

Executive Coaching

An Effective Approach For Senior Managers

Increasingly, senior managers who want to further enhance their success, engage qualified executive coaches to support them in achieving positive change. The main role of the coach is to facilitate improved thinking on the side of the senior executives and to keep them accountable during the change process.

Leaders aren't born, they are made. And they are made just like anything else, through hard work. And that's the price we'll have to pay to achieve that goal, or any goal.

ñ Vincent Lombardi

Executive Coaching has been a buzzword in Asia only in the past few years. However, the development in the past 20 years or so in North-America and Europe has clearly proven that coaching is not a fad but a trend which is here to stay.

Consequently, an increasing number of Senior Managers are considering ways to harness the benefits of coaching for themselves and their respective organizations. Let's look at

what coaching actually is, its benefits and possible applications.

What is Coaching?

According to Merriam-Webster the word 'coach' comes from the German word 'Kutsche' which is a large, usually closed four-wheeled carriage having doors in the sides and generally a front and a back seat inside and an elevated seat in front for the driver.

Now you may wonder how a four-wheeled carriage is related to the modern meaning of a coach for senior managers. The carriage actually can serve as a metaphor for coaching: it helps a person get from A to B faster than they would get there walking. Similarly, an executive coach helps you to achieve

your objectives faster than you would 'walking' by yourself. Unlike a mentor, trainer or consultant, a coach rarely provides advice or answers but instead helps the coachee discover the best possible ways of achieving the given or chosen objectives. A key coaching tool therefore is questioning in a way that promotes deep thinking and that creates enhanced awareness.

The great Peter Drucker (1909-2005) was perhaps one of the first consultants who acted as a true coach at a time when 'coaching' was an unknown term in connection with corporate performance.

Dan Lufkin, a co-founder of the investment banking firm Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette Inc., which often consulted with Drucker in the 1960s, has the following to say about Drucker:

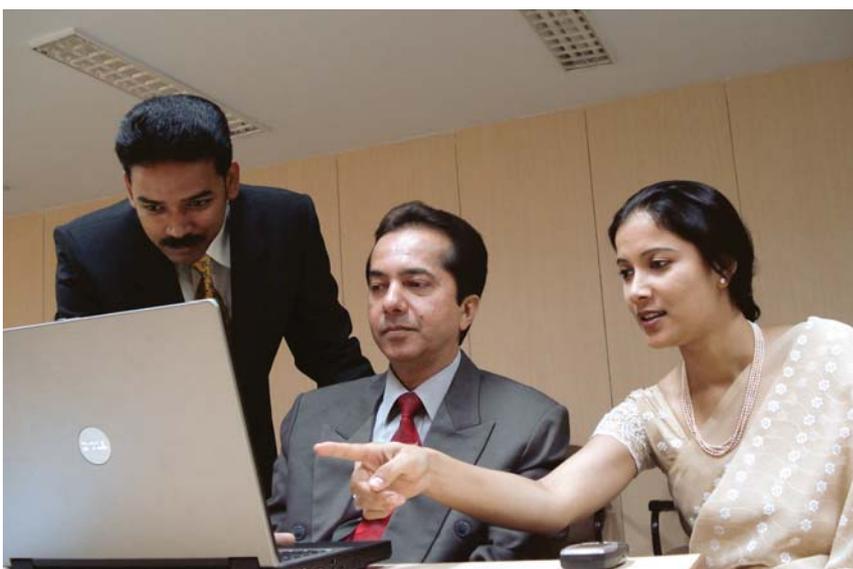
It was never his style to bring CEOs clear, concise answers to their problems but rather to frame the questions that could uncover the larger issues standing in the way of performance. 'My job,' he once told a client, 'is to ask questions. It's your job to provide answers.'

He would never give you an answer. That was frustrating for a while. But while it required a little more brain matter, it was enormously helpful to us.

Several studies proved the effectiveness and great benefits of coaching. The key benefits include:

- ❖ Improved performance of coachees through the support and
- ❖ Higher retention of top talent through a supportive and engaging environment
- ❖ Shift in engagement as coachees become increasingly empowered.

In this article I will elaborate on both executive coaching for senior managers as well as coaching used as a leadership style by senior executives.



Executive Coaching for Senior Managers

Think of all the people who have been your leaders at some point. Try to remember their leadership style and the way they interacted with people. Do you think of them as great, average or downright lousy leaders?

A couple of years ago, I was researching for my first book *The Groupness Factor*, and I asked a number of people to do this exercise to find out whether my perception was unique or mainstream. Unfortunately, I found that many shared my perception: there are very few great leaders today of ineffective leaders truly abound.

