

Human resources

Improve an executive's game through coaching

Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle) - October 24, 2003

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Can an executive coach boost your team's performance?

On a sports team, the role of a coach can mean the difference between winning and losing a game. A sports coach has different roles. When calling a play in the heat of a game, he has to analyze the competition's skills and weigh the ability of his players. During routine practice, his focus is on teaching new techniques, conditioning and preparing for an upcoming opponent.

In business, many people in an organization may play the role of coach. A manager may serve as a mentor to junior-level associates, helping them develop new skills and rise up the corporate ladder. The company CEO is often head coach and cheerleader, not only directing the company's strategy but also motivating the staff to succeed against the competition.

As with sports, there can be times when a company needs to look outside the organization for a specialist to work with key players. That is when a company turns to an executive coach.

An executive coach's role can be summarized in sports analogies. He or she may be called on to turn a solid performer into a most valuable player. Perhaps his job is to take the rookie of the year and make him a consistent all-star. Or he may be brought in to build the bench strength of an organization. In any case, the end result is to have a winning team.

There are a variety of reasons that a company might hire a coach, with three scenarios being the most common. First, a coach can help prepare a fast-track employee for a significant promotion. Second, a coach can work with a solid performer who needs enhancement in specific areas to do her job better. A third scenario is for a coach to work with someone who has already been promoted but who is facing challenges with the transition.

That third scenario is less common because a coach is typically brought in to make someone better, not to work with someone who is having difficulties. Coaching tends to be more effective when the person is already doing a good job but needs some enhancement.

Two things are needed from the coaching subject for a coach to be effective. First, the person needs to be aware of his developmental needs. Second, he must have the desire to change. If the person is resistant to the process, it will not work.

There is no formula for executive coaching success, as each subject has different needs. But some of the more common issues involve leadership development, communication techniques and interpersonal skills. The coach should have clearly defined goals to monitor progress and evaluate the program's success or failure in the end.

I once coached a rising executive who had trouble delegating. She was spending too much time on tasks that should have been handled by others, preventing her from focusing on more strategic decisions.

In one of our first meetings, we examined her weekly to-do list. We identified 10 items that needed to be handled by others, assigned responsibility for each item and discussed how she would go about delegating the tasks to people on her team.

The following week we discussed her progress and any stumbling blocks she faced getting others to accept responsibility for the tasks. After about three weeks there were two visible changes. First, she noticed she had freed up at least two hours each day that could be devoted to other tasks. And second, her boss noticed that the team was viewing her in a more managerial light and following her direction as a leader, which is a critical step that must occur when someone is being promoted. Another skill that may be typical of executive coaching is training someone to manage differently according to the situation. For example, an executive might have operational responsibility for a manufacturing facility as well as a seat on the senior management team for the parent company. Different management skills are needed for each scenario.

Executive coaching can be used to teach this manager how to "style flex" according to his audience. For workers in the manufacturing plant, he will need to use different language and a different demeanor than he would in an executive-level conference. Neither style is more correct than the other in general terms, but each is more appropriate in the given environment. Using the wrong style in either situation could have had negative ramifications for his career.

I view coaching as an employee benefit, not as a disciplinary action. Executive coaching is not a last resort before someone gets fired or the solution to an attitude problem. Furthermore, coaching is not a quick-fix solution. But given a willing subject and a company desire to invest in future talent, coaching can make the difference between an average performance and a record-breaking season.

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