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Pathway to Leadership

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PATHWAY TO LEADERSHIP

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Coaching can take a strategic and more effective position when it is tied to an organization's talent management strategy. The author of this article illustrates one way to position coaching as a key component tied to the business and to a talent management architecture. Coaching can evolve from being reactive (improving a leader's performance) to proactive (addressing development and anticipated opportunities) when linked to how an organization systematically develops its leaders. This proactive, more sophisticated, stance can be shown by "stages" along a coaching continuum. An example of one leader's development illustrates how organizations can achieve success with this type of practice.

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Executives often talk about having a lot of balls in the air, usually referring to plans about business growth, political conundrums, how to best lead strategic initiatives or organizational problems to solve. An executive coach is a resource who can strategize change, help to develop innovative or novel perspectives, consider and challenge issues and decisions, reframe problems, and work with a leader to develop their own effective personal style.

The work of the coach is to build a client-centered partnership which creates a genuine connection with a leader while providing feedback to further their organizational and personal success. This connection starts with the coach listening and relating to the leader to gain both an empathic and objective understanding of the leader's life and challenges.

This balance allows a coach to:

- Determine the focus of coaching with the leader and other stakeholders;
- Diagnose the executive's style and work effectiveness;
- Jointly set goals and performance measures to enhance and optimize work performance;
- Provide feedback to challenge and enhance perspective; and
- Guide success in the context of what the organization and the leader define as progress.

This partnership is a journey of discovery. The executive learns about the perceptions they trigger in others and how to manage and lead in new ways which optimize their effectiveness. The formal data to provide the required personal change are 360° feedback and leadership assessments. When coupled with a trusted coaching relationship, a leader can develop broader perspectives about their work, generate insights toward creative ways to achieve their objectives and enhance behaviors critical to their role and to their vision.

The leader can also develop a self-narrative aligned with their leadership position, vital in new or bigger roles. The self-narrative is a broader identity catalyzed by challenges or requirements of a bigger job or changes in role. Coaching offers the self insight and the integration of a broader, more fully incorporated sense of self, based on what the leader needs to "stand for" in the organization. Establishing and incorporating a new persona fitting with a new role or leadership platform incorporates

past successes with broader perspectives, fitting the larger leadership scope (Ibarra, 2000). New self narratives, “allow leaders to shape behavior, establish a leadership identity and integrate multiple perspectives” (McAdams & Pals, 2006). This self view lets the leader form relationships, stepping up but not away from whom they are — thereby allowing for greater congruence as their role and life changes. It also lets them be self-aware, emotionally present, and able to incorporate role changes within a broader context. At this point they are congruent with who they are and how they present themselves to others.

POSITIONING COACHING STRATEGICALLY

The valued position of coaching strengthens when part of a broad leadership and talent management strategy. A broad framework of this sort ties to succession planning, business objectives and organizational strategy and is viewed as a priority in the development of employees across multiple levels. Such positioning anchors coaching (and mentoring) to business objectives and provides a proactive rationale for its use. Coaching may be used to facilitate or support 360° feedback, competency-based assessments, individual development plans, and various leadership programs. Leadership skills should also be articulated to include the external perspective needed to address customer expectations. The combination of external and internal perspectives helps leaders build the broadest possible framework. This viewpoint positions leaders to relate to external market and community leaders as they assume greater positions of authority in their career (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2007). (See Table 1.)

Table 1. Talent Management Components

Succession Strategy Distinctions	Leadership Competencies, Implementation Distinctions	Systemic Leadership Development Distinctions
Ongoing succession planning driven by a top down mandate of the executive team.	Competency model developed and communicated and used as “success criteria” to paint the picture of a successful leader.	Leadership development and coaching occur at multiple levels as a proactive intervention.
Succession linked to business strategy, high potential development, cross functional assignments to transfer technology or broaden leaders’ company perspective and marketplace perspective.	Competencies linked to performance management, succession, development internally and externally, job assignments, mentoring, development planning, reward systems and external market trends and customer expectations.	Tiered and tailored development programs operate in tandem with coaching new leaders, targeted performance coaching and executive coaching.
Assignments, rotations and development broadly implemented to create talent pools.	Coaching is <i>one</i> component of a holistic talent management system.	Development planning, mentoring and feedback systems are widely used with effectiveness measured.