However, when asked about great doctors, teachers or other professionals, people can usually mention many names. What is the reason for this discrepancy? My explanation is simple: formal trainings for most professions abound, but there is hardly any formal education for leaders.

Think about it for the most important job in a company, we engage people without formal education for the position. We just believe, or at least hope, that they will have a natural flair for leadership. There are very few companies that actually prepare a person for leadership positions, and the programs those companies have in place are often too general and not focused enough on the specific needs of their possible leaders.

If it is true that the required number of leaders drastically outweighs the number of *born leaders*, why do so many top managers resist doing anything considerable about the situation? Here are three possible reasons:

- 1) They think that things are OK the way they are.
- 2) They think that it is sufficient for the CEO to be a great leader and the rest should just follow. This way of thinking is already an indicator of poor leadership.
- 3) They are aware of the problem but don't know how to fix it, or they are not able to measure the cost of poor leadership, and are thus unable to calculate the return on investment (ROI) for leadership development.

For senior managers belonging to the third category, there is an effective though not necessarily cheap solution: to hire a professional executive coach. As stated above, an executive coach is not a mentor or personal consultant who would need very specific



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experience in the role of the senior manager being coached. An executive coach is not the master of the content (though a good understanding of corporate dynamics is important) but the master of the process of assisting the managers in their thinking process resulting in subsequent improved leadership behaviors and decisions.

Professional coaches achieve these positive improvements through the creation of a highly trusted relationship with their coachee and then the use of various coaching tools to help the managers reach new insights and an extended understanding of their own leadership style and its consequences on their success.

Through such insights and understanding, leaders will start a positive change process in their behaviors and make useful adjustments to their leadership style. During this change process the role of the coach is similar to a sports coach, i.e. to keep the manager accountable and assure that the agreed changes are really put into action. As such, the coach helps the manager to develop new habits to make any changes sustainable even without the executive coach.

Typical reasons for engaging an executive coach for senior managers include

- ❖ **Start-up Support in a New Position**
To assure a smooth start, make sure that the manager adopts an optimal mindset and achieves the desired perception within the organization
- ❖ **Preparation for a More Senior Position**
Similar to the assignment above, however, to be completed before the actual promotion
- ❖ **Behavioral Change**
Most senior managers have certain interpersonal flaws that hinder them from achieving even greater success. In some cases they are aware of it, in other cases they need to be confronted with the negative impact of certain behaviors
- ❖ **Organizational Change**
To achieve a positive cultural shift in an organization, particularly

during or after any major reorganization is an extremely challenging job for any senior leader. A coach will support the manager to better understand the human dynamics and in developing useful strategies to achieve the desired changes.

The above reasons are just the most typical ones. There may be others like assisting the coachee in achieving a better work-life-balance, in developing a higher Emotional Intelligence, in overcoming low motivation, in becoming a better negotiator, etc.

Depending on the type of assignment, the coach may use different formats and tools such as 360 degree assessments, psychometric tests, etc., to make the process as efficient and effective as possible.

It is important to note that not every coach is necessarily the best choice for all possible types of assignment. It largely depends on the coach's background, training and expertise whether or not he is suitable for any given reason for coaching.

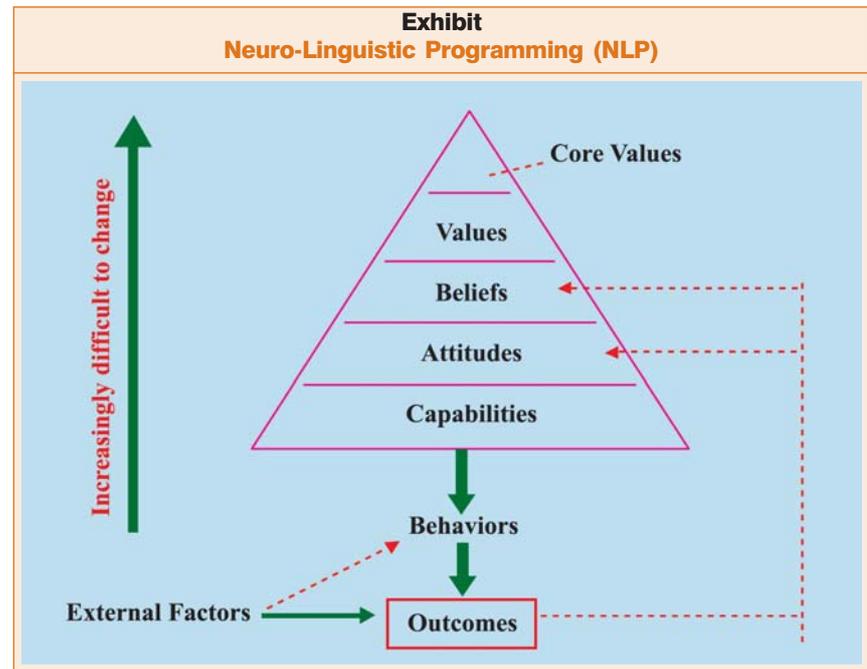
Various studies on coaching clearly show that executive coaching can be highly effective in achieving the desired outcomes. Even though executive coaching is typically not cheap (fees range between US\$100-1,000 per hour), various studies found returns on investment of several hundred percent.

