

UNLIMITED POTENTIAL

Volume VII, No. 3

Newsletter

8 Keys to Picking the Right Coach

In times of recession, companies must do more with less. Providing executive coaches to high-potential performers is one way to get the most out of untapped talent.

“There’s no question that future leaders will need constant coaching,” notes Ram Charan, author of *Leadership in the Era of Economic Uncertainty* (McGraw-Hill, 2008). “As the business environment becomes more complex, they will increasingly turn to coaches for help in understanding how to act.”

Willingness to be coached and a good fit are two of the key ingredients for a successful coaching relationship. This was reinforced in a January 2009 *Harvard Business Review* survey, in which researchers queried 140 top coaches about what companies should look for when hiring a coach.

According to the *HBR* article, there are two basic hiring rules:

1. Ensure executives are ready and willing to be coached
2. Allow them to choose the coach

Unfortunately, many executives select a coach based on referrals from colleagues, without adequately considering personal needs. The person sponsoring the engagement usually sends a few coaches for interviews and asks the executive to select one based on “fit.” But what does a *good fit* actually mean, and how do you avoid hiring a coach who feels right but may not challenge you to grow?

Without a greater understanding of what happens in a coaching relationship, it’s difficult to make a fair assessment and pick a good match. As the client, you should do the choosing, but you need some criteria to make the best selection.

In *Your Executive Coaching Solution* (Davies-Black, 2007), Joan Kofodimos says a coach should achieve most of the following:



**HERDLINGER
ASSOCIATES**

“Turning potential into performance”

**P.O. Box 20389
St. Simons Island, Georgia 31522
912.634.9300
877.626.2960
(toll free)**

potential@Herdlinger.com

Herdlinger Associates provides the vehicle to help people expand and develop skills and attitudes necessary to achieve a higher degree of success both personally and professionally.

Our programs incorporate attitude development, goal setting and skills development into a process that results in greater utilization of the potential inherent in all people.

We help people create a plan that enables them to balance the profit motives of their businesses with the motives of their lives.

Our professional staff is committed to a common purpose:

**Developing People
To
Achieve Their Full Potential
... That’s What We Do!**

Learn more about Herdinger Associates at our website ...

www.TheCoach.biz

1. Strike a balance between supporting and challenging you
2. Help create feedback loops with colleagues
3. Assist in clarifying your true strengths, values and purpose
4. Provide structure in the development process
5. Broaden your perspectives
6. Teach concepts and skills
7. Maintain confidentiality
8. Influence how others view you

1. Pick for Support and Ability to Challenge

Executives are hired for their strengths. We don't expect them to show uncertainty, express fear or naturally ask for help. Executives who wish to grow, however, must do these very things.

You're more likely to open up to a coach who creates a safe, confidential environment. Coaches accomplish this in part by demonstrating that they understand you and respect your interests, values and concerns. This enables you to feel accepted, be honest about your thoughts and feelings, and be more willing to try new behaviors.

But coaches must be more than cheerleaders. They need to provide challenges that motivate you to perform beyond your habitual behaviors and perceptions; confront you directly, yet nonjudgmentally, with the impact of your actions; and courageously probe the motives and assumptions underlying your behaviors.

Coaches who lack the capacity or courage to push you out of your comfort zone aren't doing their jobs. Some learning is achieved only through discomfort.

Using the Coaching Relationship

Good coaches will use their personal experience with you to teach you about yourself. How you treat your coach reflects how you treat others.

The way you select your coach is significant. Do you see the coach as a subordinate? A vendor or outside consultant? An authority figure whose primary relationship is with your boss? How do gender, race or other personal characteristics influence the way you interact with your coach?

Effective coaches will detect and decipher the subtleties within their clients' interactions. They will provide feedback on how one's behavior impacts other relationships and goals.

Pick a coach who can raise issues impartially and show you how your behaviors affect others.

2. Pick for Feedback Loops

A coach must serve as the conduit for colleagues' feedback. Your peers will rarely share authentic feedback with you, and a skilled coach can solicit important information in a way that satisfies confidentiality requirements. Clear agreements, established boundaries and skilled diplomacy are critical.

Your coach should help you develop the skills needed to create relationships in which you can ask for honest feedback on an ongoing basis.

Instead of encouraging dependence, your coach should teach you how to manage your development in the future. After an initial assessment, a good coach shows you how to form links with colleagues and teaches them how to frame useful, specific feedback instead of vague judgments.

Your coach will teach you to ask for feedback and manage the conversation without being defensive. This includes learning how to determine which feedback is relevant and valid, prioritize the issues you need to address and figure out how to handle them.

