



Coaching the Character

Ultimately, it is up to individual leaders to make the commitment to coach their people. Those who do make that commitment will find that coaching generates amazing results.

By Tim Tokarczyk and Chip Toth

Bill, president of a midsized construction company, was known to be agreeable with his directors and peers when in person, or at least apparently agreeable, then prone to head in his own direction. He would tell others one thing, then go do another. Bill's mentor advised him to get coaching as soon as possible. He felt like someone had just told him that his hygiene was bad and he needed to invest heavily in Listerine. "Coaching?" he thought to himself. "Coaching is for people who are really messed up, employees who are high-maintenance."

Yet his mentor persisted, and Bill committed to securing an executive coach. Bill reports a year later: "I have learned that I have more influence as a leader than I once had thought. People watch me all the time and take their cues from my actions as well as my words. Further, my recent effort to bring intentional praise and recognition to my people has been well-received. The emotional climate of our company has become more positive and collaborative. Most importantly, through executive coaching I have become more aware of who I am, my strengths

and weaknesses, and how to leverage the one while finding compensation for the other. Finally, I am happy that the new beliefs and behaviors I have learned through executive coaching have become second nature for me, as I can barely recognize the person I once was.”

EXECUTIVE COACHING

Executive coaching has emerged as a billion dollar industry, serving the needs of a wide array of clients and companies. Executive coaching can be defined as “a collaborative relationship focused on equipping people to more fully develop themselves while facilitating a shift in their knowledge and behavior.” Further, it is a confidential, individually tailored engagement designed to meet the needs of both the leader being coached and the organization paying for the service.¹

Leaders in the industry unfamiliar with executive coaching may think back to experiences they have had with coaches — most likely, a softball or basketball coach. If positive, that coach brought you to a higher level of athleticism than you were capable of reaching on your own. However, executive coaching is fundamentally different from the relationship you had with your sports coach or other types of coaching. Executive coaching takes a unique approach and assumes an equal relationship between the executive and the coach, with the aim of helping

that executive discover and develop his or her own path toward optimal performance in an organizational context. Many leaders across the industry have achieved exceptional results through working with an executive coach. Executive coaching is geared toward creating sustainable leadership growth and development.

Executive coaching can take a number of forms. For example, FMI Coaching Advantage provides six-month coaching engagements with client and coach meeting over the phone twice per month for 60-minute sessions.

The sessions are lively discussions

packed with encouragement, resourcing, skill development and insights. On the front end, the coach and client collaborate to build a personal and practical plan for developing the client. This plan, Coaching Metrics, provides a measurable and practical tool for holding both the client and the coach accountable for real progress toward shifting behavior and reaching the goals of the plan.

MORE ON BILL

As we discussed Bill’s need for coaching with others, we were told that Bill had a character flaw! He would tell others one thing, then go do another. If you

“Coaching is about helping people slam shut the gap between what they’ve got now and what they want for themselves.”

— *Inc.*, June, 1997

Executive coaching is geared toward creating sustainable leadership growth and development.

chose one word to label this flaw, what first comes to mind? Dishonesty, deceit and duplicity might be your words of choice. Yet when we met Bill, we found an individual with healthy character, genuine commitment to his company and people, and a desire to act with integrity. You may ask, “How do we explain the discrepancy between what we observed and what others experience?” Two words: blind spot. Bill had absolutely no awareness that he was creating mistrust and dissonance with his superiors and peers. Yet, with the help of a multi-rater assessment and a professional debrief, Bill now had the gift of feedback ... the people he most cared about felt deceived and had little or no respect for him. Bill was no longer blind to his blind spot! He had taken the first critical step to grow and develop: He was now self-aware.

That should settle it, right? Give the man feedback, give him the business case and return on investment for correcting his issue, prescribe a treatment of two transformation pills per day for 60 days, then send him back to work. We wish! Bill needed a coach, a professional change agent to walk him through the thought and behavioral transformational process. In addition, Bill was now ready to commit to the difficult work of building a new set of skills to lead at a higher level.

