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Leadership Coaching: The Path to Greater Effectiveness

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When most people hear the word "coach," the first image that comes to mind is of an athletics coach. The stereotypical coach's job is to improve the performance of the team's players and to win games. Of course, coaching occurs in many fields, not least the business world. There are many kinds of coaches working in this area and many levels of expertise and experience among practitioners, which can lead to confusion, dissatisfaction, and in turn, a bad reputation for coaching. One specific type of coaching is leadership coaching, the subject of this article.

Leadership coaching, as the name implies, is a process where a manager or executive engages the services of a professional coach, for the purpose of developing or enhancing leadership competencies and effectiveness. The process can be short-term or an ongoing relationship lasting many months. When done properly, leadership coaching can have a lasting impact on a leader's effectiveness regardless of his field of work.

Demand for this type of coaching is growing in Russia, but for many leaders in business and government, it is uncharted territory. Because of this, there are several misconceptions about coaching. One is that coaching is only for those with problems or poor performance. In reality, even a very experienced leader still has room to further develop his or her competencies. Think of fine-tuning a high performance automobile. Another misconception is that the coach's role is to tell the leader what he needs to do. This prescriptive approach misses the point that the person being coached needs to discover his own developmental needs, determine learning approaches and "own" the developmental process. The coach can assist the person in the process but cannot do it for him.

Given that leadership coaching is a big investment of time and money, a person needs to understand its true value. He should evaluate a potential coach or coaching organization with the end in mind: What is he trying to achieve? What are the consequences of not meeting

his goals? How will the coach help him to get results? The key is to be clear on desired outcomes and work with a coach in a way that focuses on action and results.

For instance, senior executives and high-potential businessmen may benefit from leadership coaching that allows them to build on existing strengths, develop new strategies for leading in new or complex situations, and push their goals forward. One leader may work with a coach to go from "good to great," while another may use coaching to shorten his ramp-up time in a new role or help navigate a significant increase in responsibilities.

For middle managers, coaching can reinvigorate a job or even a career. A coach can help a leader identify strengths, skills to be developed and strategies for improvement. Coaching can focus on achieving goals within a leader's current job or preparing for a new direction.

Derailing executives — previously successful executives who, for any number of reasons, are not meeting the organization's expectations — can gain from leadership coaching, too. Coaching helps these leaders identify problem areas and work to make tangible improvements that serve the needs of the organization and the individual.

So how does leadership coaching lead to results? Research shows that leadership coaching helps to improve individual performance in several ways. It can build greater self-awareness and understanding of one's context. Coaching is about what he does and where he works. The person coached will gain insight about himself as a leader within the specific organization. Coaching can also lead to greater understanding of others. A coach helps the person understand why others might think and act the way they do. He can learn about actions to take to help focus him in a direction that is better for the organization.

Coaching can also improve a leader's ability to communicate, a key leadership skill. A coach works with the leader to find ways to improve how he conveys what is important to him, to the business and to others. And coaching improves the leader's ability to coach others. Once a leader has experienced the value of coaching for his own development, he will be much more prepared to notice and leverage coaching opportunities with his team. This capacity will be a key differentiator between a good leader and a great one.

Of course, leadership coaching is not for everyone. If the leader has no interest in changing or is not willing to work hard and make development a priority, then coaching will be a waste of time and money. On the other hand, if he is ready to invest in himself, coaching offers a tailored, focused way to connect leadership development with day-to-day work demands.

What determines the effectiveness of a leadership coaching approach? It will be effective if it mirrors how leaders develop over the course of their careers. Research shows that three elements must be present for leadership development to occur. The first is ongoing assessment of one's impact and where he or she is in their development. The second is challenge, since many competencies are learned in the daily challenges that confront leaders. The third element is support: Leaders develop when they have others who support their growth.

If this is how leaders develop their competencies, then it is logical that effective coaching embodies these three elements. We believe that good coaching is always grounded in assessment. Using formal and informal assessments gives the leader a clear look in the

mirror in order to see their strengths and areas of development. The coach also challenges to leader to change. What is not working? What needs to change? What do you need to do? And, of course, the coach and person being coached develop a confidential and trusting relationship that supports the ongoing development process.

Leaders can ask themselves, "Can I benefit from leadership coaching?" The answer is yes, but only if — if they are open to change, ready to make the commitment needed and find an effective coach who incorporates assessment, challenge and support into the process. If this happens, a leader in whatever role or type of organization can make a huge leap in leadership effectiveness.

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