# The coach approach

*As more and more managers turn to coaches to help them in their work, Iain McCormick and Rachel McInnes discuss executive coaching, asking what is it and does it work?*

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Executive coaching has received huge attention in the media over the past few years with a wealth of new articles, books and web sites on the topic. A recent web-search using Google revealed 688,000 relevant web pages worldwide. Even narrowing the search to "executive coaching New Zealand" revealed 16,300 pages.

The exact history of executive coaching is difficult to trace because it has only recently been written about. However, it is likely that the term executive coaching was first used in business in the late 1980s, primarily by psychologists—often clinically trained—who felt it sounded less threatening than counselling, psychotherapy or behaviour change.

It gained popularity in the 1990s when the term was appropriated by a wide range of consulting companies, often in the outplacement or recruitment areas, who wanted to broaden their services.

## What is executive coaching?

Executive coaching is often poorly defined, however Richard Kilburg, in his book *Executive Coaching: Developing Managerial Wisdom in a World of Chaos*, describes it in the following manner:

- a helping relationship between a manager and a consultant;
- who uses a range of behavioural methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals;
- to improve professional performance, personal satisfaction and organisational effectiveness;
- within a formally defined coaching agreement.

In summary, coaching is about formally using a set of behavioural methods and tools to help executives improve performance and reach goals.

What, then, are the steps in executive coaching? While frequently poorly defined, executive coaching often occurs in seven stages:

1. Relationship building, where the coach, manager (and often the 'buyer' from the organisation) meet to decide if they can work together;
2. Assessment, often using 360 degree feedback and psychological testing to understand the coaching needs of the manager;
3. Feedback, when the manager reviews the assessment and a mutually agreed set of coaching needs are defined;
4. Planning, when a set of agreed actions and a timeframe for the coaching are agreed;
5. Implementation, where the agreed actions are put into place;
6. Evaluation, when interviews and questionnaires are used to assess the outcome of coaching;

### How do you make the most of your coaching?

To get best value out of your coaching be sure to:

1. Meet the coach before you start paying for sessions to ensure you can establish rapport with the person;
2. Have specific goals you want to achieve, preferably measurable performance goals—so at the end of the process you have a good measure of success;
3. Devote the time to the process—like all forms of learning it does require effort and persistence.

7. Follow-up, when the results of the evaluation are fed back to the manager and often the organisation.

### Why is executive coaching so popular?

There are many reasons why coaching has become so popular. For starters, New Zealand's sporting history has made us aware of the importance of coaching in success. The idea of using coaching in other areas of life outside of sport is therefore a small and easy step for many to understand and take.

For a lot of managers, the increasing demands of work and its growing complexity have highlighted the need for professional development. Not everyone, however, wants to commit to spending their time on getting an academic qualification or even attending a residential management development programme. Under these circumstances a coach who comes to the manager's office for an hour a week is an ideal solution.

There is also a growing recognition that people management skills are the key to success at work. These skills can be difficult to enhance without the honest direct feedback that a supportive coach can provide.

There are times, too, when people reach a plateau in their careers. They often develop a desire to understand more about themselves in order to restart their stalled career or to adjust to the reality of the plateau. Coaching can address these challenges in a highly targeted manner.

Yet another instance where coaching has proved beneficial is with chief executives, or board directors, who find themselves isolated and lacking critically constructive feedback. Gaining access to people who ask questions, provide advice, and give counsel can be invaluable for the 'lonely' CEO.

Likewise, many entrepreneurs find running their own businesses a challenging and at times a lonely process. An outsider who can bring a fresh perspective and provide motivational support is often highly regarded.

## How do you pick an executive coach?

Identifying a good coach is a similar process to identifying any professional. We suggest the following:

1. Ask around and find out who has a good reputation and who does not;
2. Find a coach who has a clear logical coaching process that makes sense to you;
3. Ask to check a range of reference clients that the coach has worked with and be sure that their executives are happy with the service;
4. Check the price of sessions—professional executive coaching sessions can run from about $100 per hour to over $300 excluding GST—you need to understand what you will pay;
5. Be sure the individual has relevant qualifications and experience in psychology, business or other important areas.

### Does executive coaching work?

Although executive coaching has gained increased attention in the media, there is surprisingly little research on its effectiveness. In a recent review in *Consulting Psychology Journal*, only seven research studies were found in the area. Two of these are summarised below.

The first was a field study using a survey and interviews to evaluate the effectiveness of coaching. The findings were:

- Coaching does contribute to sustained behaviour change, with 70 to 90 percent of executives rating coaching as "highly effective" and "somewhat effective" in the areas of improving awareness and responsibility;
- Interviews with 25 executives found that 84 percent reported positive feelings about their coaching. All executives (100 percent) also said that coaching had a positive effect in their personal lives by improving their interaction with other people, helping them establish balance in their lives, and helping them prioritise and make decisions about how they use their time.

The second study consisted of interviews with executives in six different Fortune 100 companies, executive coaches and HR personnel. In summary the study found:

- Executives stressed that "good coaching is results-oriented";
- They mentioned honesty, challenging feedback, and helpful suggestions as examples of good coaching;
- Executives rated the overall effectiveness of executive coaching as "very satisfying," on a four on a five-point scale.

While none of the research conducted on coaching so far would be regarded as being major scientific studies, the initial evidence is positive and partly explains the rapidly growing popularity of executive coaching.

With all the publicity it has received in the media, executive coaching is a rapidly growing area of consulting. While it is not a clearly defined process, it does typically involve a logical series of steps—from establishing rapport to planning through to evaluation.

There is some initial evidence that executive coaching is helpful to managers and that a results orientation is seen as important in the coaching process. Executive coaches should be selected with care and can be used effectively if you plan and organise the coaching process properly.

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