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A Helping Hand

The role of executive coaching in performance management

By Barbara Kaufman Ph.D.

SEEKING THE ADVICE OF AN EXECUTIVE coach is becoming increasingly common in educational institutions across America. After all, professional athletes have coaches, so why shouldn't university administrators?

Too often, however, coaches are called in even though an administrator's poor performance is well beyond redemption. The intervention is thus set up for failure, right from the start. The likely result is that the institution loses not only the administrator but also the time and resources invested in the coaching engagement.

To avoid this dilemma, it's helpful to identify the circumstances under which coaching is really an appropriate performance management tool, what institutions can do to help coaches succeed, and what performance management actions remain when coaching is not a viable option.

When Can a Coach Make a Positive Contribution?

When administrators are asked what they wish they had known when first appointed to their current positions, most state that they could

have benefited from the guidance of a "truth-teller," someone willing to alert them to cultural landmines and unwritten norms and to candidly point out role expectations and performance areas in need of course correction.

Since bosses, including board chairs, are so often reluctant to be the truth-tellers for newly-appointed leaders, this is one of the primary areas of effectiveness for executive coaches. A coach can facilitate the period of adjustment for a newly-appointed leader or prepare a leader in transition for new roles and responsibilities. "Administrative leaders are most often derived from faculty members who have excelled in their teaching and research responsibilities," says Molly Corbett Broad, president emerita of the **University of North Carolina** system. Successful faculty members are individual performers, but successful administrative leaders create an environment and empower the organizational capacity to advance the mission of the university.

She believes it's no surprise, then, that newly-appointed administrative leaders can be quickly overwhelmed by the realization they

cannot make every decision or micromanage every person in their new organization. Paramount to both their success and the success of the university are leadership development and relationship building skills. “A skillful executive coach can play an instrumental role in transforming bright individuals into effective managers and leaders. Such a coach understands the organizational culture and knows how to hold up a mirror to the ‘coachee’ that leaves no place to hide,” Corbett Broad says.

The other side of the coin is remedial coaching, used when a specific performance issue has been identified. This is most effective when integrated into a comprehensive performance management process, which positions coaching not as a remedial tool to “fix” an individual who has gone astray, but as an investment in development.

“We tend to think of coaching in the context of negative behaviors that require correction,” says Bruce Darling, senior vice president for University Affairs in the **University of California** system. “In actuality, it is our responsibility as leaders to identify the strengths of the individuals who work for us so that we can build on those strengths or help them develop new ones. Seeing someone you work with grow, take on new responsibilities, and even advance beyond your own position is one of the most rewarding aspects of being a supervisor. A coach who can help in these efforts not only benefits the individual, but creates tremendous value for the institution.”

Corbett Broad agrees. “An investment in leadership development is an investment in the future of the organization,” she says. “However, many universities are unwilling to invest either resources or time in leadership development. In an environment where coaching has simply not been the tradition, it is difficult to achieve the necessary paradigm shift without a serious commitment from the governing board.”

Components of Coaching

A successful coaching process begins with an assessment of the administrator’s role as defined by the institution, current performance expectations, and perceptions that have developed over time, including feedback from the superior and a sample of subordinates, key peers, and other key constituents.

Expect the coach to conduct one-on-one confidential interviews with a cross-section just large enough to get a snapshot of any performance issues from multiple perspectives. The

approach may also include “shadowing,” such as by accompanying the administrator to meetings and generally observing him or her in action and in relationship to other key players. Coaching may further involve working sessions between the administrator, direct reports, and his or her boss to acknowledge

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*–Molly Corbett Broad,
University of North Carolina*

the performance feedback, build a sense of team, and solicit support for agreed upon changes in performance – both at the individual and team levels.

One common misperception about coaching is that a coach can work with the individual in isolation, invisible to the organization. A coach who remains invisible lacks the leverage of getting first-hand feedback about how others experience the administrator’s performance. In many remedial situations, the administrator’s problem lies in the perceptions of others, so coaching needs to be grounded in the interdependent nature of roles and relationships.

To be effective, any coaching intervention will be customized to meet the needs of the organization and the individual administrator; a generic cookie-cutter approach never results in increased effectiveness sustained over time. Coaches can only add value when their interventions are based on a thorough understanding of environmental complexities, the organization’s needs and values, the administrator’s

needs and values, and the degree to which these needs and values are in alignment.

Among the desired outcomes of coaching are:

- Actionable recommendations that result in a shift in perspective and an increase in self-knowledge.
- Acquisition of new information.
- New learning that promotes altered behaviors (such as increased ability to manage key relationships more effectively).
- Demonstrated style flexibility (which leads to more effective decision-making).
- More effective communication that is aligned with local culture, tradition, and unwritten norms.
- A more effective approach to problem solving and conflict resolution.

When Is Coaching Not Viable?

