



WHY BOTHER WITH A COACH?

A skeptic's look at the booming field of executive coaching

Recently, I had lunch with an extremely successful friend. At the time, he ran a major office of a growing professional services firm. He had just been promoted to run the entire region with several metropolitan offices under his responsibility. Lunch progressed normally across over-sized downtown salads. He shared about the challenges facing him in his newly expanded role. I listened carefully, asking questions and occasionally offering an insight or observation.

Of course, my friend knows what I do for a living. He knows that I work with customer-facing leaders at growing technology and professional services firms. He knows that I had recently joined the growing group of people in the coaching field, people who spend the vast majority of their time helping others perform better in their jobs. He probably suspected that I would have liked to gain him as a client. He was right.

But as the lunch hour ran down, he made a statement that made me sit up and take notice. The waiter had just taken away our plates to leave us sipping our iced tea. My friend looked over at me skeptically.

"I know you've been recommending I get a coach. And you're not the first person. I have several people who want to coach me – or recommend their favorite coach to me – now that I have this new job. It makes me wonder what's wrong with me that everyone suddenly thinks I need all of this help."

We laughed together. I knew that he was at least half serious in this comment. And it *did* seem a little absurd. This guy is on the fast track to success. He consistently blows away performance goals. He harbors extraordinary ambition which fuels his effort and complements his natural ability.

"Well, I don't know. Maybe we all just know it's a big job, really believe in you, and want you to continue your track record of success."

My friend sipped his iced tea and then finally showed his cards.

"OK, I have an embarrassing confession to make."

"What's that?" I said curiously.

"I have a problem with coaching." He paused. "For that matter, I have a problem with professional services in general."

THE SHORT COURSE

- Executive coaching continues to grow as a field.
- Many successful people feel skeptical about whether coaching is right for them.
- We answer four of the top questions we hear from prospective clients about executive coaching.

WHY BOTHER WITH A COACH?— CONTINUED

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I’ve sold millions of dollars of consulting services to other people, but I have a hard time justifying paying someone to even do my taxes. I just don’t think they are worth it. I always figure, I’m a smart guy, I can figure it out on my own. Why get help?”

We both laughed at the irony of this statement coming from a leader in a consulting firm.

As I rode the train back out of the city that night, I started to write down the skeptic’s questions about coaching. I wanted to answer them for clients. Even more, I wanted to answer them for myself. Though I absolutely love coaching, helping high performers accomplish more of their goals and get more from their work, I have natural reservations about any movement that explodes onto the scene. And coaching has grown astronomically over the past few years.

I started with questions posed by my friend over lunch. But I added others that I had heard from other colleagues and even family members who are employed in much more concrete jobs as doctors, pilots, and computer engineers. I don’t claim to have answered these questions completely yet, but I offer here my current take on some appropriately skeptical questions.

“I’ve sold millions of dollars of consulting services to others, but I have a hard time justifying paying someone to do my taxes. Why get help?”

Question 1: “Why can’t I do this job on my own? I’m smart, I’m creative, and I’m competent.”

Perhaps you *can* succeed on your own. In fact, if you are getting all you want from your job and for your company the way you currently approach it, I heartily encourage you to continue on solo-fashion. If you are giving your best contribution with your current approach, by all means get on with it.

I must point out, however, that you will be in the distinct minority of high-performers by going solo. Look around at the top performers in nearly any pursuit. I challenge you to find more than a handful who excel over time without having a coach regularly engaged in their development. Whether they are top musicians, athletes, artists, or scientists, most of them have engaged a coach to help pull the best from them. These high performers are undeniably talented people, to the point where they clearly stand out on pure talent. But they realize that talent alone only carries someone so far. At some point, something – or someone – else must assist them to get the most from that talent.

The coaches engaged by these top performers rarely have more than a fraction of the talent of their clients. They excel at something else: the ability to see things others miss and get their clients to embark on a journey of improvement. They may never be as visible as their client, but they play a vital role. This leads to the second skeptic’s question.

Question 2: “What tangible value comes from coaching? Won’t this person just turn into a professional friend?”

