HR.com June 20, 2005

Three roles executive coaches should avoid

By Ben Dattner

Introduction

Executive coaching is an increasingly popular method for enhancing the effectiveness of individuals at all levels of organizations. There are many definitions of coaching, and many different kinds of coaching, coaches, and clients. Coaching can be defined as a professional relationship in which the coach works with the client to help him or her develop a greater understanding of strengths and development needs and to then create, implement, and refine strategies for using this knowledge to become more effective and successful. In addition to meetings and conversations between the coach and client, additional sources of information can include three hundred sixty degree interviews or surveys, in which the client´s manager, subordinates, peers, and clients or customers provide feedback; personality or style assessment tests; and observation of the client by the coach in work situations such as team meetings.

In order for coaching to be most effective, it should be framed positively as an investment in the client´s future rather than as a remedial exercise, and there should be an open and well-functioning four-way relationship between the coach, the client, his or her manager, and Human Resources. There must be clear expectations for the goals, logistics, costs and duration of the coaching, and agreement about what information will be shared with whom, by whom, and when.

Because the field is relatively new, there is not much research about which approaches, methodologies and techniques are most effective. However, based on my experience and that of many colleagues who work as executive coaches, there are three roles that executive coaches should avoid: evaluator, messenger, and advocate.

Evaluator

At some point in many coaching engagements, someone asks the coach: ¨how do you think __________ is doing? Is he or she making progress? Do you think he or she has what it takes to move to the next level?¨ While coaches may be tempted to answer in the affirmative for high potential clients who embrace coaching, and to answer in the negative for lower capability or resistant clients, coaches should avoid answering these questions for several reasons. First, clients should be able to trust that the coach is there to help them, not to judge them. If a coach is going to evaluate the client and then report back this evaluation to others in the organization, the client has a disincentive to openly and fully share challenges and concerns. Secondly, answering this question can violate confidentiality. While most coaches establish clear parameters for not violating the client's confidentiality by explicitly revealing what is discussed in coaching, the coach can implicitly reveal what was discussed by answering questions about client capability.

There is one exception to the recommendation that coaches not evaluate clients: when organizations require that coaches evaluate the client and report back their assessments. To set the client at ease, the coach may want to commit to showing the client any evaluations that the coach needs to submit to the manager or to Human Resources before doing so, and also to commit to not have further evaluative conversations with anyone else in the organization unless the client is present. This increases the transparency of the evaluation for the client, and the client, therefore, does not need to speculate or worry about the tone or content of the evaluation.

The most problematic cases, which are rare, occur when the coaching is ostensibly for development but then the agreed-upon terms of the coaching are changed without the client´s knowledge or consent, and the coach´s input or evaluations are used by others as the basis for performance appraisal or promotion decisions. This kind of changing of the rules in the middle of the game can lead to a breakdown of trust among the parties in the coaching relationship. Most issues and problems can be avoided if all four parties to the coaching relationship agree to, and abide by, explicit terms about whether, when, and how evaluation will be part of the coaching.

Messenger

Some managers bring in executive coaches because they want someone else to convey messages to their staff that they themselves are reluctant to convey. In some cases, executive coaches can help clients and managers communicate more clearly by encouraging more openness and candor. In many cases, it makes sense for the coach to meet with the manager to ask for his or her perspective on the client's strengths and weaknesses. However, it can be problematic when either the manager and/or the client put the coach in the position of go-between, asking the coach to communicate messages back and forth. Coaches should not be messengers since mediating in this way can serve to perpetuate rather than eliminate communication breakdowns between the client and others in the organization. Although it is reasonable for a manager to ask a coach to help the client develop self-awareness, interpersonal skills, and other managerial abilities, it does not make sense for the manager to ask the coach to ¨tell __________ that he/she needs to be more of a team player.¨ It is one thing for the coach to report back anonymous feedback that the manager or others in the organization provide, but it is something quite different for the coach to convey explicit, attributed messages from individuals in the organization who could – and should – convey those messages themselves. At times, coaches may even ask managers why they are so reluctant to communicate directly with the client, and may even coach the manager about how to open up a more direct and productive dialogue.

Advocate

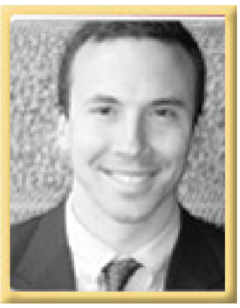
The role of advocate in some ways combines the other two roles, since in order to advocate a coach is implicitly or explicitly evaluating the client, and is serving as a messenger between the client and others in the client's organization. Coaches may be tempted to serve as advocates for their clients for two kinds of reasons. First, they often come to like or identify with their clients and genuinely want to see them succeed. However, as much a coach would like to see a client succeed, ultimately that success needs to be achieved by the client without any direct intervention by the coach. Advocating for clients can put the coach in the middle of organizational politics, where he or she can lose objectivity and neutrality. Further, if a coach advocates for one client and not for another, it can be very demoralizing for the client who does not get that extra support.

Secondly, advocating for one's client can be a way of justifying the value that coaching has added. By advocating for a client, a coach is making an implicit claim that the coaching has been successful and that the client should be promoted, rewarded, or recognized based on the better performance that has resulted, at least in part, from coaching. Ultimately, the organization needs to have its own mechanisms for deciding who is or is not performing well, without either the evaluation or the advocacy of the coach.

Conclusion

In conclusion, executive coaching is an increasingly popular intervention in the workplace and can bring many benefits to clients, including greater self-awareness and more effective and efficient ways of working in both the task and interpersonal realms. Because executive coaches are either external to the organization or, if internal to the organization, external to the division of the organization where the client works, they can bring a neutral and supportive perspective that can help the client learn, grow and succeed. However, in order for the coaching relationship to be most effective, clients should not have any concern that their coach is going to evaluate them and secretly report the evaluation to others, Human Resources should not have any concern that the coach is going to enable managers to avoid having direct conversations with the client, and the manager should not be concerned that the coach is going to advocate for the client instead of letting the client´s progress speak for itself.

Author



Ben Dattner, Ph.D.
ben@dattnerconsulting.com
www.dattnerconsulting.com
Dattner Consulting, LLC

Ben Dattner has helped a wide variety of corporate and non-profit organizations become more successful by developing a better understanding of the impact of individual psychology and group dynamics on their performance. His consulting services enable organizations to make better hiring and staffing decisions, to enhance the professional capabilities of managers and employees, to configure teams more effectively, and to reduce the amount of interpersonal and intergroup conflict. Ben received a BA in Psychology from Harvard College, and his MA and Ph.D. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from New York University, where he was a MacCracken Fellow. His doctoral dissertation analyzed the relationship between narcissism and fairness in the workplace, and his masters thesis examined the impact of trust on negotiation. Before graduate school, Ben worked at Republic National Bank of New York for three years, first as a Management Trainee and then as Assistant to the CEO. After graduate school, Ben was Director of Human Resources at Blink.com before founding Dattner Consulting. Ben is an adjunct professor at New York University, where he teaches Organizational Development in the Industrial and Organizational Psychology MA Program, and at Marist College at the New York City Police Academy, where he teaches Organizational Change in the MPA Program.