



Executive Coaching: what's it all about?

By Eric Kaufmann

Sam's career at Engines, Inc. had been at a standstill since his promotion to director three years ago. His quest to advance had been hindered by two barriers: 1. his direct reports complained that he was too much of a micro managing taskmaster, and 2. clients perceived him as confrontational and difficult.

Sam's boss was frustrated because he knew that Sam's technical skill and experience were under utilized due to his lack of "people skills." Sam, too, was aware that he was not "smooth," as he called it, but was at a loss about what to do differently.

Engines, Inc. asked me to coach Sam. The primary reason they hired me was to enable Sam to behave in new ways that would have a positive effect on his career path and on the bottom line results of the company.

Why did they hire a coach? Why not send Sam to a training course or seminar? How did Engines, Inc. justify the cost of a coach? What made coaching so effective?

These questions are answered as we examine three compelling factors driving the current and future need for coaching.

1. Socioeconomic Landscape. Stable economies, life-long employment, unchanging careers, unified families, and well-defined communities are no longer our living reality. The reverse is true; stability is hard to come by, rapid change is the name of the game, multiple careers are normal, and social support and direction is scarce.

In days past, if Sam had a problem or challenge, he may have turned to his parents, trusted priest, friends, uncle, or grandparent for advice and direction. Today, even if any of these people could find the time for him, they probably lack the technical skills to address his specific needs and the professional ability to listen without an agenda. At my coaching best, I enfold the qualities of these friends and advisors and provide objective and insightful feedback and attention

2. Business pace. It is increasingly difficult to provide training that keeps up with the speed and demands of career and market changes, and new knowledge. While customized training design and delivery takes time, coaching provides just-in-time solutions. Also, the process can have laser like specificity and immediate real-world application.

A 360-degree feedback process revealed to Sam areas of focus to improve his relations with staff and clients. We concentrated our coaching on better conflict management, negotiation, active listening, and stress management in order to change both the perception of Sam and his effectiveness.

Loss of perspective and insight – the building blocks of creativity – is a negative consequence of a rapid business pace. Improvement and innovation require time – time to analyze the present and the past, time to reflect and learn from the analysis, and time to digest the learning and improve from it.

Coaching is particularly effective for analysis and inquiry. As long as our business pace remains as it is, coaches will continue to be invaluable resources for learning, discovery, innovation, and wisdom.

3. Leadership effectiveness. While I was managing at Corning, our CEO was replaced and, almost overnight, our performance and culture began changing. Leaders set the tone for company behavior and performance. The long-term success or failure of training initiatives depends greatly upon leadership modeling and example; coaching executives can provide the behavioral examples that make training stick.

Either because of an ego need to appear competent or for lack of time, or both, managers find it difficult to attend training sessions. Coaching easily integrates into existing schedules and affords a confidential learning arena. As Sam used his coaching to change his actions and relations, Sam's boss found improvement in team productivity and client satisfaction.

Here are some guidelines that helped make Sam's coaching experience a success, and that will ensure the longevity of executive coaching:

Keep it focused: direct the coaching efforts towards specific target behaviors. Utilize pre and post objective measures.

Make it strategic: keep the coaching efforts aligned with the overall needs of the team, department, and company goals.

Get management buy in: the coaching investment will pay great dividends when managers support the coachees and the process.

Develop authenticity: help clients develop a personally authentic way of leading and working rather than molding them to some preexisting leadership model.

Use assessments sparingly: coaching, first and foremost, is a relationship; it is a collaborative effort toward a goal. The overuse of assessments may diminish rapport, mutual understanding, and the power of two human beings working together to grow and improve.

Sam's case is not unique. He is one of a rapidly growing number of leaders who have experienced significant professional and personal growth as a result of executive coaching.

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