

Who Leads Leaders?

Excerpted from Greg Bustin's book, *Take Charge! How Leaders Profit From Change*

Depending on the rigors of your job, the pressures you face, and your experience handling change, at some point you may consider working with an executive coach – either as part of your trusted circle of advisors, or outside it.

As a senior leader, you've achieved success based largely on your attitude, abilities and acuity. Your skills have been your transport to your position in life. The thought of needing a coach can seem bush league. The fact is that coaching elite-level athletes is really no different than coaching elite-level executives.

It's been said that Tom Landry's job as the head coach of the Dallas Cowboys was to get grown men to do things they didn't want to do in order to achieve something they all desperately wanted. That's the essence of coaching.

And that's why it's helpful to have a wise, objective, focused and – occasionally – unmerciful evaluation of our personal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, or SWOTs. After all, that's what keeps "excellence" excellent.

Define your needs

At a time when anyone can hang out a coaching shingle, how do you find a resource that won't waste your time or money?

Like anything in life, you must define your needs, evaluate solutions and execute. A good first step is taking a quick look at what executive coaching is and is not.

Coaching is...	Coaching is not...
Tough love	Sycophantic
Motivation & mentoring	Therapy
A sounding board	Personality-based
Holding you accountable	Theoretical
Empowerment	Political maneuvering
Removing roadblocks	Focused on externals
Unlocking potential	Making you into someone you're not
Identifying and filling gaps	Manipulation
Practice and rehearsal	Memorization

Specific individual development needs are unique. Consider these questions:

- Are you experiencing professional frustration?
- Are you stuck on a career plateau?
- Are you unclear about why you or your organization is not moving upward and forward?
- Are you bored? Disenchanted?

- Have you lost passion for your work?
- Are you less comfortable in social settings?
- Does public speaking cause anxiety?
- Do your management or leadership skills need sharpening?
- Are you facing challenges you've never faced?
- Is your change curve steeper than your ability to adjust?

Take a few minutes and identify specific barriers, limitations, challenges and development goals you want to address. As you're cataloging your needs, remember the old saying that executives get hired for their skills but fired for their personalities.

Finding the right resource

The proliferation in the number of executive coaches, coaching accreditation organizations and coaching websites can confuse your search for a coach. To complicate things further, many coaches don't refer to themselves as "coaches." You may find terms such as career strategists, executive development consultants, life strategists, performance consultants, personal improvement consultants...ad nauseum. Like most searches for providers of professional services, your best source is your own network of peers and their referrals. More of your peers are using coaches than you might think. So tap into your network and leave advertising and Internet searches to others.

Here are seven points to consider in finding and working with an executive coach:

1. A good coach will always offer a complimentary initial consultation
2. Communication and understanding are key
3. Select a coach who works with people like you
4. Don't get hung up on certifications
5. Make sure your coach will give you blunt feedback
6. Know your end game
7. You should drive your development process

Invest in yourself

Effective coaches will guide you through a process consisting of four fundamental components

- An examination of the "real you"
- An examination of outside forces
- An analysis of where these points converge and diverge
- A plan for moving forward

The time, effort and money you spend with an executive coach should result in significant improvement in your performance and career/life satisfaction. Plus, you should start seeing results and insights in a relatively short time span. Investing the time and effort up front to find yourself the right coach will give you greater insight into your development needs and will help keep your game at the elite level.

Think of it as an investment that pays dividends every day of your life. ■