Coaching as a Leadership Style for Senior Executives

As an executive leadership trainer and coach, I often ask potential clients (usually very senior managers) about their greatest leadership-related challenges. The answers would almost always be related to any of the following three challenges:

- ❖ Finding the right people (recruiting talent)
- ❖ Getting them to perform at their best level (achieving engagement), and
- ❖ Retaining them (maximizing talent retention).

Senior managers who learn basic coaching skills to select and manage



their people, tend to achieve considerable improvement in all the three areas.

Why look for talents in the first place? Quite obviously because we want to find people, who can achieve outstanding results for the benefit of the organization. There are three preconditions for high performance:

- ❖ Ability to perform (Can the person perform?)
- ❖ Willingness to perform (Is the person willing to perform?)
- ❖ Opportunity to perform (includes environmental factors, necessary tools, etc.)

In order to understand how leaders may influence these three preconditions, I enhanced the 'Neurological Levels' model used in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP): (See the given Exhibit).

Definitions

- ❖ **External Factors**
Typically factors such as economic situation, behaviors of Third Parties such as shareholders, vendors, buyers, competitors, etc. (in most cases, external factors are hard or impossible to influence by the individual, e.g., competitor reduces prices by 20%)

- ❖ **Outcomes**
The results achieved by an individual through behavior under the conditions of the external factors, e.g., high engagement
- ❖ **Behaviors**
What the individual does and says, e.g., to coach someone
- ❖ **Capabilities**
What the individual is able to do, i.e. skills, competencies, knowledge, etc., e.g., being able to coach
- ❖ **Attitude**
Adopted views and habits of the individual, e.g., being supportive
- ❖ **Beliefs**
What the individual holds to be true for himself without having definite proof of its truth, e.g., belief that if I support my staff, they will perform better
- ❖ **Values**
What is truly important to the individual, e.g., to be recognized as a great leader
- ❖ **Core Values**
Values that are so important that no exception is acceptable, i.e. typically these values would include either the word 'always' or 'never', e.g., if honesty is a core value then honesty is always expected, white lies, etc. would not be acceptable.

To manage our talents for top performance, we need to first understand which areas need to be addressed to further enhance performance. Is it ability, willingness, or opportunity? To create adequate opportunity is the task of the talent manager. For example, we can't expect our people to

achieve outstanding results if we do not provide them with the necessary tools to do so.

achieve outstanding results if we do not provide them with the necessary tools to do so. If we find that our talents are not sufficiently qualified or lack certain skills, then we need to consider education and/or training to enhance the capabilities to make the desired behaviors possible and achieve better outcomes as a consequence.

From my research, I found that engagement is highly influenced by the day-to-day leadership of the management. For example, how do managers communicate with their staff

The most challenging part is to enhance willingness, often referred to as motivation. I prefer to make a distinction between engagement and motivation. For me, motivation is short-lived, i.e. if something or somebody motivates me, then I'm motivated for sometime only. However, after the motivating factor dissipates, so does my motivation. On the other hand, engagement is something more profound. It doesn't develop at once but must be developed over time. Once I'm engaged to perform, even adverse factors won't immediately reduce my engagement, it would take continual de-motivation for my engagement to be reduced and finally disappear.

Coaching as a Leader

It won't be possible in the scope of this article to give a comprehensive description of the competencies and frameworks of coaching, so I will focus on four key frameworks and four key coaching competencies which will allow a leader to get started with coaching.

From my research, I found that engagement is highly influenced by the day-to-day leadership of the management. For example, how do managers communicate with their staff? How much do they respect them? Are they able to provide a shared vision and mission? Do managers represent the corporate values of their company through their behaviors? Are they behaving in a fair and consistent manner? Do they provide sufficient recog-

nition for jobs well done? Do they make their people feel valued? The quality of everyday leadership has a great impact on the engagement, i.e., willingness to perform. One of the key tools to achieve high engagement is to coach the people you lead.