Therefore, Bill and his coach created metrics that included a new set of behaviors consistent with virtues such as integrity, honesty and faithfulness. This was coupled with identifying the forces that kept Bill from speaking the truth to others around him — telling them what he thought they wanted to hear rather than what they needed to hear. Bill identified a few fears that were sabotaging his



“The goal of coaching is the goal of good management — to make the most of an organization’s valuable resources.”

— *Harvard Business Review*
November–December 1996

relationships and organization. Next, Bill began to keep a log in which he recorded both wins and losses against this new behavior of honesty. In the log, Bill would register when he successfully spoke the truth fearlessly to others, and he would also record when he was dishonest and made commitments he did not intend to fulfill. The log provided rich discussions

for his coaching sessions. Further, to develop the new thinking (fearlessness and courage) to drive the new behaviors (candor and honesty) Bill read specific books that addressed his challenge area. After six months of coaching, Bill has changed and is making a real difference in his company. Once again, “Finally, I am happy that the new beliefs and behaviors I have learned through executive coaching have become second nature for me as I can barely recognize the person I once was.”

COACHING FOR CASH

While executive coaching has made great strides in the past decade to remove the stigma that once came with it, there are still some who believe that it is only for the high-maintenance employee. In fact, nine out of ten clients who approach a coaching organization do so with a request that goes something like this, “John is productive and makes our company a lot of money but his interpersonal and social skills make Attila the Hun look friendly. We want you to fix him! No pressure, but you, and he, have six months!” And this request is reasonable, as there is a place for remedial coaching. Bill’s story above is an example of a positive remedial coaching outcome.

However, we want to raise the question of where you get the most “bang for your buck” for your coaching investment. Where do you get the most leverage for your coaching developmental efforts? Is it with High-Maintenance Marvin or

“Asked for a conservative estimate of the monetary payoff from the coaching they got, these managers described an average return of more than \$100,000, or about six times what the coaching had cost their companies.”

— *Fortune*, 2001

High-Potential Pete? Your return on investment for the high-potential leader will dwarf all investments for the high-maintenance individual. Why? It comes back to a one-word definition for leadership: influence. Coach a true and emerging influencer within your organization, and you increase both the quality and quantity of his or her impact on your company’s social, technical and material capital.

Many organizations throughout the construction industry struggle with leadership succession and filling their pipeline with enough qualified leaders to run the business successfully today — and in the future. So who are those high-potential leaders who will leverage the greater gains through executive coaching?

COACHING IS NOT FOR EVERYONE

While executive coaching has worked effectively for many construction industry managers and leaders, it is a mistake to think coaching is a panacea — a quick fix for every “problem” employee or plateaued manager. Like all programs and processes designed to spark change in individuals, there are certain limitations to what coaching can do. The leader needs to be coachable, which means that he or she is open to coaching and is willing to work with an executive coach. Some clients are forced by upper management to take on an executive coach. The results from these situations are significantly less impressive. Unless the individual is willing to be coached and is open to making changes, the coaching process will have only a minimal impact at best.

Let’s take the case of Steve. Steve was in a leadership role in his company with a track record of bringing in large clients and revenue for his firm. A 360-degree feedback assessment on Steve found him to be almost too “clean.” There were no major problems with this leader, no flaws and no areas for development. Yet, after several meetings, it was apparent that Steve had built his business within a culture of fear and intimidation. He himself was not humble, teachable or willing to

develop further. Coaching calls were filled with Steve letting his coach know that he had no issues and that his organization was flawless. The coach had a choice: to fall at Steve's feet for extended worship or suggest pulling the plug and aborting the coaching engagement. The coach chose the latter. It was a difficult discussion with Steve, informing him that coaching would be a waste of his company's funds, for he was not teachable or willing to grow. Decisions of this kind are serious, well-thought-through and most painful to execute.

So what are the essential traits for maximizing a coaching engagement? For a client to be ready and willing to be coached, there are certain requirements that need to be met.

For true transformation to take place during coaching, the client needs to display humility, have awareness of the problem with certain behaviors they exhibit, and be open and willing to make a change. Oftentimes, clients experiencing some level of pain — be it frustration with a lack of results, awareness of their leadership limitations, or even having their job be in jeopardy — are traditionally more willing to look inwardly and make necessary changes.

