



# Do I Need a Coach? Understanding the Purpose and Outcomes of Professional Coaching in Higher Education

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# About AAL

AAL is a collaborative of scholars, coaches, educational specialists, and leaders who assist organizations and individuals to strengthen their unique value through results-driven consulting, coaching, and professional development. AAL's clients and partners include universities, associations, and corporations worldwide.

More information about AAL and its clients, programs, and consulting staff can be found at [www.AALgroup.org](http://www.AALgroup.org).

# About the Author

**Dr. Judith Albino** is a certified coach with extensive experience in higher education. Her executive coaching includes individual leadership, career, and candidate coaching, as well as team development and leadership. Dr. Albino's experience includes several roles at the dean and vice president levels, as well as serving as a faculty member in medicine, dentistry, public health, and psychology. She is President Emerita of the University of Colorado and former President of Alliant International University. Dr. Albino has over 40 years of scientific research, including service as a leader of NIH health disparities research center and Co-Director and Scientific Editor of the Surgeon General's Report on Oral Health. Dr. Albino received her doctorate degree in psychology from the University of Texas at Austin and the Certificate in Professional Coaching from the Zicklin School of Business of Baruch College, City University of New York.

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# Do I Need a Coach?

## Understanding the Purpose and Outcomes of Professional Coaching in Higher Education

### Introduction

Coaching is generally a short-term process (three to 24 months) between the coach and the client. This process examines underlying patterns of behavior and perception and utilizes the insight gained for change in the client.<sup>1</sup> The coach has to focus on assisting the client to acquire the requisite attitudes, behaviors, and skills necessary to effectively perform his or her job within the agreed upon objectives or success parameters.<sup>2</sup>

Institutions, companies and individuals become involved in coaching because there is either a need for behavioral change, a desire for enhancement of knowledge and skills, or an assumption that high-quality professional learning will provide opportunities for advancement. Coaching, through self-assessment and the practice of new behaviors, enables high-potential employees to eliminate barriers and advance into leadership positions by reflecting and adjusting personal styles and approaches to people and learning the rules and expectations of the new position.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the single most common “coaching situation” occurs when one transitions to a new role. Sometimes the change is simply moving from a position at one organization to another position at a different one. At other times the transition involves changing the nature of one’s responsibilities, e.g., moving from an employee to a manager or from a department chair (or division chief) to associate dean or to dean. Transitions such as these create the

unanticipated challenges that cause a person to realize that “what got me here may not get me there.” In these situations, coaching is a tried-and-true mechanism for developing both self-awareness and critical leadership skills.

Anyone who engages a coach should be open to exploring many areas, some requiring intervention and others requiring development from a coach, such as the following:

- Gaining confidential and objective feedback focused upon enabling self-awareness and reflection;
- Challenging thinking and problem-solving focused upon moving strategically towards realistic and higher-level career goals;
- Enhancing communication approaches and styles that lead to clear, effective, and timely communication;
- Building management, leadership, and team-building skills;
- Building skills discovered through a 360-degree appraisal;
- Evaluating behavioral patterns that impact the individual’s decision making to align that process with that of the institution;

- Adapting and working more efficiently/effectively within an organization that is changing;
- Developing career paths and opportunities;
- Transitioning from one part of a career to another;
- Advancing into higher levels of leadership, either within the existing organization or a new one;
- Enhancing capacity to manage or lead an organization including skill building in areas of visioning, strategic planning, organizing, team building, leading and developing others;
- Enhancing skills in the areas of self-awareness, strengths, and opportunities, and identifying deficiencies and behaviors that limit advancement;
- Changes indicating there are needs for new or different skills for the organization or a new position.<sup>1, 4, 5, 6</sup>

Although coaching has been common in the corporate sector for many years, it is relatively new in the academic world. For those of us in academia, our early careers focused almost exclusively on individual accomplishments:

writing papers, applying for grants, mastering the art of teaching, conducting research, and improving clinical skills. If we were fortunate enough to receive assistance and guidance on these matters, it typically came from mentors senior to us in the same (or similar) field who helped to facilitate our scholarly advancement up the academic ladder. Often when faculty

members move from individual to organizational roles and become involved in managing and leading the work of others, they begin to see that academic experience alone has not prepared them for administrative responsibilities. They discover that the larger context beyond one’s academic specialty becomes more important and that our new roles require both new skills and new ways of thinking. Coaches can help with this transition.

When professional coaching is done well, it may be the most effective intervention designed for human performance. For the those with whom coaches work, there is an acknowledgement that even highly educated and experienced faculty and administrators have room for improvement. “No matter how well-trained people are, few can sustain their best performance on their own. That’s where coaching comes in.”<sup>4</sup> Additionally, faculty increasingly are choosing coaches to help them take the next step in their careers, or sometimes to help determine what that next

step should be. Some people tend to think of professional coaching as “executive coaching” – strictly for those at the top of the organization chart but that is

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Coaching can help the faculty member...

- improve workplace performance,
  - deal with a difficult situation at work,
  - avoid feeling stuck with current responsibilities,
  - develop his or her career, and
  - take on more leadership responsibilities.
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not the case. Many faculty members seek coaching to explore new positions and work as candidates to optimize their opportunities and their responses to those opportunities.

