

Eight SMARTER Tips to Choose a Coach

In times of uncertainty and change, resilient companies must do more with less. Providing certified coaches to high-potential performers is one way to get the most out of untapped talent.

“There’s no question that future leaders will need constant coaching,” notes Ram Charan, author of *Leadership in the Era of Economic Uncertainty* (McGraw-Hill, 2008). “As the business environment becomes more complex, they will increasingly turn to coaches for help in understanding how to act.”

Willingness to be coached and a good fit are two of the key ingredients for a successful coaching relationship. This was reinforced in a January 2009 *Harvard Business Review* survey, in which researchers queried 140 top coaches about what companies should look for when hiring a coach. According to the *HBR* article, there are two basic hiring rules:

1. Ensure leaders or teams are ready, willing and able to be coached
2. Allow them to choose the coach

Unfortunately, many individuals select a coach based on referrals from colleagues, without adequately considering their development or style needs. The person or workplace sponsoring the engagement usually sends a few coaches for interviews and asks the individual to select one based on “fit.” But what does a good fit actually mean, and how do you avoid hiring a coach who feels right but may not challenge you to grow?

Without a greater understanding of what happens in a coaching relationship, it’s difficult to make a fair assessment and pick a good match. As the client, you should do the choosing, but you need some criteria to make the best selection.

In *Your Executive Coaching Solution* (Davies-Black, 2007), Joan Kofodimos says a coach should achieve most of the following:

1. Strike a balance between supporting and challenging you
2. Help create feedback loops with colleagues
3. Assist in clarifying your true strengths, values and purpose
4. Provide structure in the development process

5. Broaden your perspectives
6. Teach concepts and skills
7. Maintain confidentiality
8. Influence how others view you

1. Pick for Support and Ability to Challenge

Most high achievers are hired for their strengths. We don’t expect them to show uncertainty, express fear or naturally ask for help. Smarter people and high achievers who wish to grow, however, must do these very things.

You’re more likely to open up to a coach who creates a safe, confidential environment. Coaches accomplish this by demonstrating that they understand you and respect your interests, values and concerns. This enables you to feel accepted, be honest about your thoughts and feelings, and be more willing to try new behaviors.

Coaches help you design smarter accountability plans. They help you design actions and an environment to perform beyond your habitual behaviors and perceptions; confront you directly, yet nonjudgmentally, with the impact of your actions; and courageously probe the motives and assumptions underlying your behaviors. Coaches who lack the capacity or courage to push you out of your comfort zone aren’t doing their jobs. Some learning is achieved only through discomfort.

Build a Coaching Alliance

Good coaches use their professional skills and experience to teach you about yourself. How you treat your coach reflects how you treat others. The way you select your coach is significant. Do you see the coach as a subordinate? A vendor or outside consultant? An authority figure whose primary relationship is with your boss? How do gender, race or other personal characteristics influence the way you interact with your coach?

Effective coaches detect and decipher the subtleties within their clients’ interactions. They provide feedback on how one’s behavior impacts other relationships and goals. The coach will raise issues impartially and show you how your behaviors affect others.

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2. Pick for Feedback Loops

A coach serves as the conduit for other's feedback. Your peers will rarely share authentic feedback with you, and a skilled coach can solicit important information that satisfies confidentiality requirements. Clear agreements, established boundaries and skilled diplomacy are critical.

An experienced coach can help you develop the skills needed to create relationships in which you can ask for honest feedback on an ongoing basis. Instead of encouraging dependence, your coach will teach you how to manage your development. After an initial assessment, a good coach shows you how to form links with colleagues and teaches them how to give and receive useful, specific feedback instead of vague perspectives.

Seek a coach that teaches you to ask for feedback and manage the conversation without being defensive. This includes learning how to determine which feedback is relevant and valid, prioritize the issues you need to address and figure out how to handle them.

3. Pick for Clarifying Success and Significance

How clearly do you articulate your core purpose, values and interests? Skilled coaches clarify your definition of career success (best in the world) and career significance (best for the world). Find a coach qualified to teach you how to assess your needs, values, skills, personality style, hot buttons and boundaries. This information will allow you to become comfortable and act more consistently when completing goals, even in complex or uncertain circumstances.

