

Getting a coach: the questions to ask and some ways forward

(This article draws in part on earlier comments made by Tony McNulty as published in the Financial Times, 31st January, 2000)

Contrary to what it says in much of the literature, executive coaching has been around for several decades. It has, however, grown significantly in the last five years.

There are several reasons:

- Relying solely on the “sheep dip” approach of external courses has often failed to address some development needs. Coaching can be **targeted** at an individual’s perceived needs, uncovered in part through “360-degree” feedback (see the following for a tried and tested 360-degree approach: www.mcultymanagementconsultants.com/360info; and www.mcultymanagementconsultants.com/360output)
- When the coach is effective, executives are made much more **accountable** for their agreed actions. By means of the “plan/do/review cycle”, what is agreed at one coaching meeting is followed up at a future session. If the agreed plan fails, a new one can be formulated and the cycle repeated until the issue is satisfactorily addressed
- Many executives have reported favourably on their coaching experiences, citing in particular: the benefits of having a “**sounding board**”; their coach as a **source of new ideas**; coaching as a way of **reducing stress**; their coach as a **confidant**; and, in some cases, their coach as someone who “**tells it as it is**”
- Some organisations have reported very successful outcomes of coaching (**retention of staff**, demonstrable **behavioural changes**, increased **managerial effectiveness**).

In truth, it should also be added that:

- Having an executive coach has been seen as a **status symbol** by some managers
- Coaching has proved to be a **lucrative business for consultants** (up to 30% of salary package for a year-long coaching relationship)
- Coaching is **enjoyable and developmental for the coach**, giving them an opportunity to deploy their expertise in helping to solve real management problems (which some consultants would otherwise never do).

What has changed more recently is the large number of “coaching consultants” who have emerged. In addition to the traditional group of management and organisation consultants (like ourselves), there are now: executive recruiters; academics; psychotherapists; counsellors; psychologists; ‘life coaches’; as well as former managers and directors seeking a new career. Self-evidently, the training, track records, philosophies, quality and effectiveness of these various coaches all differ considerably, as well as the services they offer.

Those hiring executive coaches should be especially concerned about:

- **Qualifications and training** Does the coach have appropriate academic or other training from a *reputable* and well-established institution?
- **Experience and skills** What is their background? Have they moved into this area only recently? Can they provide client references? Do they have the necessary set of skills (e.g. listening, giving candid feedback)?

- **Organisational understanding** Do they have a “real world” understanding of organisations? Are they able to give sound advice?
- **Chemistry and fit** Do they fit with the organisation? Will they be able to establish a rapport with the people they are coaching? Will they be respected by them and will they be able to help?
- **Models and approaches** Do they have proven models, techniques and materials (e.g. for 360-degree data gathering, time log analysis, assessment, leadership style feedback?) Can they integrate their approaches with what the client already does and has (e.g. performance management approaches and any existing assessment data?)
- **Values and philosophy** What is the scope of what they are trying to do? For instance, is it helping managers to become more effective in their day-to-day work environments (our main focus) or opening up wider questions about people’s life choices (this appears to be the domain of the “life coach gurus”). It is a continuing surprise to us how often “coaches” are hired whose values seem to clash sharply with those organisations paying for their services.

For the four main coaching approaches used by McNulty Management Consultants, see the following link: www.mcultymanagementconsultants.com/coaching

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