Here’s the truth: it all depends. At its best, coaching provides clients with a few clear benefits: clarity, choices, and accountability. Competent coaches work very hard to help clients gain clarity first and foremost on what the client wants to achieve. Coaching without a clear, tangible goal will often drift into professional friendship. Coaches also help clients gain clarity on what is really happening in their work and where they should focus for better results. They watch, listen, and ask questions, always looking for clues about their client’s situation. They lead their client in a discovery process, waiting for the light to go on, when together they find the key to unlocking the work situation in front of the client.

Once the client sees the situation differently, the coach helps her brainstorm choices she could make to make progress toward her goals. This step often takes some time because clients often feel boxed in by their current situation. The coach keeps focusing on choices the client could make, supporting them until they make a firm decision to change.

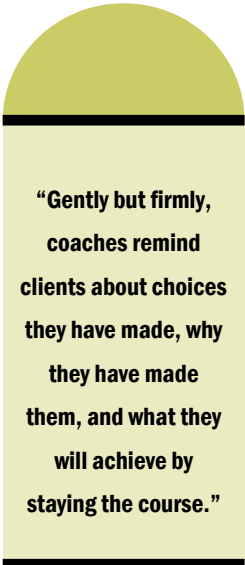
Now the fun begins. The client begins to put choices into action. They try a new skill, explore a new opportunity, try a new way of relating to a colleague. Invariably the results are mixed in the early days and it’s easy to lose heart. This is where coaches really earn their keep. Gently but firmly, they remind clients about the choices they have made, why they have made them, and what they are going to achieve as a result of staying the course. Coaches also seize on these real-life moments to help clients learn at a much deeper level. Let’s face it, most people don’t learn as much in a sterile classroom setting as they could by being aware of their everyday learning opportunities. Too often, people miss these opportunities because they are too busy or preoccupied with their normal lives to see the golden chance right in front of them. A coach helps turn lost learning into what Dave Wondra, a colleague of mine, calls “found learning.”

Question 3: “Isn’t it a sign of weakness to have a coach? What will my boss, colleagues, and subordinates think?”

I could lie to you. I could say that corporate ladder-climbers embrace help and admire those who get help for themselves. The truth is, some people will always see an openness to help as a sign of weakness. Insecure people will always need to show their supposed invincibility. But as we said earlier, those who engage a coach stand in good company with some of the most talented people in our world. They stand to benefit enormously from a real-time approach to learning.

A better way to look at this: securing the help you need to get the most from your potential demonstrates strength. In the end, you live with your life anyway, so who cares what the others think?

This question does, however, bring up an important point for organizational leaders. Coaching has often been used in recent years for people who are “in trouble” in their own company. John has relationship problems with peers, so we get him a coach to “fix” him. This positions coaching in a very limited sense – one that will dog any coaching in the company for years to come. It is much more effective to begin



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WHY BOTHER WITH A COACH? — CONTINUED

coaching with open-minded high performers. Pretty soon, coaching will be seen as a privilege reserved for high potential employees. Those “in trouble” can always be folded in later, but the early focus should be on helping high performers achieving more of their goals. This gives the company the best chance possible of maximizing its return on the coaching effort.

Question #4: How would I get the most from coaching?

First and foremost, select your coach carefully. Ask questions about their background, their approach, the sorts of issues they most successfully address, and of course, their references. Certifications are useful, but the proof of the pudding is the track record of success. And as always, trust your gut for how you will mesh with this person. They will be quite involved with you and your company. You may as well be comfortable with them.

Second, set yourself a tangible goal. You may not be able to nail down the goal before starting your coaching work, but it should be one of the first things you discuss with your coach. A good coach will be able to help you identify a reasonable goal.

Third, give yourself time. Coaching efforts are usually measured in months not days or weeks. Most coaching clients feel a little impatient in the early days, wanting to see instant gratification. Coaching is more like a crock pot and less like a microwave. It takes time to simmer new habits and behaviors, let alone see them translate into results.

My friend has not yet decided to try coaching. As far as I know, he is trying to beat the odds, depending on his own considerable brilliance to bring himself to the next level. It remains possible that he will succeed. He’s that talented. But I wonder just how far he could go with the help of a competent coach.