

## Coaching as an Executive Intervention

When a person reaches the executive suite, certain things are taken for granted by the board of directors that hired him or her such as the professional attributes to run a multi-national, billion dollar or multi-million dollar organization. What the hiring committee does not take into consideration are the personal aspects that round out an executive and make him/her even more effective such as personal balance, ability to delegate, empower direct reports, and communication skills. In order for the executive to develop these personal aspects an executive coach is usually the person to contact. As recently as the September 2009 issue of the *Industrial and Organizational Psychology Perspective on Science and Practice*, authors discussed the ways and means to help executives develop personal attributes through executive coaching (McKenna & Davis, 2009). My goal is to examine personal attributes that executive coaches focus on to assist the executive to easily transition into a leadership position. Personal attributes focus on the *soft* skills that an executive may possess but has not developed as a strategy for executive leadership (Rabstejnek, 2008). By developing the *soft* skills, the executive develops those aspects of him or herself that impact personal image, performance, credibility and trustworthiness.

This paper will review the different conceptual approaches that coaches take in order to create shifts in the executive's abilities (personal attributes) in such areas of direct report management, personal balance, presentation or other communication skills, and

productivity. When it comes to executive coaching, the literature and the reviews are unwilling to commit themselves to coaching being either a profession or a consulting intervention (Masciarelli, 1999; Rabstejnek, 2008; Bono, Purvanova, Towler, & Peterson, 2009 to name a few). The debate of whether executive coaching is a consultant's intervention or a profession of its own or whether executive coaching should focus on professional attributes as well as personal attributes or who is qualified to provide executive coaching is not to be discussed in this paper. For elucidation, I define personal attributes as something that can be developed or improved upon vs. a skill that is learned. I use intervention to denote a process that a consultant uses to develop strategies and create change while working with an executive. Although there is some debate as to whether coaching is viewed as an intervention or a profession (Sperry, 2008), I will take the perspective that executive coaching is a profession and an intervention to assist the executive in developing or strengthening personal attributes.

The question for many top executives today is not if you have a coach but who is your coach? As executives are elevated within or hired from outside an organization, it is no longer necessary to "go it alone" as so many executives deem necessary (Jones, 2005). For the past 50 years, high level executives have had access to consultants who provided insights into the identification and integration of personal attributes (Kilburg & Levinson, 2008). However, in the early 1990s, coaching came into its own as a new profession for anyone who wanted to hang out a shingle. No training was required and the field was open to anyone who could market themselves as credible. In order to create credibility for coaching, Thomas Leonard played a key role not only in the advancement of coaching but also in defining coaching parameters by starting Coach U in 1992 and the

International Coach Federation 1994 (personal communication, 1992, 1993). Today the International Coach Federation (n.d.) claims more than 14,000 members from 92 countries. The number of coaches, psychologists and/or consultants using coaching as an intervention with their client(s) has not been ascertainable. However, a review of the literature (Masciarelli, 1999; Rabstejnek, 2008; Bono, Purvanova, Towler, & Peterson, 2009) indicates that coaches are focusing more on the personal attributes of the executive office rather than the professional (Wasylyshyn , 2005; Smith, 2007).

Because of the importance now being placed on personal attributes (Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker, & Fernandes, 2008), coaches are being hired to work with executives whether they are on the payroll as an employee or off the payroll as a professional coach. In my experience as an executive coach, the C-level (the corporate executive) has more say in who coaches him or her and will more often than not choose to work with an external coach on personal issues. My belief is that this benefits the executive in numerous ways. The external consultant is not connected and therefore is not tainted by the organization and can be much more objective with the executive (Menon, 2006). For instance, if the client faces life-balance issues, an internal coach may not be able to “see” what is blocking this result as s/he may be caught up in the chaos of the organization. The coach can identify a problem behavior or something that seems “off” and refer the executive to the proper health treatment provider. A coach must realize the boundaries of his or her practice and dealing with psychological issues is not the prevue of a coach unless specifically trained in that area. An internal coach may be shunned by the executive since as an employee, the internal coach and executive are faced with the authority issue and/or the ability of the internal coach to see what’s

really going on and confront the executive with this information. Regardless, the executive coach has a job to perform—to help the executive identify personal attributes that need to be developed and/or strengthened.

When an executive has used the old cliché that it's lonely at the top, the statement rings true. Who can they turn to for help without appearing to falter or be weak? This is when the coach gets the call to review and strategize with the executive. When executives have the professional skills of running a business but falter when it comes to the human side of the business, the coach comes into the corporate arena with a focus on the personal side of business, however, in my experience it may also include professional attributes also. Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker, & Fernandes (2008) found that behavior change around *soft* skills or personal attributes predicted executive success because in today's global economy, it's not what you know, it's who you know and how you can successfully communicate and relate to them. With print and electronic media hailing another CEO's downfall due to their failure in the professional as well as personal attributes arena, coaching the executive on personal attributes and in some cases the professional attributes is a key strategy for the executive and/or organization. As Harry Levinson (Kilburg & Levinson, 2008) would say, a consultant enters an organization and then determines the intervention whether it be for personal or professional issues with the executive. Professional skills are a necessary foundation that must be acquired and mastered along the way to the executive office, however, in today's economy of chaos and change, the way to succeed is to ensure the balance of personal attributes with professional. When a coach is called into an executive coaching assignment, they are dealing with a very powerful individual who

needs to understand the concept of opposing strengths (Horton, 2009)—personal and professional.

