

When an Emerging Leader Warrants a Trusted Advisor

by Christine W. Zust, M.A.



Throughout your development as a leader, you have either created change, or proactively adapted to change happening around you. In today's fast-paced business world, it's important to recognize you don't have to go it alone. More executives are turning to coaches for help. Working with a range of clients, from the highest-ranking corporate leaders to owners of small and medium-sized companies, they bring stability and focus to an ever-changing work environment. Here are some pointers that will help you understand the coach/client relationship.

First of all, let's look at the definition of an Executive Coach. An executive coach plays four roles. First, a coach is a professional development expert in a specific discipline, such as leadership development, performance management or emotional intelligence, who provides guidance and insight. Second, a coach is a partner who challenges your thinking as a leader. Third, a coach is a confidant and trusted advisor, and fourth, a coach is an objective outside resource.

A coach will guide you through the thinking process to help you understand what changes must be made to succeed in your leadership role. This process helps you outline steps toward positive change. Their role may be part investigative reporter and part sounding board to help you make the right business decisions. The training is in place to ask thought-provoking questions and provide valuable feedback to your plan. Because there is no company allegiance, progress can be achieved more quickly.

Why do executives need coaches today when they were virtually unheard of in past years? Let's face it; the work environment is more complex. The pressure put on executives today is often double or triple of that of their predecessors. Executives are expected to manage more with fewer resources, and are juggling mergers, acquisitions, buyouts, downsizing or directing a change in company philosophy. Executives cannot rely solely on their upper-level staff advisors or team members to provide input, because they have their own crises to handle. The executive coach fills this role to help guide the process. They ask questions of a purely objective nature and keep the discussion focused. Coaching can result in a leader's enhanced self-awareness, a recognized need for continuous improvement, clearer goals, and ultimately better decisions.

What should you to look for in an executive coach? An executive coach is no different from any other professional advisor you would hire to assist in planning. We scrutinize the choices of legal advisor, accountant or stockbroker. Why should a coach be any different? First, and the most important, look for a good fit. Keep in mind that your coach is there to motivate you and guide your thought process. It is important to have someone who communicates clearly, is a good listener, is genuinely interested in helping you meet or exceed your goals, and is well organized. Like any other professional whose services you engage, coaches must be screened as well. If there isn't a fit, keep searching until you find someone who is the right fit.

Like any relationship, the coaching relationship must be built on trust and mutual respect. You must trust this part of your trusted advisors to guide you through a strategic thinking process. The more information you share, the more beneficial the experience will be to you. When you have identified your need, you and your coach determine the frequency of the coaching sessions. Many initial executive coaching sessions last from 2 to 4 hours, with follow-up sessions varying from 1 to 2 hours. You can set the pace once your plan and strategies crystallize. Follow-up work can be done weekly, bi-weekly or monthly, depending on the timeframe for desired results. Some follow-up coaching can be done by telephone, which provides a different dynamic for communication. Together, you and your coach determine the length of the ongoing coaching relationship. This key relationship can last a few months or several years.

You might be asking yourself “Is executive coaching a trend?” The answer is “no.” It is clear through results that the coaching profession will continue to provide a valuable service to leaders. A quick poll of colleagues in executive search, placement and outplacement indicates that executive coaching is a high growth industry with no signs of easing up in the next few years. As executives’ lives continue to gain speed, and they are expected to manage more, do more, learn more, and handle more at a rapidly increasing rate, they will need the assistance of expert coaches to help them make better business decisions, polish their skills and balance their lives.

There are many resources to locate an executive coach if you determine this can make a significant difference in your role as a leader. First of all, your own company may work with an executive recruitment or outplacement firm, - this is the first place you can turn to for assistance. Many such firms offer executive coaching, or work on a referral basis with independent executive coaches. There are several excellent national resources for locating an executive coach who is right for you. The following provides links that will quickly get you to a list of coaches by geographic location and type of coaching offered. And, remember every professional athlete has a coach and they aspire to such greats as major contracts or the Olympics. Why should your journey as a leader be any different?

- The Center for Creative Leadership offers in-depth leadership development and coaching programs for executives from the U.S. and around the world. *Website address: www.ccl.org.*
- The International Coach Federation (ICF) has a membership base of business and personal coaches, and offers a member Coach Referral Service. *Website address: www.coachfederation.org.*
- The National Association of Business Coaches (NABC) provides a referral service of its members who are business-to-business coaches. *Toll-free number: (800) 290-3196.*
- The Coaches Training Institute (CTI) offers a CTI graduate referral service. *Website address: www.thecoaches.com.*
- The Hudson Institute offers a referral service for HI graduates. *Website address: www.hudsoninstitute.com.*

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