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SMARTER Solutions to Bring Humanity Into the Workplace

Coaching Leaders for Change

How do you convince leaders to change? How can you optimize their talents and potential? Which best practices in executive coaching programs produce lasting results that drive business performance?

Coaching offers a tremendous opportunity to leverage leadership talent and resources, both of which can steer an organization toward sustainable success.

A New Paradigm

Coaching is no longer reserved for problem leaders. More frequently, it is sought by top performers whose organizations value their leadership growth potential. Today's CEOs recognize the importance of enabling leaders to achieve critical business objectives in the shortest possible time, with humanity and civility, so they are hiring coaches to accelerate development.

Forty-seven percent of companies rated for strong leadership regularly assign coaches to their leadership team. . They know coaching provides a powerful way to boost performance and strengthen leadership skills.

The coaching profession is expanding rapidly, with coaches from diverse backgrounds who champion varied methodologies. This growth has sparked debate over several issues, including:

- What are best practices?
- Who is the actual client: the leader being coached or the organization footing the bill?
- How should impact and return on investment be measured?
- Where do you draw the line between personal and business issues?
- How can confidentiality be preserved when stakeholders and team members are part of the mix?

Establishing Ground Rules

In the beginning, coaches must clarify the ground rules, calling attention to the following key areas:

1. **Confidentiality, expectations and commitment:** The coach must be clear about what will be shared with the leader's boss and what will be kept confidential. Aligning coaching goals with the organization's objectives and values are crucial, as coaching isn't merely an exercise in personal improvement.

2. **Reporting relationships:** There must be clarity among the three key participants: the organizational sponsor (boss or HR representative), the coach and the leader being coached.

3. **Methods of information gathering:** Key stakeholders, team members, customers, board members, direct reports and others involved will be contacted by both the coach and the leader being coached.

4. **Making judgments, setting objectives and monitoring progress:** The coach helps the leader and key stakeholders maintain objectivity. Coaches must focus on one or two behaviors, without judgment, and facilitate honest sharing about progress.

5. **How, why and when the coaching will end:** Coaching parameters must be set at the beginning of the engagement, with milestones for assessing progress and a completion date (usually 12 to 18 months).

It is critical to clarify at the outset *who the client is*. When the coach and leader understand that the company is the actual client, then the ground rules are easier. This is a vital step for gaining and maintaining trust. Once the ground rules have been established, they cannot be bent along

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the way. The coaching relationship requires discipline and boundaries for progress to occur.

Measuring Sustainable Success

Success *isn't* measured by:

- How well the leader performs with the coach's help. It must be judged on how well he or she performs *after* the coach has left the scene.
- How leaders feel about their own progress. It must be judged on the *changes* stakeholders perceive.
- The leader's positive feelings toward, and relationship with, the coach—a natural byproduct of a successful coaching engagement. True success is measured by demonstrated results.

Ultimately, the success of a coaching partnership is *not* measured by coach-leader chemistry or the leader's satisfaction level; rather, it is measured only by business results.

Getting Leaders to Change

Marshall Goldsmith has been called America's foremost executive coach by several leading magazines and newspapers (*Fast Company, Forbes, Wall Street Journal, Harvard Business Review*). His model for behavioral coaching outlines a reliable process to help leaders achieve positive, measurable changes in themselves, their staff and their teams.

First, the coach secures an agreement with the client (the organization) and the leader being coached with respect to two key variables:

1. What are the key behaviors that will lead to the greatest positive change in leadership effectiveness?

2. Which key stakeholders should determine (one year later) if this change has occurred?

3. Goldsmith and his associates work only with leaders who:
   - Are considered good coaching candidates
   - Are seen as high potentials within the organization
   - Have not committed an integrity violation
   - Are willing to make a sincere effort to change

Involving Key Stakeholders

In this model of behavioral coaching, the coach asks key people involved in the leader's performance to participate in the coaching process. The coach requests direct help in four critical arenas:

1. **Let go of the past**. Key stakeholders must agree to focus on a future that can improve, as opposed to a past that cannot. Goldsmith calls this process *"feedforward," in lieu of feedback*.
2. **Be helpful and supportive—not cynical, sarcastic or judgmental**. If people don't give the leader a chance, he or she will stop trying.
3. **Tell the truth**. Key stakeholders are advised not to gloss over or embellish reports.
4. **Choose an area for self-improvement.** The leader must be open about what he or she is going to change. As part of the process, he/she will ask for ongoing suggestions. Stakeholders, too, will be asked to select an area for self-improvement and to solicit suggestions. This makes the process a two-way street, allowing stakeholders to serve as "fellow travelers" in the quest for self-improvement (as opposed to singling out one leader who must change). It also greatly increases the value the corporation gains throughout the entire process.

