

Improving Employee Performance through Coaching

By John Dale and Hilary Potts, CLG

QUICK LOOK

- ⇒ The executive coaching process allows leaders to explore their leadership and to find ways to positively impact their employees.
- ⇒ The coach creates a safe learning environment that encourages outside-the-box problem solving.
- ⇒ Savvy leaders take the time to determine what they need to do differently to get the most positive impact.

Think of the best leader or manager you ever worked for—someone who brought out your best. When this person called, you were quick to answer. When he/she gave you an assignment, you would work late to make it right. Note this person's name. Now think of the opposite—a leader or manager who drove you crazy, whose calls you let roll into voice mail. You dreaded this person and would have left to work for almost anyone else. Note this person's name, too.



What is the difference between them? What did one do or say that the other did not? How were their behaviors different?

When executive coaches ask these questions, they often hear that the “good” manager focused on what was right, while the other focused on what was wrong. One brought solutions, while the other brought problems. One took all the credit, while the other was quick to share. One kept everyone informed, while the other hoarded information.

Leaders should think about the profound impact each of these people had on their work. For the “good” one, you would give all you had. But the other manager only received the minimum, just enough work to get by. How did each of these people affect others? After all, they influenced an entire department, function or organization.

Leaders affect how employees perform, which affects the entire company’s performance. This is a big deal because the impact of this leader stretches all the way to the shareholders and customers.

“Best” and “worst” leaders choose to act a certain way. For example, when leaders approach team members, do they talk about what they are doing well or doing wrong? Do leaders take the time to develop potential solutions to a problem or just present the problem?

Executives should ask themselves which type of leader they are. Are they the type people seek or the type they avoid? Are they a positive influence on others or a drag?

This article discusses a tool used by highly effective business leaders in world-class companies to improve their leadership behavior so it better aligns their intentions with the impact they have on others. This tool helps leaders do and say the right things *to create the environment where people want to do more* . . . not just feel like they are required to do more. In other words, this tool helps leaders build

FIGURE 1: 2X2 LEADERSHIP MATRIX



commitment, not compliance. This tool is executive coaching.

Effective Leaders Get Results the ‘Right’ Way

Before getting into the details of executive coaching, let’s look at the “product” of the process—effective leadership. The executive coaching process allows leaders to explore their leadership and find ways to positively impact their employees in order to get better business results. Leaders identify how to get results the right way. Executive coaching provides leaders with a means to position and equip themselves with the appropriate tools to lead others.

This is not about being nice or making people feel good. It is about knowing what needs to be done to be successful, ensuring that employees know their roles and telling them when they are on target and when they are not—and doing so in a way that makes them feel respected and valued. This creates a win-win: the company wins with outstanding results that are sustainable, and employees win by knowing that their work matters and is valued.

There is a correlation between sustainable results and effective leadership behaviors. Leaders who exemplify these behaviors and get results are in the upper right quadrant of the 2x2 matrix shown in Figure 1.

And how do leaders develop these effective behaviors? One cost-effective way is through executive coaching.

What Is Executive Coaching?

In executive coaching, leaders work with a professional behavioral coach to help them:

- Clearly see things they do that are effective.
- Clearly see things they do that are getting in the way.
- Analyze why some things work and others don’t.
- Forge plans for moving forward.

Leaders who are offered executive coaching participate in regular one-on-one confidential coaching meetings in which they receive feedback from their personal coaches on their progress. With the guidance of education and feedback from this neutral third-party expert, leaders practice proven

leadership methods. The coach creates a safe learning environment that encourages outside-the-box problem solving and success building.

Simply put, executive coaching enhances leadership effectiveness by helping leaders develop new behaviors that positively influence those who directly impact bottom-line business results.

Important: when setting up an executive coaching process (whether companywide or for a couple of individuals), the recipients must view it as a privilege and a reward, not as a remedial activity or punishment. If it is seen as the latter, the program will never attain the benefits explained here.

Why Seek an Executive Coach?

Leaders seek an executive coach to help achieve various goals. Typical reasons are when a leader:

- Launches a new strategy, large initiative or complex change
- Needs to improve leadership effectiveness
- Transitions to a new role in the current company or moves to a new company
- Executes a merger, acquisition or divestiture
- Establishes a new leadership team
- Needs to enhance relationships with other functions or departments.

Leaders attain their stature because they naturally meet daily challenges head on. However, as they take on new and different challenges and roles, they may need to consider different approaches to keep effective. Much has been written about differences that leaders encounter as they rise in an organization, from managing their own time to managing others, and then to managing the managers of others, and then to managing an entire enterprise.

When setting up an executive coaching process the recipients must view it as a privilege and a reward, not as a remedial activity or punishment.

The leader and his/her coach
develop “coaching action plans”
to work on specific leadership behaviors
that are carefully aligned to key business initiatives
to achieve results.

Each transition requires new and different skills. Savvy leaders take the time to determine what they need to do differently to get the most positive impact and seek ways to gain the information to ensure they are on track.

Unfortunately, executives rarely receive vital feedback on their performance. In fact, the higher they are in the organization, the less feedback occurs. This limits the critical information that executives require to ensure they are on track. An executive coach can help fill this void and, more importantly, help the leader fill the void on his/her own.

How Does Executive Coaching Work?

