

Seven Reasons Why Executive Coaching Fails

By Paul Aldo, Ph.D.

Executive coaching is big business. According to recent estimates, U.S. companies spend more than \$1 billion a year for it. The companies spending this money are some of the biggest and best: GE, IBM, and Goldman-Sachs, to name a few.

What's driving this demand is clear. Twenty-first century business competition requires that much more attention be paid to people. They need to know more, share more, learn more, and work more productively together. Controlling, directing, and demanding no longer work in businesses that need to engage brain power, creativity, and team work. This is where executive coaching enters the picture, as a way to help businesses solve people problems in the executive suite.

There are, unfortunately, times when executive coaching doesn't work. When it doesn't, there are usually specific reasons why. What follows are seven of those reasons. They pinpoint why executive coaching may, instead of helping, result in disappointments, costly but ineffective investments, and people-to-people situations made worse rather than better.

Reason 1: Poor or no success metrics

One big reason executive coaching fails is the lack of clearly defined goals for the coaching experience. What, exactly, is expected from the coaching at the end of the engagement? Unfortunately, whether due to a coach's reluctance or a client's confusion, engagements sometimes start without a clear end in mind. This should never happen with executive coaching.

By definition executive coaching focuses on producing some demonstrable change in executive behavior that helps improve organizational outcomes. Defining goals for this coaching is simply a matter of specifying the desired behavioral changes. Whether these changes are in verbal behavior, non-verbal behavior, or some combination of the two, they must be expressed behaviorally. That's because executive coaching is about improving executive performance. If executive behavior doesn't change, executive performance won't change either.

Reason 2: The coaching focuses *exclusively* on the person being coached

A second reason executive coaching fails is because the coach does not see the person being coached in a social context. The coach and/or client organization fail to take into account how others shape and reinforce behavior. They see the person being coached as a one-person challenge, disconnected from the social network in which the problem behavior or developmental need is played out on a daily basis.

In the real world of day-to-day social interaction, people naturally orient their behavior toward other people. If the coach does not take this into account, the effectiveness of the behavioral change effort will be limited. People are not islands. They respond to one another and use their social history with one another to help determine future actions. These social exchanges create two sides to the story. Executive coaches who do not see both sides will be handicapped in understanding how clients perceive their situations and what might be done to change them.

Reason 3: Trying to change too much

Executives, especially successful ones, often think they can accomplish anything. They are perennially optimistic and confident in their abilities. While studies have shown this confidence underlies much of their success, it can cause big problems when it comes to self-improvement. That's because they often try to change too much.

The heart of the problem is underestimating the difficulty of the change effort. Think about it. Sustainable behavior change is hard for everyone. Every day people go on diets to lose weight, only to abandon the diets shortly thereafter, or worse yet, gain the lost weight back after a successful effort. People go to jail for crimes they commit, only to return to jail time and time again for committing the same crimes. People make endless promises to themselves and others to make improvements, only to fall back into their old behavior patterns over and over.

Because of this, the only realistic chance a client has of changing any important behavior is limiting the focus of what is to be changed *and concentrating on that*.

Not being selective and focused in changing behavior also ignores the fact that key behaviors have great leverage. By picking the right behavior to change, many other behaviors that are dependent on it will automatically change when the key behavior changes.

Reason 4: The client is not committed to change

It is important for executive coaches to remember that coaching clients change behavior for their reasons, not for the coaches' reasons. If the person being coached is not committed to change, it is unlikely change will occur, regardless of the help an executive coach provides. People cannot be made to believe something they don't want to believe or do something they don't want to do, at least on a sustained basis. This is especially true of behavioral change, where the level of difficulty is high.

Coaches need to secure this commitment to change up front, before the coaching begins. Once a coach is engaged, it is difficult to reverse the decision without jeopardizing the person being coached. This same commitment applies to the client organization. If the organization is not truly interested in the client's improvement, the energy, support, and patience necessary for authentic and sustainable behavioral change will not be present, and the coaching client will know it. In either case, the lack of commitment critically limits the likelihood of a coaching success.

Reason 5: Others are not involved in the change process

Given the difficulty of behavioral change, the support of others in the change effort *always* increases the likelihood of success. This is especially true if there is a history of political intrigue and/or bad relations between some of the members of the executive team. These situations are usually complex and difficult, and not easily remedied by engaging only one of the parties, even if that party is the one primarily responsible for the problem. If relevant others are not engaged in the change process to some extent, their behavior usually works against the change effort, often serving to reinforce the behavior that the coach is trying to help modify.

Engaging others in the effort also diminishes the feeling of manipulation that people singled out for coaching often (and sometimes rightly) feel. This, in itself, can be a significant help in facilitating a successful outcome.

Reason 6: Not enough attention is paid to the broader organizational environment

We've already talked about problems that result from exclusively focusing on the person being coached and failing to engage others in the coaching process. Reason six is broader still, taking into account two additional factors external to the individual. One is the relationship between the person being coached and the culture of the organization; the other is the relationship between that person and the job requirements.

Both cases involve coaches gaining a fundamental understanding of the people they coach. How do they naturally behave, what moves them to action, and how do they think about themselves and the world around them?

Coaches can use a variety of assessment techniques to gain this understanding. The important point is that they do it. When they don't, they can easily end up trying to put square pegs into round holes. If there is a misfit between the person being coached and the cultural setting or job demands, no amount of coaching will produce a satisfactory outcome. In the best of cases it results in artificial change, high stress, and a very temporary solution.

Reason 7: The coach takes responsibility for the behavioral change

When a coach consistently delivers results for a client, the coach sometimes comes to be seen as having powers exceeding anyone's capabilities. The coach's reputation grows, making that person the sure-fire bet for solving all important people problems.

This is as dangerous as it is gratifying. That's because the coach may actually come to believe it. When this happens, the coach often takes responsibility for things only the person being coached can do. The coach forgets the role is helper not hero. The result, sooner or later, is disappointment for everyone and the failure of a coaching engagement.

Conclusion

The seven reasons presented here are certainly not the only reasons why executive coaching fails. They are, however, among the most important reasons that good executive coaches sometimes fail. They're offered here in the spirit of sparing others the pain of tough lessons learned.

If you have questions or comments about executive coaching, please e-mail them to us at paul.aldo@ipsresults.com and the replies will be published on our website, www.ipsresults.com.

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