What coaches need to know about an executive in order to be effective is that executives are created, taught, formed into knowing how to make companies run and make money. While they know and have mastered the professional attributes such as linear thinking, winning at all costs, increasing/achieving financial goals, problem solving, globalization, adrenalin and control, they have missed out on the personal attributes to help them move from left brain to right brain thinking in order to achieve the results they want with the people/workforce they have. Pink (2005) posits that personal attributes for an executive include empathy, appreciation/gratitude, value articulation. In my own consulting practice, I have also coached executives on creating a reserve of time, people, confidence, serving for the good of others, being a model and mirror for change, empowering others to do more, and set personal standards .

Why are these personal attributes important? We are no longer in the industrial age or the information age. We stand on the threshold of the conceptual age (Pink, 2005) or what I would call the idea age and this comes from right brain thinking. Right brain thinking includes the personal attributes that many executives eschew or are never made aware of on their way up the ladder. One of the biggest problems for executives is empathy. They essentially don't realize the impact, whether positive or negative, they have on others (Goldman, 2006). Many executives are known as the command and control types. During an initial interview with a prospective client, it became clear to me that the problem I had been called in for, communication issues among

departments, was not the issue at all. The Department Vice President, the economic buyer, was a bully. During this initial meeting, I asked if she would be willing to be coached on her communication skills prior to implementing a department wide program. She declined and I declined to submit a proposal. She has since been replaced.

Although one would think that a senior level executive would be a master of relationships, in many instances, there is a gap in this personal attribute not only with direct reports but with the coach (McKenna & Davis, 2009). Just as a coaching relationship is difficult to develop and critical for any successful coaching assignment, when an executive is thwarted in the relationship arena, results are difficult to achieve especially as that executive attempts to be a one man or woman show. Great leaders of our time such as Kennedy, Johnson, Reagan, and the Bushes have surrounded themselves with other great leaders in order to achieve results. When an executive is lacking in the ability to build and maintain relationships, it is difficult to have empathy towards other's personal issues or provide appreciation for a job well done or be a model for leadership (Wasylyshyn, 2005). My own experience has shown me that this is not an easy obstacle to overcome not only for the coaching relationship but also for the executive's future. In a coaching relationship, if the executive is allowed to dominate, nothing will change which exacerbates another area of lack for the executive: being the model or mirror for change.

When the executive displays resistance to change, such as incompleteness between coaching session assignments, this signals a lack of readiness and willingness. The coach provides the how but the executive must be ready and willing. Without this

personal attribute goal setting and achievement along with role playing and experimentation are negated (McKenna & Davis, 2009) which leaves a very pompous or emotionally suppressed executive. By developing the ability to change, a critical attribute in today's fast paced economy, the executive becomes a role model throughout the organization. People hate to change except for their own self-interest and it is the coach's job to help the executive become a leader for change (Kotter, 1999). Not only does this empower the executive to do more in the area of change, it sets a standard for the executive to empower his or her direct reports to do more through change.

A coach also works with an executive to set personal standards for their own personal style and behavior development. As an executive is promoted, what worked at one level of the organization will not work at the next. With each promotion, roles and expectations change (Smith, 2007) and the effective coach can help the executive traverse the personal changes that will be required. These changes could be forms of interpersonal communication with direct reports or peers or "rackets" (Smith, 2007, p 79) the executive is running (working till 9pm every evening, inability to delegate, unwillingness to take responsibility for personnel issues; developing or refining the ability to tell the truth). A key personal standard for each executive must be the empowerment of the people within the organization and customers.

Promoting a senior executive from within the organization may not appear at first to have problems, but this can cause what I call promoter's remorse once the

announcement has been made. So do you coach the person who has promoter's remorse (usually the retiring/relocating/promoted CEO) or the replacement? The goal is to work with both executives for a smooth transition (Wasylyshyn, 2005). By doing this, you can coach the executive on personal attributes already discussed and at the same time, talk about empowering others. This is the perfect time to bring up this personal attribute if disempowerment or "promoter's remorse" has filtered down from the top. In cases where the CEO successor is being disempowered by the more senior CEO, relationships get sidetracked and this impacts the organization because of the snowball effect of disempowerment. A regional sales professional was promoted to National Sales Manager by the CEO of the company. However, once the announcements were made, the relationship between the National Sales Manager and the CEO deteriorated to the extent that no one was talking. The CEO hired me to coach the National Sales Manager however, in my conversations with the CEO, the issue of disempowerment came up and he agreed that he wasn't certain he had made the right choice. In discussing how he could move forward, he made a commitment to work with the National Sales Manager and I suggested that after each conversation he had with him, he should ask himself: "did I empower the National Sales Manager to do more or less?" Empowerment is a personal attribute for an executive that must be developed.

