




Achieving Powerful Leadership

*6 Myths About Executive Coaching That
Can Prevent Leaders From Reaching
Their Full Potential*

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6 Myths About Executive Coaching That Can Prevent Leaders From Reaching Their Full Potential

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Executives frequently are troubled by concerns surrounding the quality of leadership within their company. Questions such as the following are common:

“I have good leaders in my company. How can I make them great leaders?”

“What do we need to do to get rid of the conflicts weighing down our executive team?”

“If my VP could just improve in this one area, he would be unbeatable.

“But how can I make that happen?”

“Am I reaching my full potential as a leader?”

One of the best methods of improving the level of excellence in leadership within a company is to invest in executive coaching. However, many executives short-circuit the benefits of such coaching because they have fallen prey to one of six myths – myths that prevent leaders everywhere from reaching their full potential.

Myth #1: The Quick Fix

The first myth is that of the “Quick Fix.” Typically, this myth is adhered to by executives who hire a coach for one or more of their employees in leadership positions. The executive will tell the coach upon his or her arrival, “Give my Director of Ops a few sessions and fix him up!” Or, “My VP of Marketing could use a few sessions with you.”

The operative word here is “few.” The hiring executive is looking for fast change and immediate results.

However, executive coaching needs more than “a few sessions.” It isn’t a magic bullet yielding instantaneous transformation. Coaching often takes six months or more for the simple reason that *behavioral change is difficult to achieve.*

Behavioral change is the core of executive coaching. Executive coaching is not a data dump that relies purely on mental comprehension. Neither is it technical training to acquire a new intellectual or manual skill. Executive coaching is about changing ingrained patterns of behavior. These patterns have likely been in place for the person’s entire life. As such, executive coaching involves personal, one-on-one:

- **Discussion** with the individual being coached and with his or her peers, subordinates, and manager(s).
- **Assessment** of the data received during discussion, surveys, and reviews.
- **Feedback** regarding areas of strength and areas for development.
- **Strategy** to plan how to achieve behavioral change in key areas.
- **Implementation** of the strategy by the individual being coached.
- **Accountability** with the executive coach to encourage continued progress.

All of the above require time. Regular meetings between the coach and the person being coached are needed to design a plan of action, review progress, and make adjustments. Implementation of the plan requires time for the new behaviors to be incorporated by the person being coached and to be recognized by his or her colleagues.

Consider what needs to take place for coaching to bring results: First, the individual being coached needs to become **aware**. Much of coaching focuses on increasing the level of an individual's self-awareness. This includes not only becoming aware of thought processes, communication style, and behavior patterns, but also of the effect those thoughts, words, and actions have on others.

Second, the individual being coached must **accept** the need for change. This is by no means a simple step. Generally speaking, people – all people – resent it when their deficiencies are pointed out, and therefore resist accepting that there is an issue needing to be addressed. It takes a significant mental shift for an individual to admit that his or her behavior and attitude are a problem, and to take ownership for making a change.

Third, the individual being coached must **apply** new tools and techniques designed to help him or her accomplish a behavioral change. This requires specific action items, consistent effort, and constant accountability.

Executive coaching isn't finished when people have become aware of their negative behavior patterns, have accepted the need for change, and have begun to apply themselves to changing their behavior. The fact is, people do not change in linear fashion: they do not have an "Ah-ha!" moment, then just keep getting better and better at leadership after that point in time.

Instead, people tend to change by moving two steps forward and one step back. Or sometimes, by moving one step forward and two steps back. Why? *Because behavioral change is difficult.* It is worth repeating that key fact. Typically, there is great enthusiasm in the beginning for enacting change, but then, when things start getting tough, the person being coached slides back into their previous behaviors. It may take weeks or even a few months to get past that stage of regular backsliding before the tools and techniques actually begin to take root, and several more months before they are actually "second nature" to the person. As a general rule of thumb, it should be expected that executive coaching will take 6-12 months to yield permanent behavioral change.

Reality Check #1: Executive coaching is a long-term process.

Myth #2: The Pleasant Path

When people first begin working with an executive coach, they often go in with the belief that coaching will be a pleasant experience. After all, they reason, a coach is supposed to make me feel good about myself, right? This is about making me a success, and success makes me feel good, so I should feel good during the coaching process.

If that is their approach, they are bound for disappointment. Being coached is not easy, and it is frequently unpleasant.

Again, consider what coaching involves:

- **Realizing** that others (managers, peers, subordinates, clients, or vendors) may have a very different view of a person than the person has of him or herself. And that third-party view must now be taken seriously. For example, a senior-level manager might view herself as a great collaborator. But if all her staff refers to her as a micromanager, it is their opinion that must be recognized and addressed as the truth.
- **Accepting** that despite having reached a certain level of success and responsibility on the corporate ladder, their behaviors are now working against their future promotion. Confidence, skill, and knowledge will only take a person so far. At a certain point, their behavior patterns will begin to either help or inhibit them.
- **Humbling** themselves to take ownership of their negative behavior patterns and of the consequences those patterns have had, and working to consciously change lifelong habits of thought, speech, and action.

It is evident from the above that coaching can, at first, cause a person to experience stress or anxiety as they re-evaluate who they are, how they act, and how they are perceived. This, and the ensuing work that must be done to change ingrained behaviors, is not just difficult: it is humbling, painful, and uncomfortable. It is, however, essential.

Reality Check #2: Executive coaching requires humility and effort.

Humility and Humble Pie: A True Story

Picture a banking executive. For six years, he has run the single most successful division in his bank: the highest profit margins, the greatest number of deals, everything. But he treats everyone around him – even his clients – in a demeaning, condescending manner.