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Steps in the Behavioral Coaching Process

Research indicates that if leaders fail to complete these basic steps, they probably will not improve. Conversely, if they successfully accomplish these steps, growth is assured.

1. *Allow leaders to be involved in determining desired behaviors*. Leaders cannot be expected to change their behavior if they lack a clear understanding of the company's goals.

2. *Let leaders assist in identifying key stakeholders.* There are two major reasons why leaders deny the validity of feedback: wrong items or wrong raters. When leaders and their managers agree in advance on desired behaviors and key stakeholders, they buy into the coaching process.

3. *Collect feedback.* The coach can accomplish this by interviewing key stakeholders and using 360-degree rating systems.

4. *Determine key behaviors for change*. Select only one or two key behaviors that will have the most positive impact on effective leadership.

5. *Have the leader respond to key stakeholders*. The leader being coached should talk with each key stakeholder to collect additional "feedforward" suggestions on how to improve in the targeted areas. The leader keeps the conversation positive, simple and focused. When mistakes have been made in the past, it is generally a good idea to apologize and ask for help in changing the future. Leaders are to *listen* to stakeholder suggestions without *judging* them.

6. *Review what has been learned, and help the leader develop an action plan*. After listening to suggestions, the leader must return with a plan describing what he or she wants to accomplish. The coach then provides encouragement that helps the leader live up to each commitment.

7. *Develop an ongoing follow-up process*. Follow-up should be very efficient and focused on the future, incorporating questions like, "*Based upon my behavior last month, what ideas do you have for me for next month?"* Within six months, conduct a two- to six-item mini-survey with key stakeholders, asking whether the leader has become more or less effective in each targeted area for improvement.

8. *Review results and start again.* If the leader has taken the process seriously, stakeholders invariably report improvement. Build on this success by repeating the process for the next 12 to 18 months. This type of follow-up will assure continued progress on initial goals and uncover additional areas for improvement.

This coaching model has a proven track record with leaders from some of the world's foremost organizations. When leaders practice these guidelines and work with competent executive coaches, they focus their behavior on what works best for them, their team and the company.

The coach must keep the focus on the specific behaviors selected with the leader, facilitate information collection from key stakeholders and act as a catalyst for "feedforward," emphasizing positive, measurable progress as noticed by team members and stakeholders.

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Why Leaders Give Up

When it comes to change, some leaders lose motivation and fail to "stick with the program." Regardless of a coach's competence, failure to achieve goals may occur for several reasons:

1. Ownership: The more leaders feel the process is being imposed upon them or that they are just casually "trying it out," the less likely the coaching process will work. If leaders are simply "playing games," with no clear commitment, their bosses must be willing to discontinue the coaching process—for the good of both the company and the coaching profession.

2. Time: Goal setters have a natural tendency to underestimate the time needed to reach targets. Busy, impatient leaders can be even more time-sensitive than the general population. Ordinarily, our *behavior* changes long before our coworkers *perceive* any change.

3. Difficulty: Goal setters' optimism applies to difficulty, as well as time. Not only does everything take longer; it also requires hard work! Long-term change takes real effort. For example, it can be challenging for busy, opinionated leaders to have the discipline to stop and listen patiently while others say things they may not want to hear.

4. Distractions: Leaders have a tendency to underestimate the distractions and competing goals that will invariably surface in any given year. By planning for distractions in advance, leaders can set realistic expectations for change and, consequently, will be less likely to renounce the change process.

5. Rewards: Leaders tend to become disappointed when achievement of one goal doesn't immediately translate into achievement of other goals. If leaders think skills improvement will quickly lead to short-term profits, promotions or recognition, they may become disappointed and give up when these things fail to materialize instantaneously.

6. Maintenance: Once a leader has put forth the effort required to achieve a goal, it can be tough to maintain behaviors that incorporate the new changes. Leaders must recognize that professional development is an ongoing, lifelong commitment. Leadership involves relationships—and relationships and people change. Maintaining positive relationships requires long-term effort.

Coaching can be daunting for some leaders, as they must be willing to be vulnerable and open. It is exhilarating for those who embrace it and commit to change. Unlike management science, academic theory or consulting, coaching is an exciting interpersonal journey. Coaches and their clients form strong bonds built on trust, openness, confidence and achievement.

Goldsmith, M., Lyons, L. & Freas, A. eds. *Coaching for Leadership: How the World's Greatest Coaches Help Leaders Learn*. Jossey Bass/Pfeiffer. San Francisco, CA.

Morgan, H., Harkins, P. & Goldsmith, M. eds. *The Art and Practice of Leadership Coaching: 50 Top Executive Coaches Reveal Their Secrets.* John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Hoboken, NJ.

Contact cynthia@smart2smarter.com to discuss how coaching can benefit your leaders and teams.