**Coaching Faculty Members**

Many tend to think that coaching is also mentoring; however, there are distinct

differences between coaching and mentoring. Burdett states that “Coaching is exclusively a process focusing on enhanced performance. Coaching should not be confused with counseling or mentoring. The former addresses the employee’s emotional state. The latter is a means whereby a seasoned colleague – at a more senior level – shares his/her experience with a view to ‘fast track’ the career growth of a high-performance employee. This form of coaching is typically accomplished through one-on-one interactions and utilizes specific strategies such as goal setting, feedback, and collaborative problem solving.”<sup>7</sup>

Coaching faculty members is not very different from coaching those who are in leadership roles, and it can be especially productive, because the time to begin practicing leadership is when one is not consumed by a leadership role. This is when the faculty has the best opportunity to try on new skills, to take some risks, to reflect on strengths, to assess skills, and to ask for feedback. When the faculty is not burdened by broad leadership responsibilities, the stakes are not quite so high -- and your mistakes will not be quite so visible. What that means is a greater opportunity to learn. Coaching often can accelerate that learning.

Coaching focuses on demands related to academic organizations and has its foundations in management theory, motivational psychology, and human performance. It is most beneficial when it is focused on specific goals. With candidate coaching or coaching that is directed at specific work situations, those goals usually are relatively clear. For developmental coaching, aimed at general growth in effectiveness, it is often important to get additional feedback or input on the process.

This can be done in the form of a 360-degree approach, whereby others are asked to respond to questions about the faculty member who is being coached. Either a standardized assessment tool or individual interviews, conducted by the coach, can provide this information. Then, the coach uses this information for the creation of a professional development plan that identifies specific goals and behaviors for the focus of the coaching. These plans are greatly aided by input from others. When 360 feedback is not possible, the coach may rely on one or two others for input, or simply move forward after some discussion and analysis of situations and challenges. With mutual agreement,

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#### How Coaches Help Us See More Clearly

- A coach can hold a mirror to your individual behavior to help you see yourself as others see you—something not easily done alone
- A coach can help you recognize opportunities for growth and provide a safe environment in which you can try out new behaviors and adjust your leadership style to meet new needs
- A coach can observe and address your behaviors in real time, as they occur, to help you “think through” challenging times, provide reality testing when needed, and offer support when doubts emerge

sometimes “homework” assignments are given, which may involve practicing a new approach to dealing with a challenging situation, for example. Although one can gain greater understanding of strengths and capacities through coaching, practicing new behaviors is the key to goal attainment and greater success. The coach and client together

monitor progress towards goals throughout the coaching engagement.

Researchers have found that teachers who participated in coaching scored significantly above average on the dimension of efficacy, were more self-directed, maximized their contributions to the workplace, and reported increases in job and career satisfaction. Administrators also reported that coaching refined their people skills, self-awareness, and understanding of personal strengths.<sup>7, 8, 9, 10</sup>

### **The Coaching Process**

Good coaches are credible, make strong personal connections with their clients, and don't focus coaching sessions on themselves. Instead, they focus on the needs of those persons they are coaching. They quickly establish a coaching agenda and timeline focused upon the objectives of the client as well as any organization or institution involved. Objectives may be identified by the client, by an employer, or through a 360-degree evaluation of the individual. Gawande suggests that good coaches know how to break down performance into its critical individual components, perhaps even demonstrating some of those components, noting different ways for personal reflection, exploration to learn or enhance skills and behaviors.<sup>4</sup> Coaches listen more than they talk and coach by asking questions, pushing the client to think critically and reflect upon the questions and whether there are opportunities for growth. The coach should be direct in dealing with the client, respectful, analytical, and personally observant, and should also be able to discuss his or her observations of the client in a constructive and proactive manner.

Most coaches will be open to assessments beyond those described above. There are a

variety of techniques that can help an individual both develop greater awareness of strengths and challenges, and develop new strategies for maximizing their performance using their strengths. Obviously, commitment and honest efforts are important to achieving one's goals through coaching. Faculty members tend to get the most from coaching when they are able to commit to regular sessions. Twice monthly is a common choice for many, but most of us are flexible on the issue of scheduling. Faculty members who have done some leadership training often are ready for coaching and can make rapid progress on their goals.

The primary purpose of coaching--whether in the corporate world or academe--is to create a one-on-one learning environment that accelerates professional development. Coaching facilitates this kind of learning and mastery by helping clients:

- Identify strengths and other areas that "need work"
- Understand the specific skills needed in one's current (or anticipated) role
- Recognize how others view one's work and leadership style
- Set goals that are relevant to one's current work-role context
- Use strengths as a platform from which to address the areas needing work
- Develop the set of key skills on which leadership relies
- Address challenges that may have seemed insurmountable
- Find new perspectives for dealing with difficult situations or people

The coach must adhere to high standards of ethical conduct and honor the confidentiality and privacy of the person involved in the coaching experience. This issue is particularly important when dealing with a varied group of stakeholders such as the client, his or her supervisor, and the institution or company. Confidentiality may be addressed by developing a clear set of confidentiality guidelines relative to measuring coaching impact and behavioral changes of the individual involved at the beginning of the relationship to avoid problems during or at the end of the process.<sup>11</sup>

To benefit from a coaching experience, the client should be engaged in the process, respectful, responsible in competing tasks and assignments, open to the coaching experience, reflective, realistic about the potential outcomes of the coaching experience, and future oriented.

### **Conclusion**

In major corporations, it is the unusual executive who does not make use of coaching. In major universities, it is still unusual for leaders to take that step. Fortunately, that is changing. As more academic administrators avail themselves of coaching, its value for both individual success and organizational strength are becoming evident. Soon, it may be the unusual academic leader who does not make use of coaching for development.

Professional coaching has positive research outcomes and is a development approach that is beneficial to the individual and the organization by aligning the individual with the organization and its mission. It begins where the client is and is expertly tailored to his or her needs and development goals. The growth, personal satisfaction, and advancement of an institution's faculty and

academic leaders are of prime importance for retention and advancement of the educational mission. For these reasons, individuals and institutions should carefully consider the benefits of coaching and invest resources in coaching to facilitate ongoing professional and institutional growth.

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