3. Pick for Clarifying Values and Purpose

How clearly do you articulate your core purpose, values and interests?

Skilled coaches help you clarify your developmental, career and life goals. They should also teach you how to sort out your needs, wants, concerns and boundaries in any particular situation, which allows you to become more comfortable and act more consistently when completing goals, even in complex circumstances.

4. Pick for Structuring the Development Process

Your coach must help you manage each step of the coaching project:

- Establish a contract
- Get input from others
- Review feedback and plan development
- Hold regular coaching meetings to practice new behaviors
- Implement behaviors in daily work
- Assess for results

Many people will let coaching sessions slide when urgent work matters arise or they experience an inherent resistance to change. Together, you and your coach will develop a roadmap that defines goals and keeps the process moving over time.

5. Pick for Broadening Perspectives

Your coach should broaden your perspective by helping you understand and break free of any limiting beliefs and assumptions. A perspective shift may be the most significant factor in changing behavior and results.

A perspective shift can occur when your coach:

- Provides additional viewpoints
- Plays devil's advocate
- Looks at situations as others might
- Asks new questions
- Offers new approaches

A perspective shift will change your assumptions, expand the information you find useful, alter how you perform key skills and enhance your ability to create organizational value.

6. Pick for Teaching New Concepts and Skills

You may be so engrossed in your work environment that you've never developed a clear understanding of your role. A good coach will help you step back and get a clearer picture of what is—and isn't—part of your role.

Good coaches present a mental model of what leadership means, what it takes to be effective and the key skills required. They should teach skills relevant to one's particular situation and assist with implementation in daily interactions.

For example, which of these key leadership skills do you need to learn?

- Collaboration
- Expectation management
- Influencing
- Conflict resolution
- Developing others

7. Pick for Confidentiality

Trust is essential in the coaching relationship. Your coach must effectively navigate risky waters filled with sensitive, confidential information. Because a coach may be engaged with several members of the same organization or team, it's vital to respect boundaries and maintain confidentiality.

This is not an easy job, and it's one of the most important skills a good coach acquires with experience. When interviewing prospective coaches, find out how such situations are handled. How have they dealt with similar challenges in the past?

8. Pick for Influencing Others' Views of You

Behavioral change is not the sole coaching goal. Coaches also help colleagues notice the changes you make, invite them to become involved in your development and possibly change their behavior in relation to you. A qualified, experienced coach can influence others' views by:

- Coaching your relationships, not just you
- Challenging others' assumptions that a problem resides entirely with you
- Contracting with key colleagues to determine their desired outcomes of the coaching process and assessing their willingness to share feedback and participate in conversations
- Facilitating conversations between you and colleagues to share coaching insights, development plans and new expectations (in both directions)
- Helping you solicit ongoing feedback on relevant behaviors

If your coach doesn't raise these points in your initial conversations, make sure they're included in the coaching process.

Roles a Coach Should Not Play

Coaching methodologies vary widely. Some begin with 360° assessments; others use in-depth interviews. Regardless, your coach should clearly define the process' start, developmental plan and conclusion.

A good coach will consciously avoid roles that hinder your ability to take independent action:

- **Cheerleader:** Coaches should not give positive reinforcement from the sidelines for everything you do.
- **Therapist:** Coaches should not deal strictly with your personal adjustment and psychological issues, even if they're qualified and licensed to do so. Your coach must continually assist you in the context of your organizational performance and business goals.
- **Executor of the Boss's Wishes:** Coaches should do more than force you to conform to a superior's expectations, even when given an agenda when hired.
- **Shadow Manager:** Coaches cannot advise you on business decisions or act on your behalf.
- **One-Sided Advocate:** Coaches must look at all viewpoints and resist taking one side.

How Do Fit and Credentials Apply to Selection?

Two loaded and complex issues often arise during coach selection: good fit and credentials.

Beware of deciding upon the look and feel of a “good fit.” Effective coaches are adept at personal relationships, and each has a unique style and manner. Be sure to balance feeling comfortable with the coach against the need to be challenged in order to grow. You must believe a coach can help you change.

As for credentials and training, the executive-coaching field is not associated with traditional career paths or specific educational backgrounds. Most coaches enter the practice after a gradual evolution from roles in related areas.

Coaches may come from internal HR departments and specialize in leadership development or organizational effectiveness. Others have external consulting experience and specialize in organizational change. Some come from the counseling and psychology fields. Many have years of business experience in executive offices, while others are retired CEOs.

What really matters is the coach’s ability to understand and work with individual and organizational dynamics. Make your selection only after you have a solid understanding of the coaching relationship and process.

Herdlinger Associates

P.O. Box 20389

St. Simons Island, Georgia 31522