



Do I Need a Coach? Understanding the Purpose and Outcomes of Professional Coaching

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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.

About the Authors

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Do I Need a Coach?

Understanding the Purpose and Outcomes of Professional Coaching

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.¹ The coach must focus on assisting the client in acquiring the requisite attitudes, behaviors, and skills necessary to perform his or her job effectively within the agreed upon objectives or success parameters.²

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.³ 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. Transitions such as these create

unanticipated challenges that cause a person to realize “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 on 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 affecting the individual’s decision-making to align that process with that of the company or institution;
- Adapting and working more efficiently/effectively within a changing organization;
- 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.^{1, 4, 5, 6}

Although coaching has been standard in the corporate sector for many years, it is relatively new in healthcare and academia. For those in higher education, 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 advancement. Often when employees move from individual to organizational roles and become involved in managing and leading the work of others, they begin to see experience alone has not prepared them for administrative responsibilities. They discover the broader context beyond one's specialty becomes essential and that our new roles require both new skills and new ways of thinking. Coaches can help with this transition.

When done well, professional coaching

may be the most effective intervention designed for human performance. For those with whom coaches work, there is an acknowledgment that even highly educated and experienced employees have room for improvement. "No matter how well-trained people are, few can sustain their best performance on their own. That is where coaching comes in."⁴ Additionally, managers and leaders are increasingly 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 not the case. Many employees explore new positions and work as candidates to optimize their opportunities and their responses to those opportunities.

Coaching can help...

- 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

The Coaching Relationship

Many tend to think coaching is also mentoring; however, there are distinct differences between coaching and mentoring. Burdett states "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 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.”⁷

The time to begin practicing leadership is when a leadership role is not consuming. This is when a person 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 broad leadership responsibilities do not burden the employee, the stakes are not quite so high—and your mistakes will not be quite so visible. What that means is a more significant opportunity to learn. Coaching often can accelerate that learning.

Coaching has its foundations in management theory, motivational psychology, and human performance. It is most beneficial when focused on specific goals. With candidate coaching or coaching 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 move

forward after some discussion and analysis of situations and challenges. With mutual agreement, sometimes “homework” assignments are given, which may involve practicing a new approach to dealing with a challenging situation, for example. Although one can gain a 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 those 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.^{7, 8, 9, 10}

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 good coaches 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.⁴ 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 constructively and proactively.

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. Commitment and honest efforts are important in achieving one's goals through coaching. Coaching clients tend to get the most from coaching when they can commit to regular sessions. Twice monthly is a common choice for many, but most coaches are flexible on the issue of scheduling. People who have done some leadership training are often ready for coaching and can make rapid progress on their goals.

The primary purpose of coaching 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 a set of critical skills on which leadership relies

- Address challenges that may have seemed insurmountable
- Find new perspectives in 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.¹¹

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 and healthcare organizations, it is still unusual for leaders to take that step. Fortunately, that is changing. As more current, new, and aspiring leaders avail themselves of coaching, its value for both individual success and organizational strength are becoming evident. Soon, it may be unusual to find a healthcare or higher education 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 employees and leaders are of prime importance for retention and advancement of the organizational 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.

For information about AAL's coaching services, visit AALgroup.org/executive-coaching.

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