

# Navigational Help for Executive Coaching's Future

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I appreciate and am at times amazed by the success and far-reaching benefits gained from great executive coaching. Like a number of coaching colleagues, I want to 'pay it forward' and improve service in the field to help as many clients as possible enjoy these benefits.

At the same time, also like colleagues, I see the need in an unregulated market to help buyers avoid regrettable choices and the impact of less capable coaches. We want to arm consumers and coaches with new knowledge and decision-making capabilities, raise their expectations for professional quality, and improve coaching success and ROI.

This article briefly describes a process and related information to help both users and providers of executive coaching anticipate the future of the field and capitalize on it. Details of this information and process are one topic in the book *Pinpointing Excellence: Succeed with Great Executive Coaching While Steering Clear of the Rest*, scheduled for release in the spring of 2022.

The process and its underlying concepts, called the Top Executive Coach 4 (TEC4), include practical evaluation and selection steps, and a guide for interviewing candidate coaches to gauge competencies that are universally important in executive coaching – Business Depth, Psychology Depth, Coaching Depth and Ethics Depth. These competencies are keys to excelling in a coaching career and to selecting great coaching providers in a buyer-beware marketplace.

I am grateful for feedback over the years that the TEC4 meets serious needs for consumers and practitioners. It is encouraging to see how TEC4 competencies are increasingly reflected in organizations setting standards for training and certifying coaches, and for accrediting coach training programs found in commercial firms and higher education.

## The Field – A Snapshot

Researchers estimate that the executive coaching industry is 80 to 100 years old – and yet it continues to lack fundamental professional qualities. Without question, for instance, the field still needs to reach consensus on:

- A common body of knowledge guiding coaching practice
- Global standards to enter the field and substantial, meaningful barriers to entry
- Educational steps (e.g. formal, university-level qualifications) to practice
- Enforceable ethical standards for serving clients
- Licensure, regulation, and certification standards at state, provincial, national, and global levels to demonstrate and confirm necessary knowledge and skill
- Continuing education requirements to maintain this knowledge and skill

- Regulatory bodies authorized to admit, discipline and sanction members

The good news? Today more clients select executive coaches wisely and get better service. Despite industry quality problems, research from the International Coach Federation (ICF) suggests that 86% of client organizations report at least a degree of positive ROI from coaching. Imagine the ROI boost if the field one day became a disciplined profession that consistently generates strong results.

The bad news? A significant portion of clients and buyers still rely on vague selection criteria and processes, are confused, fall for misleading or misguided marketing messages, and get less value from coaching investments than they deserve. Instead of having clear, consistent information to rely on in selecting their best option – a great coach – many consumers are forced to wade through a growing volume of half-truths and inflated sales claims. They are – pick one – appalled, incredulous, weary, resigned, or unable to make sense of an industry long known for disarray and less-than-professional discipline, one making encouraging progress but still chasing its tail after close to a century.

Briefly, here are two of many industry challenges for which TEC4 support has been useful.

#### *Example 1 – Business vs. Psychology*

Historically and currently, most executive coaches claim to have business or psychology knowledge and cite it as important in their differentiating sales ‘value proposition’.

For decades, a major source of entrants into executive coaching has been current or former executives and consultants. Coaches with this background offer at least two reasons for buyers to select them.

The first reason is credibility – based on their practical, relevant experience, knowing ‘first-hand’ about organizational demands. The second reason is their education and training through MBA programs, for example. Strategy, sales, finance, marketing and their other expertise areas may resonate with client executives.

A second major source of aspiring executive coaches has been psychologists and related social scientists. Coaches with this background refer to their perceptiveness and understanding of people and their skill in helping them adjust and adapt to improve. They cite expertise in behavior change, adult development, neuropsychology, assessment, and positive psychology, for example.

These two communities, with business and psychology roots, compete of course. Each tries to articulate respective advantages in serving clients, and how their particular expertise is fundamental for excellent practice.

Psychologists are known to say their understanding of behavior change processes and practices is more relevant to executive coaching success than graduate business training and practical experience. Not surprisingly, business-based coaches make the reverse claim.