THE EVOLUTION OF COACHING AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY

When coaching is not part of a talent management strategy it is often introduced organizationally in an unstructured, *laissez faire* manner. In this instance, the goals of a coaching engagement may not be defined, let alone connected to a succession management process or business outcomes.

An organization may try out coaching as a remedial fix for an executive who is in crisis mode. As coaching evolves and matures, it is used for a few top executives who are seen as the next wave of top leaders. When the organization realizes

the benefits of coaching more executives want to have a coach. You can hear people say things like, “I have a coach and leading is ongoing learning”. Coaching is recognized as an experience contributing to a leader’s success. Based on the author’s observations, the personal experience and benefits of coaching start to be internalized as part of an organization’s narrative. This narrative begins a paradigm shift organizationally. The collective individual value accrued from coaching becomes embodied in organizational culture.

The strategic intent of coaching is linked to talent management and to leadership development initiatives.

These benefits of coaching are recognized by the organization, which leads to the development of a coaching strategy. At this point, coaching has evolved and migrates to a proactive choice. It is used to assist in the assimilation of new leaders as well as to develop other leaders who have proven track records. The strategic intent of coaching is linked to talent management and to leadership development initiatives. Over time, results and measures of executive success and coach effectiveness are gathered.

An organization moves to a higher level of sophistication when coaching becomes a systemic intervention and becomes part of the “development fabric” in an organization. Clear criteria are used to select coaches and coaching is viewed as a leadership development tool at multiple levels in the organization. Internal mentors are identified and trained to sustain coaching and development plan outcomes (see Table 2).

Table 2. Creating a Proactive Culture of Coaching — Where is Your Organization?

Limited Recognition of Coaching Value	Building the Coaching View	Building a Proactive Coaching Environment	Strong Coaching Culture
No exposure to coaching best practices	Coaching is remedial or offered in a crisis	Awareness of coaching benefits with some anecdotal results	Awareness of coaching benefits widely known
Development is unfocused and reactive	Some awareness of coaching benefits	Done when requested, as a tactical form of development, in “pockets” of the organization	Tangible and intangible business results tied to coaching; ROI measured and discussed with senior team
Leadership development is offered through group training	Used for a few at the top of the house	Used for new leaders (high potentials) and proven leaders	Coaching is an ongoing business practice; proactively used extensively at multiple levels
Haphazard alignment of individual goals with organization strategy; no talent management system	Coaching remains mysterious and not well understood	Seen as an executive perk	Clear criteria for matching coaches with leaders
High risk for staff turnover	No criteria for selecting coaches	Informal mentoring and training of mentors	Internal mentors coach and may also work with external coaches
No succession plan, with the hiring of leaders done in a reactive mode or randomly	Succession planning is implemented as replacement planning	Succession planning conducted and reviewed yearly	Part of a talent management practice and integrated with the company strategy
Weak leadership bench	Leadership bench “spotty”	A leadership bench exists in some areas with strong leaders, but not across the entire organizations	Strong leadership bench across the organization

COACHING AT WORK - IN A PROACTIVE VENUE

In my experience, there are at least five categories of balls for an executive to juggle at all times: work, relationships, health, family and values. Just like athletic events, the ball called work can bounce and rebound and have considerable volatility. Even with its ups and downs, work ideally has an ongoing rhythm of the executive being in sync with their team, peers, boss, customers and the vision for business success. An organization that embeds coaching as a key component in its leadership and talent management strategy can often anticipate or get on top of problems before they get out of control. One of my client companies, exemplary of this, is proactive and positions coaching well. They stand out, whether they are assimilating new executives, helping those who are making significant work and role passages, or using coaching as an improvement strategy for leaders who can benefit from an individual leadership development experience. Here's a personal story that illustrates how coaching can be used to ensure success, even in the most demanding of circumstances.

I knew he was in trouble when we met. His executive demeanor was hesitant and he stated that he needed help adjusting into this new culture and in “getting his arms around” a big new job.

