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Helping You Hire and Develop Great Leaders

Leadersynth™
To Coach or Not to Coach?
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Earlier today, I talked with a manager in a financial institution who was struggling with a particular direct report. She wanted to know if coaching would be beneficial for this person. After we talked and I answered her questions and gave her my perspective, it occurred to me that others might have the same questions as her. This **Leadersynth** edition focuses on how to determine whether or not an individual is appropriate for executive coaching.

It is important to note on the front end that most of our client companies at Roselle Leadership use executive coaching as a development tool for high potential individuals and key leadership roles. Most of the time companies refer leaders to us for coaching, it is something the individuals have requested for their own development and there are no "derailing" issues involved. This was true for the situation described here, as well.

The most important questions. In deciding if coaching is the right choice for an organizational leader, there are four key questions that I always ask, even before I meet the individual. These are the questions I asked this particular manager, and the order in which I posed them:

- *"Is this person a valuable contributor, someone worth the investment?"* That is, if the coaching resulted in positive change on those dimensions that seem to get in the individual's way, would it be worth the effort in time and money? She indicated that he was a solid leader on many dimensions, and that his contributions were very strong. However, he approached situations in a way that was too focused on day-to-day issues, like he was fighting fires. Also, his interpersonal style was rather aggressive with others on the team.

- *"Is the individual likely to value from coaching?"* This is a more complicated question, which takes a good deal more probing. For example, I asked her what she, as his manager, thought he needed to work on to become more effective. She quickly identified these needs:
    o Be more visionary and big picture, more strategic
    o Prioritize more effectively, with greater emphasis on achieving results before moving on
    o Be less combative, competitive, quick to debate with team members
    o Exhibit more patience, emotional control

We talked through each of the identified needs, and I used them to give her a framework to better understand which issues were coachable and which were not. Becoming more visionary, for example, is typically not something amenable to coaching. I indicated that I would help him address this need by asking better, big picture questions and identifying others on the team who could help raise strategic questions. However, I noted that he would probably never be strong at this if she had not seen it so far.

As for prioritizing, we talked about how his personality characteristics, like on a Myers-Briggs, might be more P than J, more open-ended than planful. This would mean that he was not naturally inclined to plan the work and work the plan, push for closure, or start early on tasks. However, he could learn more effective strategies and techniques to keep himself and his team organized. I could help him do that in coaching, and it would likely shore up this weak area enough that it was no longer problematic.

I told her that my approach would be similar for the issue of his combative, competitive style. She had already indicated to me that his StrengthFinders results showed highest scores in Command, Significance, Competition, Achiever, and Focus. With such a profile, it was unlikely he would ever fade into the background in a discussion. However, if I helped him develop insight about how extreme his style was and probed to find some faulty beliefs that might drive his extreme behaviors, I might be able to move the needle enough that he would just come across as "assertive."

The patience issue, I informed her, takes a different depth of coaching. People who are impatient are usually perfectionistic and driven by beliefs like, "If I don't get things done very quickly, others will not think I am competent," or "If I don't deliver at the highest level of quality, my job is in jeopardy." I indicated that, for this issue, I would probe his underlying irrational fears and faulty beliefs about what it means to be successful and competent, and help him develop a more realistic, healthy perspective. From past experiences, I know that such an approach would help reduce the "edge" that others experience with him. (For complete perspective on this topic, see my 2006 book, **Fearless Leadership**).

- *"Does the person take responsibility for what's getting in the way?"* I asked his manager if she had sat down with him and communicated clearly how his style and approach created obstacles to his success. She said that she had done so, but had probably not given a direct, hard message in most of her past communication. When she recently had a "these things need to change" conversation with him, he seemed to take it in and listen. She was not sure if he actually took full, personal responsibility yet, but he at least did not react defensively and blame others. This was a positive sign to me that he would take personal responsibility and be amenable to coaching.

- *"Is the individual committed to becoming more effective?"* This is the final question I like to pose, and often it cannot be answered until I actually meet with the individual to discuss the possibility of coaching. Of course, I asked the manager what her opinion was, and she said she knew he wanted to be promoted and was probably motivated to improve in his weakness areas. My perspective is that, even though I primarily focus on leveraging core strengths and personality characteristics in coaching, it is important to minimize the impact of weaknesses. Once an individual recognizes how his or her attitude, beliefs, techniques, and approaches become obstacles, the weaknesses typically are mitigated enough to let the strengths shine through. As this happens, the commitment to become more effective gets reinforced.

The decision. To coach, or not to coach? It's an expensive question either way. If you decide NOT to coach an individual and that person becomes more toxic and problematic, you risk others on the team leaving. People who stay despite the toxic behaviors often do "work arounds" and try to avoid the individual. The loss of productivity and motivation on the team can be quite costly, but hard to measure. If you choose to provide coaching, either internally or from an external source, you could invest thousands of dollars in the hope of affecting change in a leader, with no tangible success at the end. You can minimize the likelihood of this by making sure the coach sets clear, mutually agreeable objectives on the front end and includes regular feedback to the organization during the engagement.

The bottom line is that you should chose to provide coaching to leaders who are worth the investment, who take responsibility for the behaviors that get in their way and are committed to improving, and who would value from a coaching engagement. Choose a coach who is experienced, well-educated, and who either knows your organization, or can get up to speed quickly about the important nuances. Then, build in feedback points to help create a successful outcome.