

Choosing an Executive Coach is one of the tasks many leaders will cross at some point during their careers. Some leaders go to great lengths to avoid it. Others delegate this to HR or to their line manager. And despite all good efforts, it happens all the time: We choose the wrong coach for our own development.

Title confusion

Partly, it's because "Coach" is a title that is not protected by any entity or legislation. Anyone could call themselves a Coach. It is also not easy to recognise -even for experienced HR leaders- how to differentiate between coaches who have undergone a proper coach education with relevant experience, right credentials, supervision reference and great client testimonials. The coaching industry is the fastest growing industry and as a result also quite diverse. There are some great coaches out there, many good medium-level coaches, and unfortunately quite a big number of simply unprofessional people who call themselves a Coach.

Professional standards

This is also driven by the fact that the coaching field's ethical and professional standards are still in development and most coach trainings offered are simply too short to provide an in-depth education the coach could draw upon.

Lack of fit/chemistry

At times it is overlooked that choosing an Executive Coach is a highly personal matter. You are seeking support to improve the most important aspect of your life: Your career, your behaviours and ultimately your life. So, it's not like you are getting your car changed or buying a new custom made suit.

Sustainability

Recently I came across an "Executive Coach" who offers "1 Day Transformative Coaching Programmes for Senior Executives". This may sound lucrative at surface and probably appeals to senior executives who simply don't have the time to engage in a 6-12 months coaching programme with a frequency of 6-12 sessions built in. Having gone through a three-year rigorous coaching education across three continents myself with many years' experience in the people arena, I struggle to see how any leader will experience "transformative change" after a one-day intervention with no follow up. Even the leadership development literature suggests that changing a habit is something that will require time, energy and skill, among many other things such as persistence, dedication and the right timing.

Well intentioned recommendation

To make matters worse, leaders often look for and trust the recommendations from their peers. So a CFO may choose to work with an Executive Coach that has been referred to him by the CEO. Whilst that may appear to be a good idea, it is likely that that particular Coach has a deep specialisation in working with General Managers, Managing Directors and CEOs. So they have honed in on working with generalist leaders with a broad leadership remit. If the CFO's ambition is to transition into a CEO role, that maybe a great idea indeed. But if they are looking to land a bigger CFO role, then working with someone who has specialised to work with CFOs in large corporates may be a better idea.

Not engaging relevant stakeholders

In one particular instance I remember how an Executive coach was half way through their coaching engagement before he received a call from the HR department. Apparently the line manager of the individual had not been engaged before committing to the coaching. So neither HR nor the executive had talked about the engagement with the line manager. And it was only when the line manager got the invoice for the coaching engagement that he understood this had been put in place. Unfortunate, you might say, but it really is a missed opportunity. A professional coach should always liaise with the line manager –especially if the organisation is paying for the coaching engagement- both in order to gather input and also keep the line manager (and sometimes HR) informed about the progress made on the agreed learning outcomes (without compromising any confidentiality of the actual conversations).

Lack of outcome focus

I once worked with a client after she had engaged an external coach – paid by her employer- who worked with her for about 6 months. When I asked her what development objectives she had been working on and what the ultimate outcomes of the coaching engagement were, she could not mention them. There were none agreed and on top, she could not name any meaningful change as a result of the coaching.

Outplacement substitute

In some organisations hiring an Executive Coach is done to replace a professional service such as an outplacement. Whilst there may be value in engaging a coach for that matter, it is absolutely critical that the purpose of the coaching is made transparent both to the Executive and the Coach right from the beginning. To make matters worse, I have observed instances where coaching of poor quality and a mismatch has exacerbated an existing issue.

Wrong tool

Lastly, senior leaders sometimes tend to confuse their mentoring need with coaching. One of the senior leaders I recently met at a leadership conference talked to me during dinner saying that he had been working with a “Executive Coach” for twelve months. Despite all the chemistry checks, referrals and credentials, the coaching had not resulted in any outcomes they had agreed upon. Listening closely to what he was looking to get out of a coaching engagement it quickly became clear to me that he would have been better off with a senior mentor instead of working with an external coach who calls herself on her website a “Life Coach, helping clients to find their mission in life”.

Nobody’s perfect. And yet, choosing the right Executive Coach is not only doable, but a very wise thing to do indeed. My next blog post will focus on key criteria to choose the most appropriate Executive Coach.



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