

What Makes Executive Coaching Work?

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Have you ever had a coach—in business or sports? If so, did your coach help you or your team take your performance to a higher level? If you are like most people, you’ve benefited from a coach in some way. If you are at the top of your game, you’ve probably had a coach who helped you get there. There are few CEOs, actors, musicians, or professional athletes who haven’t had a coach help refine their skills. Yet people ask “Does coaching really work?” Or more fundamentally “Can coaches really help people change?”

Having coached hundreds of people as an executive coach, I can attest that people do change. Coaching works very well. I’ve seen many people learn, develop, and improve as a result of their coaching experience. Organizations benefit from coaching in countless ways including improved leadership performance, employee engagement, teamwork, operational efficiency, sales, and profitability. However, coaching doesn’t *always* work.

There are coaching engagements where people don’t engage, don’t learn, and don’t improve. For me, they are a small percentage. I can count the ones that didn’t achieve their intended results on one hand. When I deconstruct these unsuccessful engagements, as well as those of other coaches I work with, the issues are rooted in one of three areas. Coaching either works or doesn’t work based on:

1. The competence of the coach
2. The mindset of the individual being coached
3. The degree of alignment between the coach and the individual

You might be surprised that “The need for coaching” isn’t on this list, but I don’t believe it is a factor. No one is perfect. Everyone has room for improvement and can benefit from coaching. Even the best speakers, preachers, college deans, and business leaders at the top of their profession have coaches. Not everyone has awareness of their needs or believes they need coaching, but everyone can benefit from ongoing learning, encouragement, and accountability.

Listed below are characteristics to consider within each of the three areas. When selecting an executive coach, or someone to coach, refer the list below as a checklist against which to gauge the likelihood of a successful coaching outcome:

1. The competence of the coach. Areas of competence to consider include:
 - Coaching and facilitation skills** – listening and questioning skills, knowledge of coaching approaches
 - Coaching experience** – number of people coached, number of coaching sessions conducted, time spent coaching
 - Coaching track record** – references, testimonials, number of positive versus negative outcomes
 - Behavioral psychology knowledge** – understanding of behavioral science, contemporary psychology, organizational development, change management
 - Resources and frameworks** – access to models, tools, assessments, reference materials, other experts
 - Domain knowledge and experience** – time spent in the domain area of the individual being coached
 - Industry knowledge and experience** – time spent in the industry of the individual being coached
 - Knowledge of the individual’s organization** – familiarity with the individual’s organization including people within the individual’s circle of influence, processes, systems, and culture
 - Leadership knowledge and experience** – time spent in management, prior spans of control, experience in managing business unit P&Ls.



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2. The mindset of the individual being coached. Characteristics of the individual's mindset include:
 - Eagerness to learn** – commitment to professional development, willingness to receive critical feedback, track record of learning, appreciation for goal setting, interest in ongoing education
 - Availability** – prioritizes time for coaching, makes time for assignments
 - Humility** – willingness to look in the mirror for issues and admit own shortcomings, willingness to take ownership for issues and self-performance
 - Collaborative nature** – appreciation for other's assistance, value placed on conversing, interest in people versus tasks
 - Openness** – willingness to be transparent, openness to other's ideas, interest in gaining insight rather than finding fault

3. The degree of alignment between the coach and the individual. Alignment attributes include:
 - Trust** – commensurate levels of professional maturity, ability to maintain confidentiality
 - Personality fit** – alignment in philosophies, values, degree of assertiveness, work ethic, etc.
 - Coaching approach** – degree of structure versus informal discussion, facilitation versus teaching, use of assessments and scorecards, type of assignments, use of job shadowing, involvement of others
 - Depth of relationship** – anticipated level of transparency, expected depth of dialog
 - Type of interaction** – frequency of interaction, channels of communication, venues for meetings, method of follow up
 - Contract terms, pricing** – fee structure, length of engagement, deliverables, inclusion of management progress reviews

The more of these characteristics that are present and agreed upon, the more likely the coaching engagement will deliver the intended outcomes. In some cases, it only takes one of these characteristics to derail a coaching engagement. For example, an individual who lacks an eagerness to learn will quickly stop doing their assignments. Coaching engagements also breakdown when individuals expect a structured learning approach and coaches use unstructured conversation.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com) and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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