Coaching Framework No. 1: Giving Ownership

As managers, we are used to take charge and to provide direction and advice to the people we lead. In fact, most people would expect that from their leaders. A coach however does not give advice. The coach leaves the ownership of the decision on what to do and even more so how to do things to the coachee.

This is perhaps the biggest change for any manager who starts using coaching as a leadership tool. The benefits of leaving ownership to the coachee are clear:

- ❖ The coachee is more likely to follow through if it's her/his own idea
- ❖ The coachee is more engaged
- ❖ The coachee is required to be more accountable
- ❖ The coachee develops solution-finding and decision-making com-

petencies and thus grows as a person.

This concept is particularly effective if you want to develop a talent to take on more responsibilities in the future.

What seems so easy is in fact a great challenge for most managers. First of all, most managers are not used to provide much ownership to the people they lead. If anyone asks for advice, managers tend to be happy to provide exactly that. If anyone comes up with a suggestion, managers tend to look for areas for improvement and provide advice how it could be done better.

Also, many managers do not think that their people are able or even willing to come up with own solutions and therefore prefer to tell them what to do. This is a clear sign for me that there is a lack of trust and confidence in the people they lead. That's not exactly a sign of working with great talents.

In my experience, while there are a few people in organizations who are not interested in self-development or progress, the majority are. More frequently, people get disengaged because they feel the lack of trust and confidence in them and therefore avoid taking any responsibility and just follow the convenient track of doing what they are told.

If you want to start coaching your people and face this situation, you first may need to change your attitude towards your people and at least give them a fair chance to succeed when taking on more ownership. You may also need to explain to them why you change your leadership style and how they can benefit from it.

Providing ownership is a very effective way of developing your talent pool.

Coaching Framework No. 2: Being Non-Judgmental

This framework is based on psychotherapy and also proved to be very effective in coaching. While we cannot stop making judgments, we can stop bringing our judgments into the coaching conversation and instead, be curious to learn more about perhaps a different way of thinking of our coachee.

There are three main benefits of this approach:

- a) The coachee feels safer to express himself openly
- b) The coachee reflects on his thinking patterns and might change them as a consequence.
- c) The coach learns more about the coachee's way of thinking which can form a basis for further development of the coachee.

What makes being non-judgmental difficult is again our habit of making immediate judgments and consequently thinking in right/wrong patterns. What helped me overcome this habit is to respect that other people may think differently from me, have different experiences and from their point of view, are always 'right' as I am right from my point of view.

Instead of objecting or criticizing or judging what others say, I can aim at more understanding and replace my judgment with curiosity. Often enough, I myself reach new insights by gaining a deeper understanding of why other people say what they say.

Being non-judgmental is also relevant when coaching top talent. We often like to promote people who are similar to us and therefore benchmark them against us. Doing so, we might miss some important strong (or weak) points that could be relevant for the current and future performance of the coachee. If we are instead open for diversity, this risk is minimized.

Coaching Framework No. 3: Forward/Opportunity-Oriented vs. Problem-Oriented

How do you feel when you have to deal with a problem? What is your energy level? What is your energy level when you see an opportunity?

Obviously, opportunities tend to energize us while problems tend to drain us of our energy. The good news is that any problem can be translated or reframed as an opportunity. For example, if any of your staff repeatedly misses deadlines, it would normally be seen as a problem. The question is: how can it be reframed as an opportunity?

Perhaps, there is an opportunity to understand better what's going on with this staff, to see how this staff would perform better overall (including meeting deadlines). As a coaching manager, rather than telling your staff that there is a problem, you would start having a conversation about the staff's performance expectations, what kind of support he needs to make them possible and as a result perhaps achieve an overall better performance besides meeting deadlines.

This framework is particularly important when dealing with top talent as they can be easily engaged by providing them with challenging opportunities.

Coaching Framework No. 4: Sharing vs. Advising

As stated earlier, giving advice means taking away at least partly the ownership from our coachee. Does it mean our own expertise is unimportant? Not necessarily. It is more a question of when and how you communicate your own ideas and solutions.

When coaching your people, it is recommended that at first you hold back your own solutions and give the opportunity to your coachee to use her/his own understanding, experience and knowledge to come up with ideas of how to deal with the issue at hand. You may then challenge or further clarify these thoughts up to the point when you feel you got the best out of the coachee.

Only then (!) may you bring in your own expertise and complement what your coachee came up with. However, rather than giving advice which means you want the coachee to accept your point of view, coaches share their solution or ideas. Sharing means that you do not expect the coachee to adopt your thoughts, you just put them out there for her/him to pick up or leave them there. Either way is fine with you. This way, you leave full ownership with the coachee.

