

Selecting an Executive Coach

A Guide



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Selecting an Executive Coach

Introduction

Executive coaching is flourishing in the UK; 90% of UK organisations report now using coaches. Coaching is also a *developing* profession and one in which there are no barriers to entry. It is not, at least yet, a regulated profession and anyone, regardless of qualifications, experience, intent or personal attributes, can set up and call themselves a coach.

In a highly competitive market and one in which the choice is so wide, how can you make effective, successful decisions when choosing executive coaches to work in your organisation?

This paper aims to address three core aspects of this decision making process:

- What makes an exceptional coach?
- When to select an internal or an external coach
- What are the key selection criteria?

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What makes an exceptional coach?

When you are selecting executive coaches to work within your organisation, you will clearly want to select those who will be most effective and successful in their work with your people. You will want to source the best coaches you can. But what does it mean to be an exceptional executive coach and what does it take?

A recent study of the practices and personal attributes of exceptional executive coaches provides valuable information both for purchasers of executive coaching services and executive coaches themselves. Gavin R. Dagley's study sought to understand what the typical purchasers of executive



coaches (human resources professionals) considered to be the outcomes of exceptional executive coaching and what the underlying factors to these outcomes were. His study found that the single most important outcome was “behaviour change” measured both by the executives themselves and by their colleagues. Critically, such change was *sustained*.

These changes manifested themselves in:

- Personal outcomes (eg. increased self-confidence, motivation, etc)
- Realisation of potential (eg. career development, retention, etc)

So what did these coaches do that weaker executive coaches did not? Capabilities included:

- Credibility
- Empathy and respect
- Holding the professional self
- Diagnostic skill and insight
- Approach flexibility and range
- Working to the business context
- A philosophy of personal responsibility

- Skilful challenging

Dagley's findings indicate that these capabilities are not necessarily absent in weaker coaches but that exceptional executive coaches *“are able to deliver against all and any of these quite basic characteristics and deliver at an observably superior level of expertise”*.

As a consequence, executives typically experienced:

- Engagement
- Deeper conversations
- Insight and responsibility

In comparing exceptional coaches with weaker coaches, comments included *“the weaker coach just plays out what is in front of him, and then drags out one of his tools or techniques...”* while exceptional coaches are *“able to get to deeper conversations more quickly, and motivate people to take personal responsibility for their own development and growth”*.

Dagley concludes that exceptional coaches display *“exquisite expertise”* and that they are differentiated from other coaches by *“the essentially human and personal qualities that underpin such expertise”*.¹ On the face of it, this might sound somewhat 'fanciful' but there is a world of difference in coaches working at this profound, transformational level and those with less experience or expertise who work simply at the task focused, GROW model level.

When to select an internal or an external coach

As coaching continues to grow within UK organisations, there is a corresponding growth in the use of internal coaches within organisations. To date, there is no evidence base to indicate the relative merits and advantages of each, although this is an area beginning to be

¹ To read the full study, see **Exceptional executive coaches: Practices and attributes – International Coaching Psychology Review Volume 5 No. 1 March 2010.**

formally assessed and measured. So, given what we know now, when is it more appropriate to use an internal coach and when an external one?

Internal coaches will usually:

- Have a more extensive knowledge of the organisation, its culture, values, strengths, strategic direction, history, politics and problems.
- Be better placed to work within and across organisational structures, reporting lines and teams. They may have knowledge of, or working relationships with, team members, managers, etc and be in a position to support change and break down barriers and obstacles.
- Be able to provide the executive (and any sponsors) with feedback regarding performance and behaviour change in real time and from more direct observation.
- Be less expensive and sometimes considerably so.

**90% of UK
organisations use
executive coaches**

External coaches will usually:

- Have no political agenda within the company and are likely to be more objective and impartial.
- Be able to build trust and ensure confidentiality more easily. Greater openness is more likely to happen.
- Not be subject to conflicts of interest or role (eg., assessing ex-coachees for promotion, holding multiple sets of confidential information).
- Have greater expertise and experience and frequently may have niche specialisms.
- They can usually engage in a “purer” non-directive coaching mode since they are not influenced by company knowledge or agendas.
- Be more expensive although they are usually only paid for the hours used.

Research does indicate that a strong indicator of successful coaching outcomes is the trust and relationship quality existing between the executive and coach. There is evidence to indicate that executives trust external coaches more than internal coaches and are more likely to reveal difficulties and capability issues with them. This consideration may help to

determine whether the coach most appropriate in a particular situation is internal or external.

Current knowledge suggests that external coaches are most effective working at higher management levels within organisations, in cultures of low trust, and with more complex/sensitive difficulties. Internal coaches are likely to be more cost effective to support internal training programmes and as part of management development programmes.

Whether internal or external, the quality of the coach is of paramount importance. So what are buyers of coaching services typically looking for?

The most important characteristic companies are looking for when selecting external executive coaches is personal chemistry according to research from a recent Ridler report. The study found that of the companies surveyed, 81% considered personal chemistry to be “highly relevant” or “essential”. Next in importance were ‘depth and rigour of professional coach training’ with 58% of respondents indicating that this was “highly relevant” or “essential”, followed by evidence of high professional coaching standards (eg. regular supervision) with 55%, and ‘professional reputation in the marketplace’ (53%).



The study also found that external coaches are more commonly used among senior managers than internal coaches. Coaching was most frequently used in leadership development programmes for top talent, with 63% of surveyed companies doing so. Coaching to support the transition into a newly promoted appointment was next, with 59% of respondents indicating this was “often” or “very often” used.

