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Executive Development

Integrating coaching, assessment, mentoring & teaching

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Executive development is an important specialization for professional coaches, which continues to gain credibility and market growth. Specific training and certification programs exist for coaches to move into this global field. Graduate schools of universities are including executive coaching as a core element of their executive MBA programs. However, executive development requires more than “pure” coaching models to be effective.

What is Executive Coaching?

The MEECO Institute states on its website that executive coaches specialize in the areas of behavior, motivation, communication, performance, and culture (<http://meeco-institute.org/about-the-mcec-certification/>).

Executive coaches create professional relationships with their clients to support leaders in understanding their strengths and areas for growth in order to create actions to deliver on

their goals and the goals of their organizations. Understanding the leader’s organizational context is especially critical in executive coaching. In addition, coaching executive teams requires skills in facilitation and understanding group dynamics.

The role of Assessment & Feedback

A critical element of executive development involves expanding the self-awareness within executives of how their behaviors are impacting others within the organizations they lead.

One major challenge for executives is getting accurate and candid feedback from others. Stakeholder interviews and formalized 360 online assessments have become a staple of executive development. A professional coach who has been trained in qualitative interviewing can gather important feedback from key stakeholders in an anonymous way to provide critical information to the executive coaching client.

In addition, validated, commercial 360 tools can also be

used, such as the Leadership Circle Profile 360 or the Korn Ferry Voices 360, which require certification training to interpret the feedback reports. The feedback gained from key stakeholders enables the coach and executive to understand the larger system and how the executive's behaviors impact the organizational system. This information can be used to identify strengths and required behavioral changes.

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In addition to stakeholder feedback, personality and style assessments, such as DISC, the Birkman Method, Hogan, Enneagram, and MBTI, can also enhance an executive's awareness of their usual behaviors, interests, values, and needs.

Drawing on Your Experience & Expertise

It's often said that coaching is a process that does not require specific domain or subject matter expertise; however, executive coaching seems to be an exception. To qualify for the Master Corporate Executive Coach (MCEC) certification, the MEECO Institute requires that candidates have experience being responsible for the profitability of an organization (other than their own) and the management of the bottom line.

The assumption here is that executive coaches need to have some experience in leading organizations to appreciate the challenges that executives face. Most effective senior executive coaches that I work with have a rich history of working in organizations. Drawing upon this expertise allows the executive coach to specialize in areas such as board management, public speaking, political savvy, or organizational change.

Most executives expect their coach to have some domain expertise related to the areas around which they are coaching. In my own experience, having been an internal corporate organization development specialist for many years enables me to draw upon many change models, theories, and practical experiences when working with executives.

How Teaching & Mentoring Play a Role

An important element of executive development includes providing visibility to new knowledge, skills and competen-

cies required to effectively lead an organization. While the executive coach's primary role is not to teach, at times a coach may need to bring in resources or recommend training programs to their clients to close the knowledge gap that may exist in their clients.

Julie Hay, in her book, *Reflective Practice and Supervision for Coaches*, makes a helpful distinction between *traditional coaching* where the focus is on developing skills and competencies versus *developmental coaching* where the focus is on exploring the client's own "world maps" and options.

In traditional coaching, the coach serves more as an expert, mentor, teacher and role model, where in developmental coaching the coach serves the role of a thinking partner and purposely avoids offering opinions or advice so that the executive can explore their own thinking and decisions. I find this distinction very helpful in considering what role the "executive coach" needs to be at any given time to best serve the needs and goals of their clients.

Bringing it All Together

One best practice in executive development is to be clear about the role and processes you are using at any given time. The International Coach Federation (ICF) has developed standards that help distinguish the "pure coaching" process from mentoring, teaching, and consulting. I recommend that executive coaches carefully contract with their clients regarding the modes and methods they plan to use to best serve the developmental needs and objectives of executives.

For example, when moving from a coaching process into a teaching process it's helpful to signal to the client that you are making that move. Also, it is critical that you not try to mentor someone or provide consulting in an area that is beyond your expertise. Executive coaches need to have a broad network of other helping professionals that they can refer out to, such as accountants, lawyers, and human resource professionals.

Summary

Executive development is an important specialization for professional coaches which requires a combination of skills, expertise, and processes to be effective. Coaching, assessment, mentoring, and teaching all play a role in developing executives. Executive coaches often rely on their own experiences as leaders in organizations to inform their coaching practice.

It's important to contract with clients regarding which modes you plan to use in the developmental journey and to signal to the client when you are moving out of coach mode into another learning modality. ●