Four Key Coaching Competencies

The most basic and yet most important competencies of anyone who

wants to coach as a manager are

- i Building trust
- i Being present
- i Active listening
- i Questioning.

Competency No. 1: Building trust

Through our research we found that a leader can build trust by focusing on three key elements:

- i True care for the coachee
- i Good rapport with coachee
- i Appearing competent in the eyes of the coachee.

Only if the coachee perceives all of these three elements can trust be established and further grow. We found that the most important element for building trust is true care. This is good news as caring for someone only requires a decision to do so. We don't need to learn it, we can do it at any time.

Building good rapport is something that we do naturally with some people and may have difficulties with others. Neuro-Linguistic Programming discovered that people who are great at building rapport subconsciously use a technique called 'matching'. It means that they make other people comfortable by matching their preferred patterns, such as voice, body language, interests, hobbies, dress code, etc. Matching does not mean copying the other person, it just means 'getting into his zone' to make him sufficiently comfortable so that good rapport can be established.

Being perceived as competent is another important ingredient for building trust. It often helps to simply clarify your role which is typically different from the role of your staff and what makes you competent in this role.

A basic level of trust is necessary to be able to coach your people. Resistance to coaching is often due to insufficient trust between the coachee and the leader. In this case, ask yourself which of the three key elements are lacking and work on developing them.

Competency No. 2: Being Present

Being present in this context does not mean being physically present but being mentally present with your coachee. This is necessary to be able to fully listen and understand what the coachee says. Also, it will help to further expand the coachee's trust in you as s/he will feel more cared for when you are fully present.

help the coachee expand her/his way of thinking.

Most effective are open-ended questions, particularly *what* and *how* questions as they require the coachee to process information and think things through. *Why* questions also fall into this category. However, these should be used with care as they can easily sound judgmental.

sibility to get their top talent to perform at their best levels and to develop them for the future. Coaching is a key tool to achieve exactly that.

Leadership and Retention

Several surveys clearly show that only about 20% of all resignations are due to dissatisfaction with compensation. The top reasons include

- ❖ Dislike the leadership style of direct superior
- ❖ Lack of career opportunity
- ❖ Lack of training and development
- ❖ Unpleasant atmosphere at workplace.

My guess is that these four factors are even more important to top talent. All of these reasons are related to leadership. Therefore, we can say that the leaders of an organization have a great impact on staff turnover.

Obviously, highly engaged people are much less likely to leave an organization, so if leaders do a good job to achieve high levels of engagement, they indirectly increase the retention rate of their talents.

Conclusion

Increasingly, senior managers who want to further enhance their success, engage qualified executive coaches to support them in achieving positive change. The main role of the coach is to facilitate improved thinking on the side of the senior executives and to keep them accountable during the change process.

Excellent leaders not only make sure they hire excellent talents, but also use coaching skills to assist their people in achieving high performance and further development. Needless to say, talents who are highly engaged and see the opportunity to grow within the organization are likely to stay. 📌

What holds us back from being fully present are thoughts about the past and the future, e.g. what happened this morning, what will be the impact on the year-end results, etc

What holds us back from being fully present are thoughts about the past and the future, e.g. what happened this morning, what will be the impact on the year-end results, etc.

Also, distractions in the present such as noise outside, people passing by, thinking of the solution already, etc. may keep us from being present. To develop your presence, start checking yourself when you are and when you are not present in any conversation.

Competency No. 3: Active Listening

Active listening means more than just listening, it means that you try to make sure you understand what the other person is trying to say. This can be done through further clarifying questions, paraphrasing, etc. To get clues if you understand correctly, you may also want to check synchronicity between what was said and the corresponding body language. If you feel that something seems odd, you may want to check further to make sure you understood correctly.

Competency No. 4: Questioning

Questioning is a key tool in coaching and at the same time the most difficult tool to use effectively to

The following are a few typical coaching questions:

- ❖ **What if Questions:**
What would you do if you were the CEO of the company?
- ❖ **What Works Questions:**
What have you or others successfully done in similar situations?
- ❖ **Rating Questions:**
On a scale from 1-10, how would you rate your confidence that this solution works?
- ❖ **Coping Questions:**
How did you manage to deal with this situation so far?
- ❖ **Observer Questions:**
What would someone who is not involved in this situation think about it?
- ❖ **Going Forward Question:**
What are the next steps you suggest that would lead us to the right direction?

The willingness to perform is usually rooted in either certain values or more often in certain beliefs. While it is difficult to change someone's values, it is much more possible to help someone change her/his beliefs. Coaching is a very effective approach to achieve exactly that. Also, it is useful to assist your people to change their attitude, if required, for higher performance. It is the leaders' respon-