A client of mine called, saying they needed to see me as soon as possible. They had a new executive who needed assimilation into the organization. They believed coaching could rapidly get him oriented and productive in a complex, new position. This company is sophisticated about how and when to use coaching and they manage their talent systemically.

The executive I was introduced to was named Mark. I knew he was in trouble when we met. His executive demeanor was hesitant and he stated that he needed help adjusting into this new culture and in “getting his arms around” a big new job.

Mark had been hired to work for a Fortune 100 company from a premier government research center. Over a fifteen year career, Mark had proven himself as an innovative scientist, team leader, and one who could develop new products. His significant contribution in the government arena led to recognition and a job offer in the private sector. His new job required that he make three significant changes, each of which was challenging in its own right. First, he was making the shift from scientist (and individual performer) to manager. [See Hurd and Juri (2005) for some of the unique challenges associated with this transition for scientific and technical professionals.] Second, he was making the career transition from manager to division leader. [See Charan, Drotter, & Noel (2001) for the challenges unique to each level of job promotion/transition.] He was also making the change culturally, from public to private sector, into a large multinational company.

When starting this new position, he relocated with his pregnant wife, recently widowed mother and two year old son. His first assignment was to lead a cross-functional division team of internationally known technologists, all PhD's, some who had been his former teachers. Their goal was to take a basic research concept, develop a prototype and collaborate with engineering, marketing and manufacturing to deliver a product in record time. The company hired Mark at an astronomical salary, three times what he made in the public sector. The firm bet their success in the marketplace that his division could develop a product, then take it to market at lightening speed.

This new viewpoint allowed him to be more strategic and agile when making decisions.

Coaching was recognized by Mark's executive sponsors as an effective intervention and proponents of this approach saw coaching as a force multiplier for leadership development and business contributions.

The coaching process started with a stakeholder analysis to understand the culture and the key players who were important for his and his division's success. We also improved his stress level by setting priorities. Mark's stress level was so high that he was not sleeping. His self-confidence was at a low point due to all the personal change, organizational demands and cultural discovery process. He was unsure of his leadership and competence in this new work environment and unfamiliar culture.

We devised ways to manage his time, reviewed and reorganized his priorities, and discussed in depth how public sector vs. private sector activities differed. This shed a different light on what needed his attention, reframed the cultural landscape, and influenced choices about what could be delegated and how to schedule the workday. This new viewpoint allowed him to be more strategic and agile when making decisions.

We also focused on his family priorities. Agreements were made about work hours, how to set boundaries so he could start spending more time with his family and earmark time to play with his young children. We created techniques to manage stress and pace himself to accommodate the new position.

His work relationships needed attention. Some of his direct reports were former mentors and were renowned international scientists. Mark had to mentally create a different "playing field" concerning his colleagues while owning his role as the leader of his division and creating a new self narrative. This meant setting goals for others, establishing clear expectations, appraising performance (including that of former mentors), and delegating effectively to them.

As a result of his changes in leadership style, Mark gained the trust and respect of former colleagues and brought a more relaxed tone to the work environment. Mark was relieved from former workload burdens since he delegated effectively. He also gave some key, visible assignments as a way to develop others and built a stronger leadership bench. He learned that most of the upset expressed as relationship problems stemmed from unmet expectations, poor communications and unclear intentions, all tractable issues. As Mark changed his focus, style, mood and ways of engaging and directing team members, the teamwork and the overall productivity needed to meet product schedules and time to market expectations were achieved.

COACHING AS A WINNING STRATEGY

Mark built on his successes and began to work with a new rhythm. He developed a broader perspective and a more adaptive leadership style. Mark also built the relationships needed to drive the new product through successful development reviews. He built and maintained effective connections with his team, the company, as well as his family, and deepened his own insight and capability as a leader. Mark and his team were successful in their product launch, bringing the new product to market in record time.

Coaching was recognized by Mark's executive sponsors as an effective intervention and proponents of this approach saw coaching as a force multiplier for leadership development and business contributions. Our partnership was the right lever to pull at just the right time. It would become an illustrative centerpiece for the company's emergent leadership development practices. By linking coaching to

a talent management strategy, leaders, whether they are new or established, can receive the support needed to win and drive business success.

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