

EXECUTIVE INSIGHT

Vetting Executive Coaches

A Discussion of Key Management Issues

WHAT WE THINK

With the recent proliferation of executive coaches to choose from, one reason CEOs hesitate is uncertainty.

The challenge is in selecting a coach or adviser who will provide the best value and results for their investment of time, trust, and money.

Perspectives on executive coaches have changed dramatically over the last 20 years. The stigma of coaching as a last-ditch effort to save a derailing executive has given way to an acknowledgment of its role as an important element of the support system that increases the effectiveness of senior leaders. The resulting expansion in demand has brought with it an expansion in supply—though of varying degrees of relevance and effectiveness. The question becomes, then, how do you select an executive coach? How do you identify the best resource who will help you create practical, sustainable leadership changes with real business impact?

In this issue of *Executive Insight*, we will outline the skills and experiences—the core competencies—senior executives and HR professionals should look for when determining whether a management psychologist or consultant will add value to their organization's bottom line, as well as the leadership capability and career path of individual executives.

Business Acumen

From Fortune 50 to nonprofits, senior

executives are businesspeople. To help them, their coaches must be businesspeople. If the counsel given is not related to the strategic goals, challenges, and opportunities of a specific organization, it is not value-added. It may be of general use to an individual as a person, but not to the business enterprise or its people. Business acumen is the price of admission.

Key Considerations:

- Can they “speak the language” of our business? Do they understand how we create value for our customers and shareholders?
- What methods do they use to build an understanding of the strategic, operational, and cultural realities of the business?
- Are they perceptive about the day-to-day realities of a senior executive? Is their understanding superficial or nuanced and deep?
- Have they worked in similar industries, at similar scale, with similar levels?
- Are they passionate about developing business leaders? Do

they care about my success as a leader as much as they care about me as a person?

Psychological Insight

Why do senior executives need a coach? For the same reason cars have rear-view mirrors—blind spots. Even in the most feedback-rich cultures, leaders are never fully aware of their impact and how to improve it. They recognize patterns within the executive's style that add value, as well as those that detract and create risk for his/her leadership. The ability to presciently collect and analyze both formal and informal data enables the coach to tailor developmental interventions to the business and culture and provide realistic, actionable, and relevant guidance.

Key Considerations:

- Do they have psychological training? Do they understand the “whys” of people in ways that add value?
- How do they gather information? How do they draw conclusions and inferences? Will this methodology work in our organization?

- How do they combine their understanding of the executive with the realities of the business environment? Does their advice resonate and make sense for our business?
- Will they bring game-changing insights the executive has not previously considered? Do they add new ways of thinking about problems?
- Are they willing to be direct, candid, and hard-hitting when it is needed?

Drives Positive Change

The business environment is changing rapidly, and senior executives must follow suit. A coach needs to challenge clients to change, grow, explore, and reflect on their readiness and capacity for future roles. They do this by defining the needs and goals for the future; committing to improving the client's capacity, self-awareness, and engagement; and supporting progress.

Key Considerations:

- How do they tailor interventions to the needs of the business? Given our business and culture, how would they go about creating meaningful and lasting change?
- What is their approach to coaching? How are they effective? What is their "secret ingredient"?
- How do they set goals? How do they create commitment and follow-through on those goals?
- How do they connect individual

coaching to the broader developmental and support systems in the organization?

- How have they dealt with difficult executives previously, especially those who are resistant to change? What do they do when the executive is not showing progress?

Executive Presence

A credible coach should be comfortable in the C-suite. They are not intimidated by power. If they do not exude executive presence, confidence, and authenticity, they are unlikely to build rapid trust and buy-in. Their knowledge and expertise on matters of business and behavioral change make them unafraid to challenge the highest-ranking executives and ask profound and pointed questions. They are skilled in navigating boundaries of confidentiality and working toward the goals of both the executive and the organization.

Key Considerations:

- Am I comfortable putting them in front of our C-suite executives? Will the executives see them as credible and make time for them?
- How do they establish credibility with clients? How have they tried to establish credibility with me? Has it been effective?
- Do they ask good questions? Are they asking the "right" questions? Will they change our thinking?
- Are they knowledgeable and confident without being arrogant?
- Do they come across as authentic?

Chemistry

At some point, you'll have to trust your intuition. Your relationship with a potential coach should feel natural and comfortable, certainly not forced. You will need to consider whether or not there's a natural chemistry in your interactions. Shared values and interests are a plus. A sense of humor and a good dose of candor also go a long way.

Key Considerations:

- How are they building rapport with me? Will that method be effective throughout the organization?
- Are we communicating effectively? Do they listen? Do they understand my needs when it comes to people?
- Are they likely to "fit" in our culture while still being willing to challenge?
- Do I feel I can be candid with them? Are they being open and honest with me?
- Would I benefit from a long-term relationship with them?

The Bottom Line

When investing time, money, and trust in a coach, initiate a vetting process that assesses for these five essential attributes:

- Business Acumen—can they "speak the language" of our business?
- Psychological Insight—will they create new insights and shift our thinking?
- Drives Positive Change—will they create lasting change and impact?

- Executive Presence—will they be compelling in front of our leaders?
- Chemistry—will our business ultimately enjoy and benefit from the experience of working with them?

ABOUT RHR INTERNATIONAL

RHR International LLP is an independent global leadership consulting firm whose mission is to unlock potential in leaders. Through its behavioral lens, RHR has worked side by side with CEOs, board directors, and senior executives for more than 70 years, helping them acquire the knowledge, wisdom, and skills necessary to achieve business results.

RHR's practical solutions, guided by in-depth analytics, lead to business outcomes that further clients' success. RHR offers Executive Bench[®]: Talent Pipeline suite of services, Board & CEO Services, Senior Team Effectiveness, Leading Transformational Change, Executive Development, and Executive Assessment across industry sectors. For more information, visit rhrinternational.com.

Visit rhrinternational.com