

What makes executive coaches feel valued?

Considering how much organizations pay for the services of executive coaches, it might be expected that the relationship between them would be a partnership, aimed at providing the best possible support for the client. While in some cases, this is undoubtedly true, a more general picture – as revealed in a Linked-In discussion group I recently initiated -- appears to be one of more transactional relationships, with the executive coach treated as a commodity supplier.

One of the questions explored was what made coaches feel valued and devalued. When coaches felt valued by the organization, their experiences included:

- A sense that coaching is genuinely seen as a value-adding activity
- Involvement and support of sponsor
- Buyers understand what they should be expecting from coaching; they discuss assignments in terms of the value coaching will bring to the business
- Clear protocols about how to deal with issues such as conflict of interest or confidentiality
- Clear channels to bring up and discuss issues that are more organizational than simply relevant to the individual client
- Clarity about the scope of the client and expectations from coaching
- Coaching language and behaviours become adopted within the organization
- Post-implementation review, based on coach's observations during the assignment
- When the positive change in the client is acknowledged
- The organization encourages and supports the client in making good use of coaching

When coaches felt valued by the client, their experiences included:

- Being contacted outside the formal sessions, for advice
- Adherence to session bookings – a sense that coaching sessions are really important to the client
- Clarity about how they are helping/ what the client is now achieving or doing differently
- Clients take seriously their role as coachees

When coaches felt devalued by the organisation, their experiences included:

- Buyers who don't understand (or have any interest in understanding) what good coaching looks like
- Over-reliance on psychometrics
- Not getting feedback
- Coaching being used as a coping strategy, to avoid dealing with bigger or more difficult issues

- Being asked to break confidentiality
- Conflict between expectations of client and sponsor is not addressed
- HR is “stand-offish” because the coach was introduced by a senior leader; or vice versa
- Over-emphasis on coach have sector experience
- Coach being used as “last resort”, when all else has failed
- Where line manager doesn’t want HR involved
- “Having to chase for payment ... and the company not remembering what I did!”
- Unclear objectives

When coaches felt devalued by the client, their experiences included:

- Sessions postponed or changed at short notice
- Sessions shortened for “higher priorities”
- Coachees come to sessions unprepared
- Coachees expect to be told what to do
- When the client interviews several potential coaches, but only communicates back to the one s/he chooses

What lessons can organizations extract from these observations by coaches? Firstly, it is important to position the coaching assignment as a multi-party relationship, in which coach, coachee, sponsor and the client’s line manager all have a significant role; and for which all have a sense of ownership. Secondly, the quality of communication between all of these stakeholders underpins the effectiveness of the coaching assignment. In particular, communication should ensure clarity of expectations at the beginning, flow of information as the assignment develops, and reflection as it draws to a close. Thirdly, other involved parties, such as purchasing, need to be educated, so they support the emphasis on quality (rather than looking for cheapest price!). Fourthly, a climate of mutual respect is vital.

To develop a viable partnership, therefore, the coach and the organization — indeed, the whole stakeholder group -- need to agree and adhere to practical protocols for all of these issues.

It can be easy for organizations to assume that, with an excess of supply of coaches over demand, they can afford to be relatively cavalier about developing coaching partnerships. However, we are seeing increasing evidence that world class coaches – those who have the skills and experience that can add the greatest value – are most surely *not* in oversupply and can to a considerable extent choose which companies they want to work with. Coaching partnerships are only optional, it appears, if you are prepared to accept mediocrity.