

Five Myths About Executive Coaching

Douglas Riddle, Lindsey Zan, and Daniel Kuzmycz

The California gold rush of the mid-1800s was dominated by thrilling opportunities that captured the imagination of the entire country. However, the dynamism and the fortunes made and lost were only part of the story. For many of the forty-niners, California meant disease, hunger, violence, and similarly unpleasant outcomes.

Today's organizational world is experiencing a rush of its own kind: the rush to use the powerful intervention of coaching. Coaching is booming, and the overwhelming perception is that it is doing so with success. However, in the absence of universal standards and credentials, the selection and engagement of coaches has been fraught with confusion, anxiety, and unhappiness.

We reviewed the state of coaching from various vantage points (such as coaching preparation and coaching standards) and found that the steps clients are taking to ensure a good experience are not likely to yield the desired results. In fact, we think certain myths are affecting the selection of "effective" coaches. We call them *myths* because they are based on assumptions that don't bear up under examination. As Stratford Sherman and Alyssa Freas state in "The Wild West of Executive Coaching," their November 2004 *Harvard Business*

Editor's note: Issues & Observations is a venue for CCL staff members and associates to express their personal views about leadership.

Review article, "The essentially human nature of coaching is what makes it work—and also what makes it nearly impossible to quantify." Uncovering these myths, however, might help lead the way to establishing grounded standards and regulations in the industry and to improving the success of coaching interventions.

WHAT ARE THE MYTHS?

Myth 1: Coaching Credentials Mean Coaching Effectiveness. A coach's education, training, or any other kind of coaching credential provides surprisingly little information about that individual's effectiveness as an executive coach. Coaching credentials should not be relied on as the sole criterion in selection but should be approached with a degree of caution. Our research has failed to identify a single credentialing program that has refused to grant a certificate to someone who has paid the fees and persisted through the requirements. Nor have we found any program that revoked a previously granted credential because of malpractice. Compare this with other mature professions such as psychology, in which licensing or certification boards provide some protection to the public and regulation of the industry. There are currently more than sixty-five different coaching credentials and approximately 315 training organizations soliciting potential coaches as trainees (for a list, go to www.peer.ca/coachingschools.html). In addi-

tion, 180 academic departments and schools (undergraduate and graduate) provide some form of coaching degree, certification, or accreditation (see www.pennsurveys.org/coaching).

The confusion surrounding coaching credentials is entirely understandable. Unfortunately, although the practice of credentialing executive coaches continues to expand, there is little agreement on the development of standards and the assessment of coaching outcomes. So it's not possible to ensure that organizations and senior executives will be provided with competent coaches who are capable of satisfying their needs.

Organizations are increasingly seeking coaching that employs evidence-based practices. They want coaches who can show they've made a difference to the bottom line and can prove to the organization that its money was well spent. Results should matter, but the measurement of coaching effectiveness is still dominated by subjective assessments made by the people being coached. For this to change, coaches need to be equipped with the tools to measure meaningful results. The great bulk of coach training provides no such tools; nor does it emphasize the objective measurement of coaching outcomes. Although current coaching credentials promise clients that coaches have high professional standards, a strong code of ethics, substantial knowledge and skill levels, and a commitment to their own professional development, the relationship of these virtues to

organizationally significant outcomes is assumed. Absent is any emphasis on measuring or demonstrating coaching effectiveness as a prerequisite to becoming credentialed or on ensuring that the coaching credential will result in a positive impact on business-relevant outcomes.

Those who select coaches should view coaching credentials as just one piece of a body of information that also includes a coach's educational and professional histories, references from other clients, and ongoing arrangements for supervision and accountability. The ability of a coach to demonstrate competence to meet and fulfill the particular needs of the coaching intervention should be paramount.

Myth 2: There's a Magic Philosophy or Approach to Coaching. There are a multitude of coaching organizations and individual executive coaches that argue that their particular method or approach to coaching is superior to others. Though each may have creative terminology, behind the marketing language are many of the same coaching behaviors and methods.

We gathered information about the current state of global leadership coaching practices and methods from psychological research, organizational literature, and our own networking in several countries. There is widespread agreement that a coach's role is to help an individual develop skills by assisting the individual in setting and creating goals and action plans, holding the individual accountable to his or her goals and plans, and keeping the individual on track.

But what about the specific processes and practices that coaches use with each individual coaching session? Although described differently by different providers, there are significant similarities among the plethora of processes, and similar tasks are associated with each. Almost all leadership coaching models include the following stages in the coaching engagement:

- The initial phase. This includes building relationships with key stakeholders (such as the coachee and the client organization, establishing the coaching relationship, and identifying the need for coaching).

- The contracting phase. This includes coming to an agreement on the expectations, needs, wants, processes, boundaries, and ethical commitments.

- Assessment and data gathering. The coach collects data on the coachee's past history, present performance, and future challenges. The methods include interviews with the coachee and key observers, multirater assessments, personality and background questionnaires, and direct observation. The goal of this step is to determine areas for development and underlying causes.

- Development planning. The coach and the coachee identify and commit to development and set specific goals. This is a collaborative process in which the coaches don't feed insights to the coachees but rather help the coachees draw their own insights.

- Development and change. The coach helps the client stay on track and get past setbacks and holds the coachee accountable for developmental changes.

What all this means for coaching clients is that when selecting coaches, they should be conscious that marketing considerations shape the particular models of coaching more than any demonstrable differences in approach. Whether your coach uses one trademarked model or another makes little difference in the effectiveness of the coach. What matters is a combination of factors including the competence of the particular coach, the appropriate matching of coach with coachee, and the ongoing management of the coaching engagement to ensure its alignment with organizational objectives.