Finally, the coach helps the executive set personal standards on value articulation. She or he was hired for a reason, for a certain skill set, yet many times, the executive cannot express personal attributes. Although executives may cognitively know how to

run a business, can they understand and articulate the value they bring to an organization? This is often a critical area of value articulation where an effective coach helps the executive integrate the new personal attributes into his or her way of life/business. The questions I ask are the executive to help integrate these personal attributes are:

A. What are your new standards around communication with your Board, direct reports or others and how will this help them? How will it help you?

B. What relationships do you want to create or deepen and how will that help you? How will it help them?

C. Can you articulate what you want for each member of your staff and tell me why it would benefit them? How would it benefit you?

D. What are you going to start doing differently today and how will you sustain that work?

That's what distinguishes personal attributes from professional ones.

Many times, when a coaching assignment is complete, there is no follow up. In order for the executive to remain effective, intermittent follow up with metric analysis may be necessary to analyze an executive's enhancement of his or her personal attributes through coaching and compare that to organizational growth. Current metrics for evaluating an executive's performance are cash flow, return on equity, stock price, and earnings. To judge an executive's performance by how well he or she can run a company is important however, new metrics must be evaluated to judge the effectiveness of the executive and his or her personal attributes (Goldman, 1998). Then

we will truly have a complete view of how the executive operates to effectively run a company.

### *Conclusion*

As we move into an age where manual labor and other labor intensive left brain activities are being outsourced, the executive must have a strong foundation in what makes a company run smoothly but more importantly must be able to interact successfully with people. In order to do this, the executive seeks out the executive coach who has the ability to coach the executive in often absent or weak personal attributes in order to create a balance among the executive's strengths. This paper illustrates the key personal attributes an executive coach assists the executive with in order to achieve pre-determined coaching objectives which will ultimately impact the organization in a positive manner.

Personal attributes of the executive are the other side of the coin in considering a duality. Professional attributes without personal attributes is like someone who paddles continuously with their right side because they are stronger on that side (Horton, 2009). However, this behavior (focusing on one strength or one side of the brain only) has them going in circles. As executives realize the benefits of executive coaching, the executive coach is in high demand but that coach has a job to do. Executive coaches today must focus on the personal attributes in order to help the executive in various areas of personal growth or the development of personal attributes. These attributes such as empathy, relating to others, change expert,

effective communication skills and empowerment are just a few that have been discussed. There are certainly a number of other personal attributes that an executive coach might work on with an executive. These are the ones I have encountered in my practice most often. When the executive coach assists the executive to develop personal attributes or underdeveloped strengths, the organization as well as the executive has a partner familiar with their organization and the executive. This creates a synergy such that coaching the executive to strengthen his or her personal attributes to balance out the professional attributes will positively impact the organization.

## References

Bono, Joyce E.; Purvanova, Radostina K.; Towler, Annette J.; Peterson, David B. (2009).

A survey of executive coaching practices. *Personnel Psychology*, Vol. 62 (2), p361-404. DOI: 10.1111/j.1744-6570.2009.01142

Goldman, Daniel. (1998). *Working with emotional intelligence*. NY: Batam Dell.

Goldman, Daniel. (2006). *Social intelligence: the new science of human relationships*. NY: Random House.

Horton, M. (2009). School Colloquia conducted at the Walden University Residency Jacksonville, FL.

International Coach Federation. N.d. Retrieved from

<http://www.coachfederation.org/>

Jones, D. (2005, June 20). It's not just lonely at the top; it can be 'disengaging' too. *USA Today*.

Kilburg, R. R. & Levinson, H. (2008). Executive dilemmas: coaching and the professional perspectives of Harry Levinson. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, Vol 60(1). pp. 7-32.

Kombarakaran, F. A., Yang, J. A., Baker, M. N. & Fernandes, P. B. (2008). Executive coaching: it works! *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, Vol 60(1). pp. 78-90.

Kotter, J. (1999). *What leaders really do*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Publishing

Masciarelli, J. (April 1999). Less lonely at the top. *Management Review*, Vol. 88 (4), p58.

McKenna, D.D & Davis, S.L. (2009). Hidden in plain sight: the active ingredients of executive coaching. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, Vol 2(3). pp. 244-260.

Menon, T. (2006). Tainted Knowledge vs. Tempting Knowledge: People Avoid Knowledge from Internal Rivals and Seek Knowledge from External Rivals. *Management Science*, Vol 52 (8), pp. 1129-1144 .

Pink, D. (2005). *A whole new mind*. NY: Penguin Books.

Rabstejnek, C. V. (2008). Personal coaching for business persons: a plethora of choices. *Leadership & Management in Engineering*, Vol. 8 (2), p54-56.doi: 10.1061/(ASCE)1532-6748(2008)8:2(54); (AN 31295584)

Sperry, L. (2008). Executive coaching: an intervention, role function, or profession? *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, Vol 60(1). pp. 33-

Smith, C. E. (2007). King's counsel. *Business Strategy Review*, Vol. 18 (3), p78-80. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8616.2007.00490.x; (AN 26516591)

Wasylyshyn, K. M.(2005). The reluctant president. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, Vol 57(1), pp. 57-70.