

Executive Coaching

by Roland Nagel

Stakeholders – be they senior executives, junior staff or even external to the organisation - are increasingly recognising that appropriate coaching programs will lead to greater performance and contribution from the person being coached. An interesting trend is that whereas in the past, coaching programs were designed to assist coachees address sub-standard performance, current approaches are more likely to focus on helping high potential executives realise even greater levels of achievement and performance.

A further challenge within the corporate environment is that, while there are many generic leadership training programs available, these do not necessarily address specific individual developmental needs.

It is in this context that executive coaching has value and appeal. Coaching may be defined as the 'collaborative process of helping others develop specific competencies that will contribute to their achieving individual and organisational performance'.¹

Typical Stages in a Coaching Process

In implementing a coaching process, the following stages are usually undertaken:

1. Identifying the Coaching Objectives and Planning the Coaching Program

As a starting point, it is important to understand the purpose of the coaching activity. Is it to further develop high potential managers, to provide feedback on developmental opportunities or to enable coachees to work more in alignment with the organisation's vision, mission, values and culture?

The planning process includes appointing an appropriately experienced coach, identifying managers who are to participate in the program (coachees), an internal project co-ordinator as well as timelines, milestones and key target dates for the coaching initiative.

2. Use of 360-Feedback or Multirater Assessments

360 feedback or some form of multirater process provides valuable input to the coaching process and can address coachee's concerns about individual value judgements.

Senior management teams of leading organisations such as Sun Microsystems, Johnson & Johnson, Hewlett-Packard, American Express, Lend Lease and General Electric – use 360-feedback and coaching to align individual behaviour with corporate values.

There are standardised 360 questionnaires available that are generally more cost effective but not all the items surveyed may be relevant for the specific coaching objectives. Customised surveys can be professionally developed and can be based on an organisation's specific values, terminology and culture. Other competencies and behaviours crucial to a leader's success, such as communication, teamwork and interpersonal skills can be incorporated into the 360 survey.

There are other logistics involved such as identifying and contacting feedback providers (key stakeholders are likely to include the immediate supervisor, peers, direct and indirect reports, customers as well as the coachee as a self-assessor) and whether the process is to be administered on-line in hard copy.



Where there are reservations regarding a survey-based approach, there are alternatives to obtaining multirater feedback. One approach is for the coach to have confidential one-on-one sessions with the feedback providers. While the nature of the feedback would be more qualitative, it does challenge the feedback provider to support comments with examples and anecdotal evidence.

3. Leadership Training Workshop

Where coaching is to be undertaken for a number of managers at the same time, for example as part of a 360 leadership survey initiative for a senior management team, a leadership training workshop is desirable.

The leadership training workshop typically covers the following issues:

- The purpose of the coaching initiative
- How the results of a 360 leadership survey, where administered, are to be interpreted and used
- The feedback and follow up coaching sessions
- How to respond to the feedback received
- Identifying, implementing and following up on developmental and improvement plans

4. Feedback Session

As a result of the 360-leadership survey and/or the feedback obtained from interviews with key stakeholders, the coach conducts a feedback session with the coachee and identifies potential developmental areas. It is important to note that the coachee need not agree with the feedback data but merely accept that these are the perceptions of the feedback providers, rightly or otherwise.

The coach has an important role to play because some of the feedback received may result in initial shock, denial or even anger. Once the coachee works through these reactions with the coach, there can then be an acceptance of these perceptions followed by a willingness to identify and implement improvement plans.

5. Regular Coaching Sessions

One of the most valuable aspects of a coaching initiative is the opportunity for the coachee to meet with the coach on a regular basis to discuss the effectiveness of the action plans as part of the process of managing rater perceptions. The scope and extent of the coaching assistance can vary. It is typically a monthly session of one-hour's duration but more frequent sessions interspersed with regular telephone discussions are not uncommon. As long as there is value-added provided during the coaching sessions and the coachee is prepared to work on developmental areas, the benefits of such a program will be sustained.



6. Follow Up

The effectiveness of the coachee's developmental action plans should be followed up on a regular basis in order to assess whether rater perceptions have changed. This may be achieved through the conduct of a further 360 leadership survey where changes can be quantified, or through a mini-survey or follow up interviews with the raters. Unless there is a link between rater perceptions, before and after the coaching intervention, the benefits of the process and, more importantly, the perceptions of change in the coachee's work behaviour, cannot be determined.

Any implications for team development and leadership effectiveness can also be identified through a follow up process.

The External Coach

Managers, as with most people, want to be liked and are therefore often reluctant to confront their people about behavioural shortcomings at work. However, managers are likely to be more respected if they could provide constructive feedback as effectively as complimentary feedback. The growing trend in the use of external consultants as coaches reinforces survey results indicating that people highly value honest feedback – regardless of whether or not it is positive. ²

As an example, the immediate supervisor often provides feedback based on subjective perceptions with limited information provided from other sources³. The external coach is usually seen as an objective third party providing analysis, suggestions and feedback gathered from multiple-sources. A person receiving 'bad news' from an external facilitator is more likely to separate the message from the messenger than the person hearing the same news from his or her immediate supervisor⁴.

When Not to Use Executive Coaching

With its increasing use, executive coaching is not to be seen as a panacea for resolving unrelated organisational or performance issues.

For example, executive coaching is not appropriate when:

- The person being coached is not willing or not committed to making a genuine effort to change based on the feedback received
- The organisation commissions a coaching process as 'ammunition' to terminate a person's employment
- The person lacks the skill levels required to perform the job – this is addressed through skills training and development, where appropriate, rather than the use of behavioural coaching
- If the organisation is travelling in the wrong direction or does not know where it should be headed, executive coaching will not make it change or identify its strategic direction.



1. Ron Cutadean, Successful Coaching, Novations Group, Inc, 1988
2. Marshall Goldsmith, 'Coaching for Behavioural Change', Leader to Leader, Fall 1996, pp 12 – 14.
3. Roland J. Nagel, '360-feedback covers all the angles', HRMonthly, March 1995.
4. Marshall Goldsmith, ibid.



About the author

Roland Nagel is Managing Director of Nagel Consulting Pty Limited and is a Registered Psychologist, Certified Executive Coach and Certified Emotional Intelligence Facilitator. He specialises in performance and productivity improvement issues at work and has identified the need for Australian business to address the significant challenge of developing high potential leaders through multi-rater feedback and executive coaching techniques. He is particularly experienced in the use of executive coaching to enhance a senior manager's effectiveness in the areas of performance management and the management of change.

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