4. Pick for Structuring the Development Process

A coach is your guide to inform, discuss and present a coaching contract that defines each step of the coaching project:

- Establish a contract
- Get input from others
- Review feedback and plan development
- Hold regular coaching meetings to review practice milestones and next steps.
- Implement behaviors in daily work
- Assess for results

Many people tend to let coaching sessions slide when urgent work matters arise or they experience an inherent

resistance to change. Together, you and your coach will develop a roadmap that defines goals and keeps the process moving over time.

5. Pick for Broadening Perspectives

Your coach should broaden your perspective by helping you understand and break free of any limiting beliefs and assumptions. A perspective shift may be the most significant factor in changing behavior and results.

A perspective shift can occur when your coach:

- Asks clarifying questions
- Discerns feelings and needs
- Helps you reframe problems as challenges
- Offers new approaches with your permission
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A perspective shift changes past assumptions, expands your comfort zone, increases the scope of possibilities, and helps you to visualize your future self. A perspective shift shines light on human potential and your ability to create success and significance..

6. Pick for Teaching New Concepts and Skills

You may be so engrossed in your work environment that you've never developed a clear understanding of your role. A good coach will help you step back and get a clearer picture of what is—and isn't—part of your role.

Good coaches present a mental model of what self-leadership means, what it takes to be effective and the key skills required. They should coach towards developing or honing skills relevant to one's particular situation and help design a practice plan to employ new skills in daily interactions. For example, skills which coaches often help others to learn are

- Emotional Mastery
- Self-Awareness
- Image management
- Influencing
- Conflict resolution
- Developing others
- Relationship management

7. Pick for Confidentiality

Trust is most essential in any coaching relationship. Your coach must effectively navigate risky waters filled with sensitive, confidential information. Because a coach may be engaged with several members of the same

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organization or team, it's vital to respect boundaries and maintain confidentiality.

This is not an easy job, and it's one of the most important skills a good coach acquires with experience. When interviewing prospective coaches, find out how such situations are handled. How have they dealt with similar challenges in the past?

8. Pick for Influencing Others' Views of You

Behavioral change is not the sole coaching goal. Coaches also help colleagues to notice and acknowledge the changes you make. Coaches help identify "potential stakeholders" and then invite them to become involved in your development and may suggest how to change their behavior in relation to you. A qualified, experienced coach can influence others' views by:

- Coaching your relationships, not just you
- Challenging others' assumptions that a problem resides entirely with you
- Contracting with key colleagues to determine their desired outcomes of the coaching process and assessing their willingness to share feedback and participate in conversations
- Facilitating conversations between you and colleagues to share coaching insights, development plans and new expectations (in both directions)
- Helping you solicit ongoing feedback on relevant behaviors

Roles a Coach Should Not Play

Coaching methodologies vary widely. Some begin with 360° assessments; others use in-depth interviews. Regardless, your coach should clearly define the process' start, developmental plan and conclusion.

A good coach will consciously avoid roles that hinder your ability to embrace a self-directed development plan.

- **Therapist:** Coaches are not to deal directly with your psychological adjustment or counseling issues, even if they're qualified and licensed to do so. Your coach is to assist you in the context of your career, leadership performance and life goals.
- **Executor of the Boss's Wishes:** Coaches can listen to a superior's expectations for the employee which may include the boss's agenda. It is important to communicate clearly to the boss or workplace sponsor that the coachee leads the agenda.

- **Shadow Manager:** Coaches cannot advise you on professional or workplace decisions or act on your behalf. What they can do is help you gain problem solving skills.
- **One-Sided Advocate:** The coach helps you look at all viewpoints or new angles. It is critical the coach does not appear to be taking or pushing a side.

Two loaded and complex issues often arise during coach selection: **good fit and credentials.**

Beware of deciding upon the look and feel of a good fit. Effective coaches are adept at personal relationships, and each has a unique style and manner. Be sure to balance feeling comfortable with the person against your need to be challenged as you grow. You must believe a coach can help you change.

As for credentials and training, the coaching field is not associated with traditional career paths or specific educational backgrounds.

Most coaches enter the practice after a gradual evolution from roles in related areas.

Coaches may come from internal HR departments and specialize in leadership development or organizational effectiveness. Others have external consulting experience and specialize in organizational change. Some come from the counseling and psychology fields. Many have years of business experience in executive offices, while others are retired CEOs.

Two of the most reputable coach training associations are the International Coach Federation and Center for Credential and Education Board Certified Coach certificate. Smart2Smarter coaches have completed training from one and often both of the associations mentioned above.