

## Three questions to get on the front foot for coaching

If you have ever wanted to engage an executive coach you will know only too well the bewildering array of providers, philosophies and qualifications that accost you the moment you enter 'coaching' into your search engine. Coaching is a burgeoning industry and there will never be a shortage of individuals and organisations that claim they can perfectly meet your needs. But 'Buyer Beware!' It is an unregulated industry. Anyone can set themselves up as a coach regardless of their experience, training or aptitude. Plenty has been written about the need for common standards, but for now there are no definitive qualifications or single accepted professional body that regulates coaching.

Executive coaching (as opposed to life coaching, team, career, skills, or performance coaching) is a form of individualised leadership development that builds a person's capability to achieve short and longer-term goals. These are typically organisational goals but there is frequently an overlap or an interdependency with more personal goals. John Whitmore neatly sums up coaching as 'unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance'.

Coaching provides the leader with a dispassionate deep dive into what they really want to achieve and what might be slowing them down (including themselves). It explores new ways of thinking and acting that will equip them to be more effective. A typical engagement will last between 4 – 12 months; long enough to gather feedback from key stakeholders, to really understand patterns and deep-seated assumptions and to start converting insights into practical daily behaviours and outcomes.

So, if you want to engage a coach, how do you navigate this jungle of a marketplace other than with extreme caution? The first part of this article works through three reflective questions to ensure you are well prepared to start a coaching assignment.

- 1 Is coaching right for me?
- 2 Am I clear about the coaching brief?
- 3 What sort of coach do I need?

The second part of this article provides ten questions to help you select the best coach.

### 1.1 Do I really need a coach?

Firstly, it is worth asking whether you actually *need* a coach. A coaching relationship has to be right for your current needs and situation. Coaching helps facilitate human growth and change, but do you really need a coach to achieve the career or development step you have in mind? Most of us keep sharpening our knowledge and capabilities through a combination of learning on the job, mentors, smart colleagues, reading and training courses.

In terms of building technical expertise this on the job approach can work well. However, for situations where more personalised development is required, more individualised support, like coaching can really work. We can recognise challenges that require tailored, time specific help and not generic best practice, for example: stepping into new leadership role, taking on your first Board position, working in a new geography, driving major changes, working through emotional blind spots, running your first global team, making sense of a career set back or undertaking a complete career rethink. All these issues would be hard to address by simply reading around or through 'off the shelf' training.

Personal work dilemmas aren't helped by a 'one size fits all' response. Coaching can be an effective way of unpacking these subtle but niggling issues. I have worked with several highly successful clients who have felt profoundly stuck or dissatisfied at work with an aspect of their work. When a leader feels they are going round in circles, coaching can help unravel what is really going. This is often hard to diagnose alone and when a leader achieves a true 'eureka' insight, careers and individuals are galvanised.

Increasingly, executives are using coaching as maintenance tool – a way to reboot and defragment their leadership hard drive once every 12-18 months. This is another highly personalised intervention. These leaders use coaching as a route to gather fresh insight, to remain sharp and keep raising the bar on what it means to be at the top of their game. This is particularly valuable for individuals who have worked in the same role or company for an extended period or feel they aren't getting the development stretch they need.

While some leaders take pride in being a low maintenance executive, it is not a long-term recipe for success. To reference Carol Dweck's acclaimed work on mindset, advocates of coaching buy into the theory that we are to a large extent in charge of our own intelligence and that being smart is a long ongoing process of self-discovery and development.

Leaders frequently report that only so much growth and change is possible through self-reflection alone. Many do their best thinking out loud and when it comes to the tricky stuff, they need a thinking partner. Charles Handy observed this same dynamic in *The Hungry Spirit* concluding that 'We can't discover ourselves by introspection. To be ourselves we need other people'. Solitary reflection tends to be geared towards understanding our past selves and not stepping into the future leader we aspire to be. A coach can be a fast track development route to raise the quality of dialogue and challenge around your future career.

## ***1.2 Do I receive regular quality feedback?***

Startling insights often come through the robust 360 degree feedback process that typically accompanies executive coaching. At its best, this involves your coach collecting feedback on your behalf based around questions or issues where you are seeking more understanding. This is not through some online tick box survey but through meeting face to face with your boss, peers, team and even clients where they will probe for views and supporting examples. Feedback is always gathered in the spirit of 'what would be helpful for the executive to know or understand to support future progress and performance?'. The findings may be attributable or non-attributable.

It never ceases to surprise me how many business leaders are taken aback by their feedback data. Leaders may describe themselves self-aware and have files of psychometric reports, but if they have never received in depth qualitative feedback about how colleagues experience them day to day, it can be a revelation to understand the impact you actually have.