Myth 3: It's All About the Coach. Although finding a coach who dem-

onstrates competence in the type of coaching needed for a particular experience is important, it isn't the only determining factor—the magic is in the relationship between the coach and the coachee. It's not all about the coach; it's all about the fit between the coach and the coachee.

It's tough to determine what competencies a given coach needs in a particular situation. Some researchers and organizations have identified skills that are needed *throughout the entire coaching intervention*, whereas others emphasize key skills required during *each step* of the coaching process. The list of "required" skills can potentially go on ad infinitum. However, emerging evidence suggests that the ability to establish rapport may be one of the most significant factors in effective coaching.

Our review of coaching skills, competencies, and qualities promoted by coaching associations all over the world resulted in an amazing array of characteristics. We suspect that cultural differences may account for the bulk of the differences, but there also appears to be a certain arbitrary aspect to what is promoted. The common characteristics fell into the following categories:

- High ethics and integrity
- Interpersonal sensitivity
- Lifelong learning and self-development
- Self-confidence
- Interest in helping and problem solving

Furthermore, the sheer number of characteristics, along with the apparent divergence among the different organizations, suggests that the perfect set of characteristics for a coach may not exist. More important is the coachee's receptiveness to a particular coach. There is no universally perfect coach for everyone any more than one person could be the perfect mate for everyone. Every person reacts to and prefers different styles and personalities. Forming a connection is paramount to the success of a

coaching intervention. The interaction between a coach and coachee (including the quality of the relationship) is more important than the particular coach selected.

Myth 4: The Best Coaches Sat in That Hot Seat. One of the most important questions facing many leaders in organizations is how to select the right coach. With such a wide variety of coaches and so many different coaching backgrounds, it's difficult to discern which coach and which background will produce the "best" or the "right" coaching fit. Quite often, those who are tasked with finding a coach for an executive seek a coach with a background close to that of the executive. They hope that a coach who has a similar business experience will be better able to relate to the leader and position and as a result be a better coach.

There is still no evidence showing that a coach's background and experience are substantially related to that coach's effectiveness. However, there is evidence suggesting that a coach's background does affect his or her coaching approach. In CCL's experience with recruitment and selection of executive coaches, a preponderance of the coaches who were former executives found it difficult to manage their habits of giving direction and advising. To the extent that a leadership coach needs to assist the leader in exploring options, improving his or her decision making, and growing in self-awareness, these habits can be counterproductive.

One study in particular has shown that a coach's background and experience may predict differences in how he or she conducts the coaching, the tools he or she uses (such as 360-degree feedback or diagnostic assessments), and his or her sophistication in using empirically valid means of evaluating coaching effectiveness. This 2009 study by researchers Joyce Bono, Radostina Purvanova, Annette Towler, and David Peterson found

that coaches who have more business background tend to have less experience coaching, are less likely to use multisource behavioral assessment tools and approaches (such as interviewing bosses and peers), and are more likely to rely on unsophisticated approaches to measuring coaching effectiveness and outcomes (for example, measuring improvement by asking the coachee rather than asking bosses and peers).

The best executive coaches work well across professions, industries, and organizations. Although it is important for a coach to have knowledge of the business and to understand the organizational dynamics, direct experience managing in a particular industry may not be helpful. It can create overreliance on previous solutions rather than spur a search for new ones. The more important criterion is a coach's ability to help individuals learn and develop. The key ingredient is not necessarily found in the coach's background, training, qualifications, or experience but rather in how well the coach fits in the culture of the organization and how well he or she is able to meet the needs of the coaching intervention.

Myth 5: You're Going to Love My Coach! In many organizations the coaching pool grows virally—through adding coaches that someone recommends. Although there is considerable benefit derived from using coaches whom some leader trusts, the impact on the coaching pool can be a problem. Here are some examples:

Over a three-year period, we matched more than twelve thousand coaches with coachees; few organizations have CCL's depth of experience in this area. We had a mismatch rate of less than 0.5 percent, but CCL works hard at getting the match right. In one spectacular failure of our system, we connected one of the great coaches who owns a substantial international business with the director of a shelter

for abused, impoverished women. No coach is right for everyone.

The unhappy consequence of adding only coaches who are known to your existing coaches or staff is the inevitable homogenizing of the coaching pool. CCL is able to make good matches 99.5 percent of the time because it has deliberately cultivated the most diverse community of executive coaches possible: thirty different languages and a balance of gender, ethnicity, national origin, age, and experience. The link between certain kinds of innovation and diversity is well established, and coaching's role in spawning innovative thinking demands focused attention on increasing the diversity of coaches.

FOCUS ON OUTCOMES

We have labeled these ideas myths because they are so appealing until compared with the evidence. We don't mean to suggest that they have no value or that they're completely wrong. Far from it. Rather, we want to urge greater attention to the objectives of coaching programs in modern organizations. The outcomes desired need to shape the organization of this burgeoning professional service, and the world of executive coaching is sufficiently mature to allow greater selectivity in that enterprise. ✍

Douglas Riddle is global director of coaching at CCL. He holds a Ph.D. degree from United States International University and a doctor of ministry degree from the Claremont School of Theology. Lindsey Zan is a project manager and consultant at TalentSmart, which provides emotional intelligence assessments and services to clients. She is completing her Ph.D. degree at the Marshall Goldsmith School of Management of Alliant International University. Daniel Kuzmycz is completing his Ph.D. degree at the Marshall Goldsmith School of Management of Alliant International University.

Copyright © Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Imprint. All rights reserved.

Reproduction or translation of any part of this work beyond that permitted by Sections 7 or 8 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act without permission of the copyright owner is unlawful. Requests for permission or further information should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030; phone 201/748-6011, fax 201/748-6008, e-mail: permreq@wiley.com