee), increasingly, it is evident that there are more than just these two people who have an interest in the work and the outcomes, as explored by [Eve Turner and Peter Hawkins](#).

This is not surprising of course, given that Business and Executive Coaching is for the benefit of both the individual employee AND the organization that frequently funds the coaching, according to [Richard R. Kilburg](#). Furthermore, there is increasing evidence that line management involvement in a coaching assignment can play a significant part in the successful outcomes of the coaching, as shown in “Strategic Trends in the Use of Coaching” section of the [6th Ridler Report](#).

For the executive coach, there are a number of key questions that may arise during a coaching assignment, and the coach needs to be mindful of these. Questions such as:

- Who is the client?
- How do I attend to the demands and expectations of multiple stakeholders while at the same time hold the individual needs of my coachee?
- How do I manage with my multiple roles as consultant/coach setting up the original contract, then as coach engaging with the coachee while attending to the expectations of the sponsor and/or line manager?
- How do I accommodate the diverse expectations about the outcomes or changes that are expected or wished for by all the interested parties?
- Who is going to evaluate the work?
- What is my responsibility, if any, in managing possible conflicts of interest across the stakeholders?

These questions can present some challenging issues. Sometimes the organizational sponsor (e.g., HR Director or CEO) may have little understanding or experience of the coaching process, how the coach works and whether line management is best placed to support the coachee. It is therefore important that the coach engages with at least some of the key stakeholders so that they understand the impact coaching will have and how it may contribute to the changes the coachee or the organization wish to occur.

In my view, this takes courage on the part of the coach. They need to be clear about what coaching can and can't deliver. It is not always easy to engage the relevant stakeholders while managing the boundaries of such elements as confidentiality with their coachee. The coach needs to be able to explain in layman's terms, if necessary, how coaching works to all those involved. When possible, it is helpful to engage with

the manager to encourage them to support the changes the coachee may be seeking to make. After all, it will inevitably impact all those who work in close contact with the coachee—so, the manager themselves, the team of the coachee, and possibly clients and/or suppliers.

Furthermore, the coach needs to understand the organization's objectives and purpose for the coaching and seek to explore how the coachee's goals may align with these.

This is all very well when the coaching intervention emanates from a developmental intention and agenda. However, there are difficulties when coaching may be advocated or “recommended” by a line manager who is either unable or unwilling to deal with an employee’s performance. This inevitably sets up a tension in the multi-stakeholder contract, as there is likely to be an unspoken agenda that may be at odds with the declared intentions.

This raises different challenges for the coach. Are they willing to probe to establish the true purpose of the coaching? Are they able to coach the manager in how to deal with the performance issue? Are they willing to walk away from an assignment where there are multiple, unshared agendas?

There is not necessarily a “right” answer to these questions, but it’s more a case of being aware of the complexity of the contracting process and developing the confidence and skills to facilitate these dialogues. Coaches need to develop their capacity to negotiate these diverse connections to ensure that they manage the expectations of everyone as transparently and ethically as possible. What is clear is that there are several layers of contracting to attend to: the practical, the professional and the psychological to ensure that the work is effective, according to [Julie Hay](#).

Needless to say, supervision provides an invaluable opportunity for coaches to explore the complexity of working in organizational systems where multiple stakeholders are involved.

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Alison Hodge is an accredited Executive Coach at Master Practitioner level with EMCC and an accredited Executive Coaching Supervisor with EMCC and APECS. Working globally as a coaching supervisor with individuals and groups of both internal and external executive coaches, she co-creates working agreements to explore their practice, their client work and their ongoing professional well-being. As a senior member of faculty and Executive Board member, Alison supervises supervisors-in-training at [CSA](#). She completed her DProf in Coaching Supervision at Middlesex University in 2014. She is particularly interested in the relational phenomena that arise in supervision and how this can inform the supervisee about their own process with their client relationships as well as what may be occurring in their individual and organizational client systems. Dr. Hodge will be exploring this topic more in-depth at [ICF Converge 2019](#) during her session “Managing the Complexities of Multi-Stakeholder Contracts.”