Of course, feedback should be provided through an annual review process. In reality this rarely happens. Politics, confidentiality concerns and the fact that most review conversations are linked to remuneration, means the odds are stacked against the individual receiving truly 'clean' feedback that doesn't have some secondary motive.

So its worth asking yourself when you last received valuable feedback that revealed something new to you (versus the same recycled feedback themes that are so familiar that you can no longer really hear). If you can't point to something in the last 12 months that made you pause in your tracks, then you probably aren't receiving the feedback you need and coaching may be one route to addressing that.

## ***1.3 Do I have the motivation, mindset, and time for coaching?***

Turning the spotlight around, let's also think about what the coach needs from you, if you are both to work together successfully. Executives who get the most out of coaching have a fierce desire to grow and will dedicate the time necessary to achieve this. One area I always discuss with potential clients is their motivation and appetite for a challenging developmental experience. A coach will and encourage you to make changes. They should not be there to motivate or cajole.

Another area to consider is how easily you embrace help from a third party and welcome challenge. Individuals with iron-clad beliefs find it tough to get much out of coaching. Being curious and open to new ways of thinking or operating are prerequisites for an enriching coaching relationship.

Finally, if you have the appetite but not the time for coaching, then hold off for a while. You need to create enough space not just to have the coaching sessions but also to reflect and test out new behaviours and ideas between sessions. Coaching should not be an additional stress in an already impossible schedule.

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## Am I clear about the coaching brief?

If you have concluded that coaching is the right development path for you, the next step is to outline the coaching brief you would give to a prospective coach. Start by asking yourself what you believe are the most valuable issues for you to work on with a coach. If you asked your boss, peers, team, or spouse the same question, would they raise the same issues?

### Top 3 reasons coaches are engaged



As a prospective coachee you need to be able to outline the issue(s) you want to work on along with the outcomes you are seeking. You can dig deeper in your coaching brief by responding to the following questions:

- What has prompted me to consider coaching?
- What are the issues I want to work on and why?
- What are my concerns about embarking on a coaching relationship?
- What would success look like in my eyes? What outcomes do I want?
- What would success look like to my boss, team, peers, or clients?

The scope of a coaching assignment may evolve over time, so don't feel anything is set in stone. Fresh 360 degree feedback can reframe old issues or add new ones to the original coaching brief. However, having a clear starting point enables you to explain what you are looking for from a coach. It helps set expectations with your boss, HR, yourself, and the coach about the outcomes required.

Successful coaching assignments need the attention and support of senior management. Typically, you would make sure you and your boss are clear about what you are undertaking and the brief you are working to. You would also want your manager and colleagues to be supportive of the process, goals and business outcomes and be willing to provide input along the way.

Research has looked into the criteria businesses use to select a coach.

### What are the most important criteria for selecting external executive coaches?

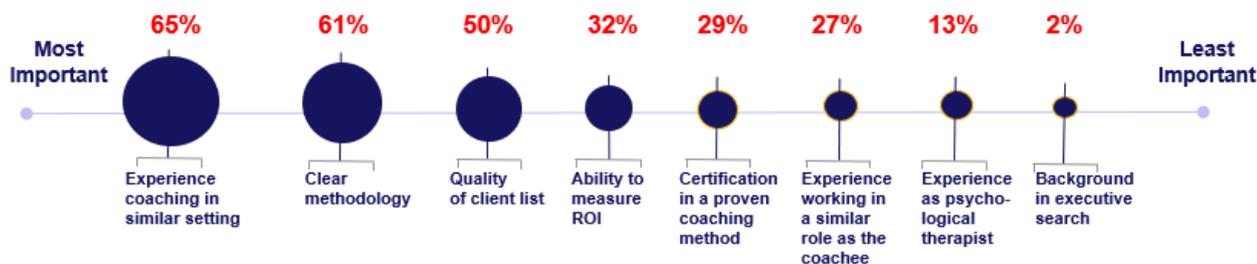


Research Report Executive Coaching Survey: 2012 Edition

These are all respectable criteria, but remember you are hiring a coach and not an industry expert. In fact, hiring an expert can be a slippery slope to establishing a consulting relationship rather than a developmental experience. This is a frequent complaint made of retired executives who move into coaching.

The same 2009 Harvard Business Review study turned the question around and asked coaches to recommend what organisations should look for when hiring coach. Not surprisingly they had a different view. They suggested that executives compare methodologies, measurement tools and qualifications. Quite a specific ask for anyone outside of the coaching world!

## ‘What coaches say companies should look for when hiring a coach’



Percentages of respondents who ranked these qualifications as “very important.”  
Harvard Business Review, January 2009

While all of these criteria are helpful, let’s not forget that the wild card in the process is you. Your individual needs, your past experiences, your concerns, and personality all mean that selecting a coach has to be a highly personalised process.

