

Resistance, Reluctance And Coaching

By Patricia Wheeler

Executive Coaching is increasingly offered as an acknowledgement of success –a tool to continue developing already effective leaders, high potentials and high performers. Some organizations are proactive to the point that it's the exception rather than the rule to deploy coaching to help an executive in trouble.

Many companies are still on the “learning curve” of how to use coaching to develop leadership capacity, particularly for technically oriented leaders and operational experts.

In my experience with hundreds of leaders, I find that people approach coaching in one of three ways:

- Some voluntarily raise their hands and ask to work with a coach. These leaders are often “early adopters” who embrace new technologies and opportunities that they think will make a positive difference.
- Some, when given the opportunity, are interested and even excited by the chance to further develop leadership skills. This group is in the majority. These two groups are committed to finding learning experiences and great coaches to raise their game.
- And, some individuals have great trepidation about coaching. They are reluctant, avoidant, and sometimes downright cynical about the process. They see it as a waste of time at best and potentially detrimental at worst.

What drives this reluctance? First of all, it goes without saying that every leader deserves to exercise choice about the coaches deployed to work with them. Just as you qualify doctors and dentists, you must know that your coach is well suited and trustworthy.

In addition to this external concern, I see three additional sources of leader reluctance, resistance and fear of coaching that must often be acknowledged and addressed:

1. Concern about venturing into the unknown, seemingly “dark territories” inside us. Leaders who have advanced primarily through the power of technical expertise must focus on the less familiar and intangible territory of interpersonal style, behavior under stress and the need to build trust and followership through behavior and relational skills rather than factual knowledge.
2. Worry that the coaching process will be too public, potentially embarrassing or may expose perceived weaknesses to others and make the situation worse. Here it is

crucial for the leader, their boss and the coach to be crystal clear about what information will be communicated to whom, and how. Coaches must deeply understand the organizational culture and its ground rules to craft a “no-lose” plan in which the process builds rather than erodes credibility. (News flash to leaders: your stakeholders already know your weaknesses!)

3. Reluctance to deliberately and consciously work on things that we know will make us uncomfortable. Let’s face it...we like doing things we’re already good at. It takes courage to push ourselves into areas that are less developed or don’t represent our usual, familiar style. How often do we tell ourselves that our worries are groundless, or that we’ll take care of the problem when we’re less busy? Many of us, including myself at times, avoid doing things that we know will be good for us in the end because we dread the ordeal. We put off making the dental appointment, starting the exercise program, telling the doctor or our family about some worrisome symptom.

How many times do we know that we should address something in our life...that either will enhance our well-being or avert destructive consequences? When do we avoid something because of inner worries, and if we do, how do we address them? We suggest turning a vague anxiety into an expressed fear – in other words, ask yourself, “What am I most afraid of?” When we unflinchingly look at this bottom line, we move toward making decisions that will serve us now and in the future.

If a leader fears that coaching will be an unpleasant experience with a potentially negative career impact, we work on establishing ground rules of confidentiality with them and their sponsors. If they had bad experiences with coaching in the past, we explore this and create ongoing feedback and feedforward within the coaching process. If they are concerned about looking bad to their direct reports, peers or bosses, we create a design that highlights their strengths and commitment to leadership and builds credibility with stakeholders. In other words, we must put the “moose” of reluctance on the table and address it early and honestly in our discussions.

Briefly put, deal with anxiety or avoidance by turning them into tangible concerns. Address them, minimize their chances of occurrence, then go forth and get even better.

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