

## The Mentor's Cousin: The Executive Coach

### A coach can help you reach career goals with an individual-based approach

By Cecelia Wooden, Ed.D.

As organizations merge, downsize, or are absorbed into larger organizations, executives' job responsibilities and workloads are in a constant state of flux. Often, this results in executives having little time or energy for anything but putting out fires. This pressure can prevent capable executives from making visionary decisions—meaning that while you may be performing your job effectively, you may not be developing the skills necessary to grow and evolve with your field. To combat this situation, you may want to consider how an executive coach can enhance your performance.

While some of the goals of coaching and mentoring may be similar, important differences exist between the two. In a mentoring relationship, a seasoned executive advises an early careerist; consequently, the relationship is often a one-sided exchange in which the employee comes to the mentor with specific questions and walks away with answers. A coaching relationship is a more facilitative relationship in which you work together to:

- Increase your knowledge base and enhance your skills. In working with a coach, you can find out where your individual weaknesses or knowledge gaps are and create a plan for improvement. For example, you may find that you have excellent technical skills, but you need to improve your interpersonal skills to continue to advance in your career. A coach can help you determine that, as well as help you develop and hone those skills to become a more well-rounded executive.
- Avoid pitfalls. Your coach can also act as a mentor, giving you the benefit of his or her experience to help you make informed choices. Additionally, as an objective observer, a coach may be able to point out potentially problematic patterns in your own behavior so you can avoid repeating your mistakes.
- Focus your career strategy. A coach can help you closely examine your talents and your goals to determine the best career path.

The best coaches are the ones who base their recommendations on your specific needs and goals. Therefore, it is important to find a coach without a prepackaged bag of tricks.

Whether you choose to hire your own executive coach or work with one within your organization, following are some issues to consider:

- What kinds of questions is he or she asking? One of the best skills a coach can bring to the relationship is the ability to ask powerful, nonjudgmental questions. These questions should help you examine yourself and your career more closely, or give you a new perspective on some aspect of your personal career development.
- Is he or she truly listening? A good coach listens to you and considers your individual needs and goals before offering suggestions.
- How is the chemistry? Do you feel comfortable with your coach? Are you willing to confide in that person? Because the coaching relationship is built on trust, look for someone who not only has an impressive resume, but who also will be a good fit with your personality and style.

Executive coaching does not preclude the need for mentoring. Rather, it is another tool to help you—whether you're an early careerist or a seasoned senior executive—improve your skills and become even more successful in your field.

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