Executive Coaching

It’s time for consequence

MADSTON BLACK
LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE

Executive Summary

Too often, executive coaching focuses only on the upside of the performance equation and it is little wonder that some executive coaching descends into the world of cosy fireside chats, with coaching assignments lasting years, with no measurable outcomes.

In this article Michael Hamer, Partner at Madston Black, argues that for executive coaching to be truly performance based, the issue of the consequences of not achieving goals needs to be clearly articulated in the coaching process. This ensures a more rigorous accountability framework that assists an executive become truly effective in their role.

At a recent two-day planning session we invited three senior HR Professionals, from top 200 Australian companies to join us for a panel discussion regarding the current state of executive development.

As the session progressed, the panel outlined the ways in which their organisations were dealing with the fallout from the GFC, as it impacts their specific operational areas. In particular, they detailed the strategies they were using to make less go further, focusing attention onto core program maintenance, prudent budget use and ensuring that their teams continued to receive support. They outlined a number of innovations that they had implemented - especially in the areas of internal mentoring, the use of train the trainer programs and the cascading of learning throughout their companies via the use of technology and internal communications.

The overriding message of the session had been that learning and development remained a key business priority and that organisations were seriously motivated to ensure that existing programs could be maintained, wherever possible.

As we drew to a close, a question was posed in regard to executive coaching.

‘Had the events of the last couple of years seen a greater level of accountability in the specifying and implementation of executive coaching programs?’

The response was unanimous. All three executives expressed concern that in their companies, executive coaching was still an individual ‘user chooser’ system, with little focus on the quality of provider and even less on the rigour on business linked outcomes.

All three cited instances of managers specifying coaching as a ‘right of passage’. In some instances managers had been using the same coach for 3 years, on an ongoing basis.

The picture that was painted is a familiar one. In our role as a leadership development organisation we have exposure to a large number of major Australian and international organisations. It is clear to us that many have lost sight of the fundamental value and principles of executive coaching.

In the last few years, prior to the GFC, the executive coaching industry saw unprecedented growth. Companies could afford to give more executives access to coaching. Executives who had coaches valued the interaction and the attention. Budgets grew. Executives saw coaching as a key element to ‘taking the next step’ inside their companies. When moving from one organisation to another they specified coaching as a prerequisite for the move. Many organisations embraced coaching so fully that they adopted a coaching style as their lead management discipline.

Within this framework of coaching largesse, we began to note deterioration of focus in both the design and evaluation of executive coaching programs. Based on the broad assumption that coaching works - ergo ‘all coaching works’ organisations began to get sloppy. With the ability to specify work directly, many managers chose coaches for themselves and their direct reports, paying only token attention to traditional goal setting, needs analysis and evaluation.

The short term history of executive coaching can be traced directly to the last recession, downturn of the economy in the 1990s. Throughout the boom of the 80’s organisations had supported lengthy 'open programmes’. As the recession bit, they found they could no longer afford to go down this route and started to search for more tailored solutions from training providers. This initially took the form of requiring customised programmes that were aimed at addressing specific organisational issues as opposed to the more general 'sheep dipping' approach.

At the same time both organisations, as well as their managers, started to see the benefits of a more individualised approach to personal development. Corporate downsizing left managers isolated and with minimal internal support. Executive coaching provided a tailored, cost effective solution.

When executed properly, coaching is the most effective tool for driving sustained behavioural change.

In 1992, Sir John Whitmore, published "Coaching for Performance" where he developed the most influential model of coaching - the GROW model (goal, reality, options, will). Leadership gurus such as Stephen Covey and Antony Robbins also fuelled the appetite for personal development and awareness.

The development path of coaching as a business has been rocky one. Markets have developed at vastly different paces. The accreditation of coaches and the rigour of process have been continual issues. However, despite its problems, coaching thrived, for one simple reason. When executed properly, coaching is the most effective tool for driving sustained behavioural change.

Which brings us to 2011.

The current state of coaching and its 'interpretation' is indicative of a skill that has lost its way. Coaching has been genericized. When this happens to any product or service, it's time to reflect and reframe.

At Madston Black we have an immense level of coaching experience and wisdom. Looking at the challenge that now exists in the market we focused on one core truth. Executive coaching is all about improving performance.

It is not a series of fireside chats or a quasi-form of counselling. It is a defined, time based process that needs to have clearly defined metrics and absolute accountability.