Coaching is not for everyone! Typically, leaders with significant character flaws or deep-seated behavioral problems are poor coaching candidates. Coaching is a process whereby the client must be willing to look inwardly and examine personal

For true transformation to take place during coaching, the client needs to display humility, have awareness of the problem with certain behaviors they exhibit, and be open and willing to make a change.



internal views, attitudes, values and beliefs that may be preventing him or her from reaching his or her full potential. For this reason, people with deep resentment, severe narcissism, ironclad beliefs or a victim mentality are unlikely to benefit from coaching.² This is not to suggest that coaching cannot help with some of the character-related issues. If the individual in question is willing to look inwardly and admit to and take responsibility for his or her destructive or negative behavior or thinking, coaching may be able to generate positive results.

Finally, some organizations will engage an executive coach to address derailing behavior. This typically is used when an employee is a high performer and possibly a high-potential employee, but has one or more particular behaviors holding him or her back. Oftentimes, leaders achieve a great deal of success because of the specific behaviors, attitudes and values that they hold.

However, their strengths can also turn into weaknesses. For example, leaders with incredibly strong work ethics are a great benefit to the organization. If this work ethic leads these employees to become workaholics and threatens to burn them out, that strength can also be preventing them from reaching their peak potential. Executive coaching would be an excellent option in this situation.

Coaches are not expected to tell others what to do, but to help them work through their concerns or issues to find solutions for themselves.

COACHING FOR DUMMIES!

All right. We know you are not a dummy. But let's just say you are interested in learning how to coach others in your organization but don't really know how to get started. Here are some practical guidelines:

- Get coaching yourself: Live the experience, then teach from that experience.
- Select a few employees who will be the focus of your coaching development effort for the next 12–18 months.
- Select F.A.T. people: The Faithful, Available and Teachable emerging leaders will leverage your developmental effort for real gain.
- Schedule meetings twice per month with your key people. We suggest 60 minutes for each coaching session.
- Use the following coaching format to get started:
 - 10 minutes — personal (check-in)
 - 20 minutes — business (projects, backlog, revenue, etc.)
 - 20 minutes — developmental input (personal growth areas worked on)
 - 10 minutes — logistical (action steps and schedule)
- Provide a mix of encouragement and challenge: Think 3:1 ratio of encouragement to challenge.

WHO WOULDN'T WANT TO COACH?

We often work with leaders in the construction industry who appear a bit intimidated by the prospect of coaching others in their organization. These leaders sometimes feel overwhelmed by the responsibility inherent in coaching and are often nagged by the thought, “Well, I’m not perfect, so wouldn’t it be inauthentic for me to try to tell others how to get better and improve?” Luckily, these fears are

unfounded. No coach is perfect or has all the answers, and this will not prevent you from achieving impressive results nevertheless. Coaches are not expected to tell others what to do, but to help them work through their concerns or issues to find solutions for themselves. Often, sharing past experiences of failure can be a powerful coaching moment. You do not need to know everything to be a great coach.

Many industry leaders who have served as coaches have commented on what a powerful, rewarding experience it has been for them. Coaching can be a thrilling process whereby you partner with specific individuals to effect true life change in them. While coaching focuses primarily on achieving business bottom-line results, many coachees have expressed the firm belief that coaching has not only affected them at work, but improved their personal lives as well. True transformation does take place through coaching.

In this article, we have outlined some of the key guidelines for coaching others. We have provided you with specific tools, but now the most important step is up to you. As a coach, you must dive into those partnerships with both feet—and trust that with your knowledge and experience, you will help to transform the lives of those you coach. That is the power of coaching, and it is one of the most effective means of enacting change in individuals and in organizations. Ultimately, it is up to individual leaders to make the commitment to coach their people. Those who do make that commitment will find that coaching generates amazing results. ■

Tim Tokarczyk is a consultant with FMI Corporation. He may be reached at 303.398.7260 or via e-mail at ttokarczyk@fminet.com. **Chip Toth** is formerly with FMI.

¹ “The Realities of Executive Coaching.” Diane Coutu and Carol Kauffman. Harvard Business Review January 2009.

² “What Can Coaches Do for You?” Diane Coutu and Carol Kauffman. Harvard Business Review January 2009.