His manager, concerned about the bad reputation his employee is accruing, invests in an executive coach. But the banking executive refuses to accept the coaching. Rather than reacting with humility, he claims that any problems that may exist are because of other people – not because of him. Reluctantly, the VP dismisses the executive coach.

Merger mania hits in the banking industry. The man's bank is bought up, and the new company promptly lays him off.

For three years, the executive remains unemployed. Why? Because his reputation preceded him – with a vengeance. No one would give him a job at any level.

Finally, he gains employment – at a quarter of his previous salary. Now, instead of a corner office with a leather sofa and a mahogany desk, he works in a cubicle. And for lunch, every day, he eats a piece of humble pie.

Myth #3: The Therapy Session

The third myth that can derail executive coaching is the “Therapy Session” myth. It is vital that both the hiring executive and the leader being coached understand that executive coaching is not psychological counseling or therapy.

Executive coaching concentrates on behaviors *that affect business performance and impact business results*. The focus is not on the background reasons for the behaviors: it is on becoming aware of the behaviors, and making the commitment to actively substitute alternative, positive behaviors. As a result, executive coaching is goal-oriented, and change is typically both observable and measurable.

If a person’s negative behaviors are the result of deep-rooted psychological issues, or are due to addiction or substance abuse, executive coaching is not the solution. A good executive coach will recognize when this is the case, and will recommend that the individual seek help either through the company’s EAP, or through other appropriate therapeutic resources.

Reality Check #3: Executive coaching focuses on behaviors, not backgrounds.

Myth #4: The Leadership Program

Unfortunately, many executives assume that a leadership development training program will accomplish the same thing as executive coaching. They therefore send their personnel to a quality leadership program ... then wonder why the same negative issues and behavior patterns keep coming up.

Leadership programs and executive coaching are distinct services: both are extremely valuable *to the right people*. But they are very different in nature and scope:

Leadership Programs ...	Executive Coaching ...
■ are group-oriented	■ is focused on the individual
■ communicate general information on a wide variety of leadership topics	■ concentrates on specific behaviors unique to the individual being coached
■ do not usually have “homework”	■ provides action items geared to correct the negative behaviors
■ do not provide for ongoing communication with the facilitator	■ requires ongoing accountability with the coach

Therefore, it is a mistake to send a company executive to a leadership development program if he or she has all the basic leadership skills and knowledge, but is exhibiting one or more specific behaviors that are sabotaging the ability to lead well. The leadership program will not “fix” those behaviors. It is like giving aspirin when the person needs arthroscopic surgery.

Reality Check #4: Executive coaching is customized to the individual.

Myth #5: The Paper Trail

One of the worst reasons to hire an executive coach is to create a paper trail to weed out poor performers. In this instance, the executive coach is not really being hired to correct negative behaviors. He or she is being hired to “prove” that the negative behaviors cannot be corrected, and therefore the employee should be fired. The executive coaching is nothing more than a box on some human resources list that needs to be checked off before the termination can proceed.

This never works, because such an approach completely negates the entire method and purpose of executive coaching. First, the employee recognizes the “writing on the wall,” and usually leaves before coaching can begin. Second, if the employee does stay, he or she will likely have a resentful, antagonistic attitude: the exact opposite of what is required to effect change. Third, it sets up the manager and the employee as adversaries – with the coach caught in the middle.

Executive coaching should, therefore, never be a punitive measure. Executive coaching should be reserved for strong performers and high potentials: people who have a track record of success but who need a bit of assistance to help them along the way.

Such individuals usually have a suite of desirable character traits, but may have allowed some of those traits to slip over the edge, impacting working relationships and preventing continued advancement. For instance, good leaders are:

- **Assertive and persuasive.** However, taken too far, they can be pushy and demanding.
- **Decisive and action-oriented.** It is one step further to become impatient or impulsive.

- **Bright and visionary.** But they can come across as a superior know-it-all.
- **Confident and assured.** When they cross the line, they become cocky and arrogant.

Executive coaching can help these leaders hone their character traits and perfect their behaviors so they continue to produce results, generate sales, collaborate effectively, and lead well.

Reality Check #5: Executive coaching focuses on professional development.

Myth #6: The Endless Visit

One of the main fears of hiring executives is that executive coaching is endless. That once the coach comes in the door, he or she will never leave.

With a good executive coach, nothing could be further from the truth. A coach should never build a dependency relationship. Instead, executive coaching is goal-oriented. Right from the start, the coach and the individual being coached should define precisely what is expected, and what is to be achieved. Progress is then tracked and measured on a regular basis. Once the desired endpoint has been reached, the coaching relationship can be safely dissolved.

An executive coach will typically define the terms of the coaching engagement in his or her contract. Ideally, the timeframe will run no more than 12 months. This gives the individual being coached sufficient time to identify issues and create new positive behavior patterns. Once the new behaviors have become regular habits, the coaching engagement should be completed.

Reality Check #6: Executive coaching is goal-oriented.

Reaching Full Potential

Whether hiring an executive coach for personal growth or for one or more company leaders, it is important to keep these six realities firmly in mind. In summary, coaching is a customized, long-term process requiring humility and effort. Its focus is on changing specific behaviors and reaching specific goals in order to promote professional development.

The executive coach is not a miracle worker, and cannot guarantee results. All results are ultimately in the hands of the individual being coached. He or she must make the hard choice to make serious behavioral changes. Once the individual has owned that responsibility, it is the coach's job to lead and guide him or her along the way. Working together, there is nothing to stand in the way of the leader reaching his or her full potential.

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