Core to this accountability is the concept of consequence.

For change to take place there needs to be a clear focus on what the benefits of that change will bring - the upside. Most coaching will concentrate on this and it is little wonder that when the upside is all that is on the agenda, coaching drifts toward the cosy coffee chats.

However there also needs to be a clear understanding of the consequences of not changing, of not improving performance or effectiveness. For a full level of engagement and for change to take place, executives need to commit to the process and understand what the real consequences are.

In the search for leadership balance, most executive coaching will focus on the being of leadership, and not on the doing. Senior executives looking to develop leadership performance have grown up in roles where prioritising complex, competing issues, on a daily basis is business as usual.

Many have been promoted based on their ability to perform the number one leadership function – deliver results. In achieving senior managerial status and in developing leadership profile, what has served them well is an ability to perform, deliver outcomes, with or in spite of the performance of their teams.

However, because good talent is hard to find, keep and motivate, today's leader needs to be both a great exponent of the "doing" side of leadership and an outstanding role model of the 'being of leadership'. "We need our executives to be both great business performers in terms of results, as well as being creators of a culture, where people can grow and develop towards the business needs. The latter is a challenge." Wayne Reade, Group Organizational Development Manager, Boral.

Leadership performance coaching assists executives focus on working toward this balance.

The up-side is obvious. Leaders working in a balanced way across the doing and being of leadership have a powerful impact – driving results at the same time as building leadership capacity in their organisations. This move from leader to leadership creates an empowered culture where people act without formal authority, where ideas and innovation flourish and where people feel respected and valued and as such will bring their best to work with them, every day.

The consequences of failing to address the skill and behavioural issues can be equally profound, both for the executives and the companies they serve.

Leadership performance requires the executive to be firing on all cylinders, and just like a car, failure to have the tuning right will impair effective performance.

Leadership performance coaching focuses on building leadership effectiveness. Individual coaching assignments are a significant financial commitment from an organisation to an executives' development.

Traditionally, briefing for an assignment will focus on the benefits/insights the executive will receive. "John wants to be a better people leader" or "Mary needs to develop her communication skills."

At this point in the briefing it is important for the coach to ask "Mary needs to develop her communication skills...so that?"

The "so that" process helps identify a clear goal that is tangible and measurable and can be benchmarked. Equally the coach needs to probe deeper to ask "What if...?" "What if Mary fails to achieve...?"

A third element that clarifies the briefing process and establishes a clear relationship between benefit and consequence is ….."by when?"

Getting a clear perspective on timing is valuable. It creates a sense of imperative to the coaching. "We need this to happen and we need to see measurable change by this date."

Many coaches will agree that changing behaviours can't be time measured. This is reasonable, but on-going coaching that lasts for years is not the answer.

Realistic, time-based goals with rigor around deliverables creates a framework of accountability, for coach, coachee and the sponsoring organisation.

Within this framework it is critical that the executive understands the issues of consequence to change. Coaching is about creating positive behavioural change but the motivation for the change comes from the executive.

The need to drive for optimal leadership performance is not a curious experiment. It is a rigorous commitment to become the most effective leader the executive can be.

It is the humility to look at feedback from direct reports and peers. It is the honesty to recognise blind spots to performance. It is the courage to try new things with their teams. It is the willingness to embrace new ideas and say “what got me here won’t get me to where I want to go.”

The coach has a responsibility to hold the coachee firm through this process of personal disequilibrium. Failure to do so will impair the executive’s ability to achieve successful outcomes.

The coach needs to rigorously hold the coachee accountable for their actions and behaviours. Holding them true to their commitments will keep the benefits front of mind whilst maintaining the focus on consequence.

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Just as behavioural strengths can be mirrored by behavioural derailers, so the coaching process – focused essentially on improvement and developments has a shadow of non-commitment and failure. Because if success is tangible and measurable then so is failure.

At best, the failure of a coaching assignment leaves an executive having not achieved his stated goals and the organisation thousands of dollars shorter.

But in reality, failure in coaching is more pervasive.

Failure can leave an executive with the sense of ‘tried that - it didn’t work, ergo I’m fine the way I am.’ With no tangible upside and no come-back in relation to consequence it leaves coaching with a poor residual image in the organisation and the reputation of coaching takes a step backwards.

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