One criteria that does not show up in the study is the question of personal fit. An initial chemistry meeting is essential to assess whether the prospective coach is someone you would feel comfortable to work with. You need some level of personal connection, trust and warmth given the exploratory work you will be doing together. Equally you are not looking for someone who feels too comfortable. You need a coach who is willing to confront and challenge you in a way that works for you.

Coaching style is another factor missing from this HBR list. For example, many coaching schools advocate a non-directive style of coaching where all the insights are gradually drawn out from the individual in a Socratic style. This can be a cerebral experience that naturally reflective leaders often relish. Other people find it wildly frustrating and require a more directive style. Pinpointing what have been your most fruitful learning experiences in the past and understanding what made them productive is a useful lens on the type of coaching style that will work for you. The degree of structure you need is all part of coaching style. When taking up references on a potential coach, coaching style, approach and structure, degree of challenge and fit are all additional areas to probe.

Finally, don’t fall into the trap of engaging a coach who is just like you. Part of the power of coaching comes from having different gender, ethnic, and cultural experiences in the conversation. We all have natural biases and blind spots by virtue of our gender, upbringing, and professional training. Coaching is the perfect opportunity to force some alternative perspectives into the mix.

So, when you have an upcoming challenge that really matters in your career, use these questions to judge whether yours is the type of challenge that would benefit from coaching. You will then be on the front foot for ensuring a rich and rewarding coaching experience that helps you ‘maximize your own performance’ in the short term and provides a basis for enduring change.

## Ten questions to select the right coach for you

Congratulations! 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. You still need to interview and select your coach.

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

What you ask in these 'chemistry meetings' is central to understanding what the coach brings to the table and how they like to work. The following ten questions have been designed to help you uncover the information you need to decide on the right coach.

### Question 1 Can you 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 why someone got into coaching as well as what coaching work they do. It is your chance to understand their motivation, as well as what training and qualifications they have undertaken. Ask whether they coach full time, what sort of businesses hire them and for what sort of assignments? 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 What's 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, expectations and norms. They do not need to be an industry expert. Gauge whether their questions about your current situation show an insight into your world. There may be an issues where it's critical that the coach has comparative experience, because they are so fundamental to your role, e.g. navigating a global business. Determine where your coach needs understanding versus direct experience.*

### **Question 3 Can you tell me about a client where you had real impact?**

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 will want to talk about the type of clients they enjoy working with and where they 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 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 Do you have questions about my coaching brief?**

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?***

*Your ideal coach will probe you on your initial coaching brief and provide comparisons and questions based on past experiences. Expect to be challenged on the scope of the brief (most people take on too much) and explore what progress could look like.*

### **Question 5 How would you describe your style of coaching?**

What you are trying to assess here?

***Is their style going to work for you?***

*You will be able to gather some insight into the coach's natural style from your meeting, but its still worth asking them to describe their coaching style. You will have started to form a view about what is going to work for you. For example, are you looking for someone who takes a very holistic approach to issues and encompasses the personal and professional? Do you want plenty of structure and materials or just the coaching sessions? Some coaches will be explicit in their opinions on an issue or directive, others will rarely offer a point of view. 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 will you use 360 feedback or psychometric data in this assignment?

What you are trying to assess here?

***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 will do that face to face, online or by phone. The set up for any feedback process needs to have clear boundaries and safety checks. There should be no surprises!*

*You may also have existing psychometric reports or past reviews it would be useful for your coach to reference.*

## **Question 7** What are your principles for managing confidentiality issues?

What you are trying to assess here?

***Does this coach have experience of navigating tricky confidentiality issues?***

*Different coaches have varying practices around confidentiality. The main quality you are listening for is clarity. You want a coach who is crystal clear about where they draw the boundaries 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 assignment? 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 how they responded.*

## **Question 8** Have you had a coaching assignment fail or 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 a coach has handled assignments where there have been problems or unexpected developments. It is also worth probing how they delineate between coaching, consulting and therapy. You want a coach who is clear about what is and isn't in scope and their own boundaries.*

## **Question 9** How do you judge the success of your work?

What you are trying to assess here?

***Do you think about success and measurement in similar ways?***

*Listen for both the formal and informal 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, around relationships, new insights, third party observations of change and sustainability. A good coach will be keen to flag what they need from you to ensure things goes well.*

## **Question 10** Who would be a good reference for their past work and why?

What you are trying to assess here?

***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 their strengths and weaknesses. Be wary of any coach who is reluctant to provide references.*

Executive coaching need not be a jungle. Being clear about what you want to work on, thinking about what sort of coach would be the best fit for you and then using these interview questions to make a smart selection, means you will get off to a strong start.