To succeed, any executive coaching process requires three things:

1. **It must be behaviorally based.** It should help the leader understand—with great specificity—what he/she is saying or doing that works and does not work.
2. **It must help the leader become self-sufficient.** Coaching must ensure that leaders learn and practice new skills so they can identify, analyze and act on issues. Building in self-sufficiency is an intrinsic part of executive coaching.

3. **It must be “fit-for-purpose.”** Coaching must be adapted to fit the situation, not the other way around. For example, when leaders work worldwide, they must make the process work globally and economically. One size fits all does not work. In coaching hundreds of leaders across businesses large and small, the authors

have developed a five-step process shown in Figure 2. What makes it so effective is what happens inside each step.

Step 1. Initial Meeting: This is part goal-setting, part chemistry check. Together, coach and leader set high-level goals in order to make the leader to achieve and become self-sufficient. The chemistry check determines whether coach and leader can work together. They must candidly discuss their backgrounds to see if their styles fit, and continue this assessment through the entire coaching experience.

Step 2. Collecting Feedback: This critical early step shapes the coaching plan and focus areas for one-on-one sessions. By having real data—360 interviews, business results, etc.—the coach can create a realistic picture of what is working and what is not.

Step 3. Feedback Review: The coach and leader meet to review data and identify key behaviors that will have the greatest impact on results. As an output from the feedback, the leader and his/her coach develop “coaching action plans” to work on specific leadership behaviors that are carefully aligned to key business initiatives to achieve results.

Step 4. Shadowing and Coaching: In three to six months, the coach directly observes the leader and provides

FIGURE 2: EXECUTIVE COACHING PROCESS

- 1 **Initial Meeting**
 - Chemistry check
 - Set goals
- 2 **Collecting Feedback**
 - 360 interviews
 - Review performance data
- 3 **Feedback Review**
 - Meet and review data
 - Identify key behaviors
- 4 **Shadowing and Coaching**
 - Real-time observation
 - Ongoing coaching sessions
- 5 **Transition**
 - Shift from formal support
 - Coaching as needed

feedback on how well he/she is performing the key behaviors. For example, the coach might attend a team meeting to see how well the leader engages others in discussions. Afterward, the coach gives feedback to the leader. The coach also provides articles or book summaries and, if needed, a learning module.

Step 5. Transition: The coaching goes from formal, scheduled meetings to as needed. Coach and leader determine when and how they will stay in touch. Above all, the leader must feel secure in his/her new skills and know the signs that say “call my coach.”

Potential Challenges and Pitfalls of Executive Coaching

With all the benefits, executive coaching has some pitfalls. Not all executive coaching is created equal. There are many different approaches to coaching, some effective and some not. The authors recommend starting with your coaching objectives, and then identifying coaches who possess a track record of meeting those objectives.

A second pitfall is when the boss or human resources **assigns** a leader to coaching, so the leader feels like it is a mandate. Rarely does this result in a good experience for anyone, because it is imposed. Ideally, the coaching need and objective are developed jointly by leader and boss. This ensures that both “own” the success of the executive coaching process.

Other pitfalls and challenges include:

- The coach becomes a substitute for leadership—said another way, a leader hires a coach to deal with an issue that he/she should handle directly.
- The leader lacks time to put into coaching.
- The coaching crosses over to therapy—instead of focusing on specific behaviors and business issues, it starts to deal with personal issues

Establishing this high-performance environment starts with modeling and reinforcing key behaviors in the organization.

that are better left to employee assistance or other professionals.

- The coaching becomes a chore and is not reinforcing.

Executive coaching offers great benefits, but it is important to understand and prepare for the potential pitfalls and challenges. Executive coaching is a tool for improving leadership to improve business results. Like any tool, it can be misused, overused or simply not work.

Summary

Sustained high performance in organizations begins with effective leadership. Executive leaders must establish an

environment where employees understand business priorities, have the right skills and abilities, have the necessary resources to perform and, most importantly, *want to perform* at high levels. Establishing this high-performance environment starts with modeling and reinforcing key behaviors in the organization.

Executive coaching is a wonderful tool for helping leaders learn and perform key behaviors, and thus lead better. It improves daily performance as well as helps leaders engage in new and bigger roles. When positioned correctly—as a privilege, reward and a strategic business tool—coaching offers the organization a powerful way to build leadership capability and achieve better business results.

For the leader, executive coaching offers awareness and insights into how he/she impacts others in getting results. It gives the leader the tools and information necessary to create an environment where people want to give their best. **WS**

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

John Dale and Hilary Potts are partners and executive coaches with CLG, a behavioral science consultancy specializing in helping leaders and organizations execute change through aligning behavior and results. Dale can be reached at jdale@clg.com or 304/599-7830 x 1032. Potts can be reached at hpotts@clg.com or 304/599-7830 x 1111.

RESOURCES PLUS

For more information related to this article:

www.worldatwork.org

- Type in this key word string on the search line: **Executive coach or executive coaching.**

www.worldatwork.org/bookstore

- *Improving Employee Performance Through Appraisal and Coaching*
- *Continuous Learning in Organizations*
- *Adaptive Coaching: The Art and Practice of a Client-Centered Approach to Performance Improvement.*

www.worldatwork.org/education

- C11: Performance Management—Strategy, Design and Implementation.