The problem, however, is that buyers receiving these conflicting sales claims are perplexed about which background (business or psychology) actually is more relevant and valuable. They can be left with the unfounded idea – perhaps best described as a false dichotomy – that they have no option except to compromise and cast their lot with one set of skills and expertise, or the other.

Fortunately, consumers faced with what sound like ‘either-or’ decisions need not settle for confusion and less competent providers. Using the TEC4, they can raise the quality bar to where it should be by evaluating and identifying coaches with both skill sets.

### Example 2 – Certification

Today an estimated 600 to 1000 programs globally offer coaches some form or basis of certification. These programs may meet any criteria for quality, including standards simply and conveniently defined in a homegrown ‘system’ created by a program itself. The inconsistent quality among hundreds of certifying organizations is no secret. After several decades, in many cases, being ‘certified’ or ‘self-certifying’ still takes little to no effort.

There have been positive developments and encouraging progress, however. Leading organizations such as the ICF, the Worldwide Association of Business Coaches (WABC), and Marshall Goldsmith Stakeholder Centered Coaching (MGSCC) are globally respected and in some cases (e.g. the WABC) specialize in certifying business and executive coaches based on clear, extensive, and rigorous criteria.

Overall, certification steps, criteria and quality standards vary substantially, even at the master coach level. They range from *credible* – for instance, verifying a coach’s capabilities with written and observational tests of specific coaching knowledge and skills, and requiring certain levels of documented coaching experience and training, to *questionable* – for example relying on a coach’s application and client references without requiring documented experience and training, or written or observational tests of specific coaching knowledge and skills.

The TEC4 provides support for parsing excellent and lesser quality certification options. This helps coaches identify and invest in reputable programs, while also equipping consumers to confirm solid certification quality in candidate coaches.

### TEC4 Overview

Briefly, there are two stages in the TEC4 process. In Stage 1, consumers are guided in evaluating coaches, and coaches are helped through the process of evaluating themselves, in twelve areas:

- Applied, on the job business experience
- Business education and training
- Continuous learning and development in business
- Applied, on the job psychology experience
- Psychology education and training
- Continuous learning and development in psychology
- Applied, on the job coaching experience
- Coaching education and training
- Continuous learning and development in coaching
- Business ethics depth
- Psychology ethics depth
- Coaching ethics depth

With a scoring range of 0-25 points for each of the TEC4 categories (Business Depth, Psychology Depth, Coaching Depth and Ethics Depth), coaches identify their strengths to capitalize on, and development opportunities to address with future training and education. Consumers uncover candidate coaches who score well enough to be moved by the consumer to Stage 2 based on comparative, detailed information about specific and relevant executive coaching competencies.

In Stage 2, we suggest that consumers meet for 45-60 minutes with their remaining candidate coach(es). The TEC4 includes more than 50 suggested questions to use in this stage of the process to help consumers get a sense of chemistry while learning about a coach in four areas:

1. Intellectual/thinking abilities (e.g. problem-solving)
2. Emotional characteristics (e.g. motivation)
3. Insight (e.g. self-awareness)
4. Leadership/work style (e.g. approach to working with clients)

Next, understanding more about the coach, the consumer can then privately reflect using additional suggested TEC4 questions (e.g. How well has the coach been preparing and developing professionally over the years? How well does the coach listen? What kind of chemistry do I seem to have with the coach, and why?)

At this point, armed with detailed subjective and objective information about each candidate coach, the odds favor the buyer making a sound decision and partnering with the strongest, high-quality practitioner.

### Conclusion

Evidently the TEC4 has been helpful for coaching consumers and practitioners since it was introduced in 2011. It is designed for use 'as is' and can also be adjusted based on the values and needs of diverse decision-makers. I'm cautiously optimistic that it will continue to be useful for those in executive coaching who navigate through dynamic and at times risky conditions.

The Top Executive Coach 4 (TEC4) is registered by Dr. John Lansing Reed with the Copyright Office of the US Library of Congress – registration number TXu 1-754-153.

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