Remedial coaching to prevent derailment only makes sense when bosses or peers agree the administrator in question has demonstrated substantial value to the organization in key areas of performance. Although the administrator may have derailed in one aspect of performance, the organization is confident that an investment in his or her development would bring a significant return. On the other hand, engaging an executive coach is not a viable option under the following circumstances:

- **When performance deficiencies have been allowed to continue**

unaddressed. A coach is not a miracle worker who can “fix” someone

after months or years of failing to address the problem. Often bosses don’t call in a coach until they have lost all confidence in a subordinate, generally out of a feeling of guilt over failing to provide timely, candid performance feedback. “The higher your position, the lower the chance that you will receive negative feedback,” notes Corbett Broad. “Speaking ‘truth to power’ is a rare commodity. An experienced executive coach can discern such performance issues, relationship problems, and cultural misalignment by skillful interviewing of a cross-section of individuals in different parts of the organizational structure. This insight and the ability to develop the plan for correcting or responding to the findings of the executive coach can transform that individual into a

high-achieving performer and leader.”

- **When the boss acknowledges that the wrong person has been hired.** Sometimes a boss has already disengaged from the relationship, but wants a coach to increase the subordinate’s effectiveness until a replacement can be recruited. In this situation, any coaching intervention is a waste of resources and sends mixed messages to others in the organization about performance management and the role of coaching.

- **When the time frame for changed behavior is unrealistic.** A coach cannot get someone to “shape up” in 30 days. New behaviors take time to develop. A realistic expectation, for example, would be to ask for substantive improvement and sustainability over three to six months.

- **If the performance deficiency is not due to a learned behavior.** Coaching can be an effective strategy if the problem can be addressed by learning new behaviors such as managing relationships more effectively, developing conflict management skills, or acquiring style flexibility. Yet, if the difficulty stems from a personality trait or emotional trauma, coaching is not the answer.

- **When the administrator has failed to invest in relationship management.** He or she has burned all interpersonal bridges, is

intellectually arrogant, externalizes blame, or has already accepted

failure as inevitable. A coach can only help someone who has a strong will to succeed and is willing to look in the mirror, begin a process of self-reflection, and learn from his or her mistakes. “Some individuals find it difficult to acknowledge that they are not already a fully developed leader when they step into a position whose title implies that they are a leader,” says Corbett Broad.

- **If the administrator is unwilling to self-reflect or does not want to be coached.** “The advantage of coaching over standard performance management alternatives is that the coach’s independent perspective provides a confidential and safe environment in which individuals may be more willing to open up, listen, and integrate what they learn into their

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behavior,” says Darling. “However, it can only be a positive experience if an individual is willing to reflect seriously and sincerely on others’ feedback, weigh their input, gain a new perspective on their role, and try new approaches.” However, Corbett Broad observes that people who are smart enough to be appointed at the senior level are also smart enough to pretend they are engaged in a coaching process when they really are simply going through the motions and have no intentions whatsoever of making systemic changes. “In that case, I don’t know that there is any amount of leverage a supervisor or colleague can apply to change the individual’s attitude,” she says.

Although there are situations in which coaching may not be appropriate, most organizations have a dire need for mentoring structures as part of an overall performance management process. Leaders should not only be held responsible for operational results, but also for the development of their people. “Typically at least half of a university’s budget goes toward compensation and other personnel expenses,” says Darling. “Since people are the innovators that make an institution successful, it stands to reason that managing them well is as critical as, if not more so than, managing financial and other resources.”

What Performance Management Alternatives Remain?

When executive coaching is not viable, what actions can institutions take to improve or change the unacceptable behavior or performance? In consultation with Human Resources and sometimes the Legal department, one can attempt a candid and meaningful dialog with the individual whose performance has derailed. Compliment the individual on strengths (only if they are truthful!), identify the specific areas where performance weaknesses are unacceptable, and explore the options.

For example, determine if the administrator could make a genuine contribution in another position. Is it possible to help the individual focus on a transition plan that will result in a substantive contribution over a six- to 12-month period while he or she is looking for other internal or external opportunities? How can the organization support this endeavor?

Above all, there is no substitute for candid, constructive feedback. Sometimes taking the risk of having a difficult conversation can result in a sense of relief that the performance issue is finally on the table. Both parties can then move on to a meaningful discussion of long-term professional goals and the degree of fit, and can begin to explore alternatives that are aligned with the needs of both the organization and the individual.

Coaching Realities

Coaching is a developmental tool, not a magic wand or an instant makeover. In many cases, coaching interventions would be unnecessary if organizations set clear performance expectations in the recruitment process, paid closer attention to organizational fit in hiring, and had the courage to provide truth-tellers to facilitate the initial leadership orientation and ongoing performance feedback process. However, when coaching becomes necessary, despite all efforts, timing is everything. The earlier the intervention, the more opportunity there is for course corrections before a complete derailment.

When considering a coaching intervention, it is important for institutions that hire coaches to understand and commit to two realities. One is that coaching requires a substantial investment of time and resources. Derailments don’t happen overnight, and neither will changes in behavior. The second is that bosses cannot simply hand matters over to an external coach and wash their hands of the problem. The engagement can only succeed when superiors complement the coach’s work by remaining engaged in the process and invested in the relationship. Neither coach nor “coachee” can succeed without the help of at least a few truth-tellers who are willing to communicate the sometimes harsh and painful, but constructive, feedback that makes learning and increased leadership effectiveness a new reality.

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