

Navigating the executive coaching jungle!

Ten questions to select the right coach for you

Congratulations! You know you have a development situation that would benefit from coaching. You have a brief that captures the outcomes you are looking for. You even have some ideas about the sort of coach you would work well with. All solid preparation, but believe it or not you are still only half way there! Damn it, you still have to select a coach and this is where many leaders drop the ball.

It is advisable that you meet and interview two to three coaches before making a choice and take up references. These chemistry meetings are the only opportunity for both parties to assess whether they would work well together in person and they are on your wavelength. Like most things in business and life, fit is a very personal thing and not something you can ask your Chief of Staff or HR to do on your behalf.

What you ask in these informal interviews is central to determining fit and flush out any barriers to you working well together. The following ten questions have been crafted to help you uncover the information you need to decide on the right coach.

Question 1

Give me an overview of your coaching experience?



What you are trying to assess here

What's the depth of their experience?

It's always worth exploring how and why someone got into coaching. It is your chance to understand their motivation and what training and qualifications they have undertaken. Ask whether they coach full time. Ask what sort of businesses hire them and to do what. Specifically, you want to see if they have a track record for working with people at your level and in your sort of role.

Question 2

Tell me about your experience in this sector?



What you are trying to assess here

Do they 'get' your world?

An effective coach needs to understand what makes your world tick; the pressures, personalities and norms. The industry expert may not be your best choice. So gauge whether their questions about your current situation show insight into your world. Equally, there may be particular areas where it's important that the coach has had first hand experience, because they are so central to your role, e.g., leading teams, running a P&L or navigating a global business. Determine where your coach needs understanding and insight versus comparable experience.

Question 3

Tell me about a typical client where you had real impact. How did you approach that assignment and what was the outcome?



What you are trying to assess here

What's their approach? Do they have areas of specialty?

Most coaches have a coaching sweet spot and should be able to talk about the type of client they enjoy working with the most and where they tend to have the maximum impact. This is a chance to understand their particular approach or methodology and see if it makes sense for what you are trying to achieve. Probe what psychometrics or other tools they like to use and why. Equally it's worth questioning where they feel they have been less effective with clients and the sort of client they turn down? (This is also a good test of their candour and self awareness.)

Question 4

What questions do they have about the coaching brief? Are your issues ones they have tackled with other clients?



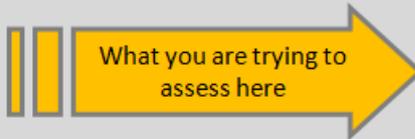
What you are trying to assess here

Is this familiar coaching territory and if yes, what are their insights around what makes for a successful approach?

A smart coach will probe you on the initial coaching brief and try and gauge how realistic it is. Expect to be challenged on how you have defined it and on tangible measures of progress.

Question 5

How would you describe your style of coaching?



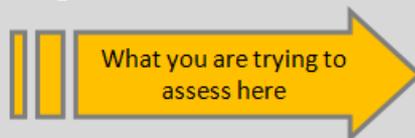
Is their style going to provide enjoyable challenge for how you like to think and operate?

You should be able to gather some insight into the coach's natural style from your chemistry meeting but still ask them to describe their coaching style.

This is really down to you and your knowledge around what sort of challenge you enjoy. For example, are you looking for someone who takes a very holistic approach to issues that encompasses the personal and professional? Do you want someone who helps you be more introspective or goal orientated? Some coaches will be explicit in their opinion on an issue or directive, others are more Socratic. Some will be very empathetic and gentle, others more forceful. Make sure you know what you would be getting with the coach in question.

Question 6

How would you use third party feedback or psychometric data in this assignment?



What ideas do they have for getting fresh insight on your goals?

It's always helpful to have third party data to help add perspective to the areas you want to work on. However, you want to be clear how your coach proposes to collect and use this data. For example, will there be a feedback report and who gets to see it other than you? How will the confidentiality of contributors be managed? If they are going to collect feedback on your behalf always ask whether they would do that face to face or by phone. The set up for any feedback process needs to have clear boundaries and safety checks. There should be no surprises!

Question 7

What are their principles for managing confidentiality?



What you are trying to assess here

Does this coach have experience of navigating confidentiality issues successfully?

While different coaches use different approaches around confidentiality, the main thing you are listening for is clarity. You want a coach who is crystal clear about where they draw the line around what does or does not get shared outside of your coaching conversations. For example, how would they respond to informal enquiries from HR or your boss about this coaching work? It's often a line coaches come under pressure to waive so ask if they have had any tricky confidentiality dynamics in the past and what they did.

Question 8

When have they had a coaching assignment go off the tracks?



What you are trying to assess here

Have they experience of recovering a tricky situation?

Inevitably the course of great coaching is not always smooth. You want to check how they have handled assignments where there have been problems or unexpected developments. It is also worth probing how they delineate between coaching, consulting and therapy as again you want a coach who is clear about what is and isn't in scope.

Question 9

If we worked together how might we judge the success of this assignment?



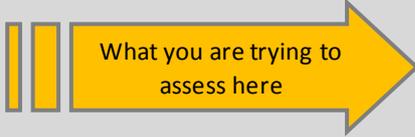
What you are trying to assess here

Do you think about success and measurement in similar ways?

Listen for both the formal and formal measures the coach thinks are meaningful and valuable. It's not always easy to tick a box at the end of a coaching assignment so be open to exploring alternative measures.

Question 10

Who would be a good person for you to speak to as a reference for their past work and why?



Do they have past clients who are willing to speak for their work?

It's always helpful to speak to a past coachee to understand in person what the coach was like to work with and where they see their strengths and weaknesses. Be wary of any coach who is reluctant to provide references.

In summary, if you are serious about executive coaching it need not be a jungle out there. Being clear about whether coaching is right for you and what you want to work on, thinking about what sort of coach would be the best fit and then using these interview questions to make a smart selection, means you will get the most of your coaching investment.

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