The Ridler Report is based upon annual research into executive coaching and has been published over the past five years providing a picture of changing trends within the profession. Clive Mann, editor of the Ridler Report and managing director of Ridler & Co, said: “*The Ridler Report research programme has, over its first four years, surfaced evidence*

of an increased emphasis among users of executive coaching on coaching professionalism when assessing executive coaches' effectiveness."

The report also indicates that most companies using internal coaches also use external coaches, particularly for senior executive level employees, and above. 69% of CEOs and main board directors, and 52% of senior executives, "always" or "usually" used external rather than internal coaches.

What are the key selection criteria?

A frequent, and reasonable, criticism aimed at the coaching profession concerns the limited evidence which might quantify the positive benefit a coaching programme has had on an

69% of CEOs use external coaches

individual's performance. Whilst this is an issue of long standing, it is not simply around the problems inherent in measuring ROI.

We have known for some time that any intervention or change in a situation involving people, will usually lead to an initial boost in performance. This is known as the Hawthorne effect and has been very widely studied in the 90 years since it was first described. Potentially it means that any intervention may lead to an initial improvement in performance. However, the improvement won't be enduring or particularly in-line with the coaching objectives defined at the outset. This is often the seductive quality of less skilled or inexperienced coaches; their intervention might make people *feel* good. It might also generate positive feedback about the experience, and satisfy the purchaser in the short term since less skilled coaching practitioners are often cheaper. But if the benefits initially felt are not maintained, this represents poor value to the organisation and the individual, and ultimately, reputational damage to the coaching profession.

Most professional coaches and most buying organisations are looking for lasting and profound performance improvement: to achieve real personal growth and change that does not slide back to an earlier state when the intervention has ended. Effective coaching programmes will focus on how to deliver enduring benefit through coaching and ensure value. Typically, assessment of the effectiveness of the coaching assignment takes place at a

relatively early stage of the process (immediately on completion of the programme) when very often Hawthorne-type effects are still operating. [Using Hawthorne-type effects to support progress *within* coaching assignments is of course beneficial and can help to embed changes to behaviour]. This of course is problematic for coaches too because it means it is very difficult to assess the effectiveness of work and apply enhancements in the right area. Ideally therefore buyers of coaching services should seek extended assessment periods to a point in time after the Hawthorne effect is likely to be in effect. At Managing Change, we typically hold three reviews of each coaching programme:

1. A mid-point review, roughly halfway through a defined number of sessions. This is designed to informally assess progress against objectives and ensures that all parties (coachee, sponsor and coach) can assess whether progress is on track and correct things if they are not. Interestingly (but not surprisingly!) because coach, coachee and sponsor know that this will happen that focus tends to mean that programmes are rarely off track.
2. A formal meeting to review the outcomes and progress against the initially defined business objectives is held on completion of the programme.
3. In addition we then review this progress at a later date – usually anywhere from three to twelve months after the assignment has ended, according to the situation and context.



In our use of this extended assessment, anecdotal feedback has confirmed that the benefits derived from coaching are more assured and consolidated. This approach helps to ensure that enhanced performance has been achieved and is enduring, thus producing business benefit and realised value.

So what else should buyers of coaching services be looking for?

Key selection criteria

- Psychologically minded – a good coach will be insightful and profoundly interested in human behaviour – in what makes us tick. Along with this should be a genuine commitment to support the development of another person.
- Qualified – it shouldn't need to be said that a coach should have received appropriate training. Coaching qualifications, ideally coupled with a credible psychology qualification, will ensure that the coach is suitably knowledgeable about human behaviour, theories of learning and motivation, and so on.
- A professional coach is like any other professional and ideally will subscribe to one or more professional coaching body (eg., Association for Coaching, International Coach Federation, European Mentoring and Coaching Council). Note, that for a fee, membership is often easy – check the level of membership they have and what it means with the body in question. Probe their involvement in this body – what do they learn from and contribute to it?
- All coaches should adhere to a rigorous code of professional ethics and should be able to describe what these are. Again, all professional coaching bodies provide these and expect their members to adhere to them. For example, check:
 - How the coach will secure confidential notes and data and that they are registered with the [Information Commissioner's Office](#) to hold such sensitive data.
 - What steps will they take if they establish that a client is experiencing psychological distress or illness?
 - What they will do if they discover that the client has problems with addiction or abuse?
- A good professional coach is an expert – they have skills to contribute to the process of personal development and growth. The executive however is the expert in him or herself and should at all times remain responsible for the content and goals of a

coaching programme. Be wary of coaches who promote expertise which translates into them directing the executive into a particular course of action or direction.

- It is essential that the coach establishes an effective coaching ‘contract’ with the executive. This should provide for clear coaching goals and outcomes, the expectations of both parties, and the means to ensure that the executive is a willing and engaged participant in the process.
- All good professional coaches will practice what they preach. In other words they will take their own continuing professional development (CPD) very seriously. They will be able to demonstrate their CPD log of training, events, courses, reading, etc which they regularly undertake in order to hone their skills and experience.
- All good professional coaches will receive regular qualified supervision – on a group and/or individual basis. This is another essential part of good coaching practise – I recommend that you rule out coaches who are not receiving regular supervision, particularly those who say they don’t need it.

It is not unusual to encounter coaches who have qualifications in abundance but who in practice have not been effective. A coaching qualification alone does not make for a good coach. As with all other disciplines, a good effective coach will have both the theoretical and the practical knowledge and capability to do a good job. Be sure to ask for references or recommendations of previous coaching assignments and be sure to follow them up.



The professional coaching community is a thriving and dynamic environment full of excellent, committed coaches passionate about what they do and making a real difference to the lives of people and companies. When you choose an executive coach, be sure you choose one of these.