

Choosing the Right Coach

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Increasingly in the organizations we serve at Roselle Leadership, Human Resources and operational leaders are recognizing the value of executive coaching for their key leaders and high potential future leaders. The decision to provide a coach involves cost, and organizations are usually looking for value in the coaching engagement.

So, how do you determine who to choose as the right coach? In the past six months, I have identified a couple of helpful perspectives regarding what to look for in an executive coach. Moreover, I recently asked several of my key clients to describe what they look for in a coach. This Leadersynth article summarizes the core elements of these various perspectives.

One of my LinkedIn connections from Houston, John Reed, recently published a book entitled, **Pinpointing Excellence**. In it, he recommends that all executive coaches be evaluated on four fundamentals to determine if they would be effective. These include appropriate depth in: business understanding, psychological perspective, coaching experience, and ethical behavior. Business understanding includes aspects like management principles, leadership best practices, talent management/succession experience, and industry-specific expertise.

According to Reed, psychological perspective includes understanding psychological issues, like narcissism, perfectionism, or personality disorders, as well as having the capability to assess personality, leadership styles, strengths and other variables in order to affect behavioral change. Coaching experience helps coaches develop and apply their coaching model, and connect it to other generally accepted approaches. Ethical behavior comes primarily from the depth of the coach's character, and can be bolstered by certification (for example, as a licensed psychologist), or membership in a coaching organization with a published code of ethics.

I agree with Reed that the best executive coaches probably possess a combination of these four factors in their makeup. These fundamentals alone, however, do not account for the "it" factor to which organizations often respond when choosing a coach. The coach needs to be perceived as someone with whom you can work effectively, who understands your culture, and who feels like a good fit for the needs of the executive who is being considered for coaching.

In the past year, I have also sat on the doctoral dissertation committee of Julwel Kenney, a published author and radio show host in New Jersey. For her study, she interviewed 10 executive coaches, both self-taught and certificate-trained, and she conducted in-depth

research to pull together the top 10 core competencies on which these various perspectives seemed to agree. The core competencies across authors and executive coaches included these:

- Orientation toward taking action
- Clear, articulate, honest communication
- Authentic, genuine interaction
- Respectful attitude
- Ethical behavior
- Positive, up-beat energy
- Orientation toward exploring deeply
- Capacity to thoughtfully reflect
- Focus on creating, maintaining dialogue
- Collaborative mindset

As I noted to Ms. Kenney in my dissertation feedback, these core competencies are not actually different from other related disciplines, like professional counselors, social workers, marriage and family counselors, etc. None of these competencies reflects the point of view from Reed, above, that executive coaches must also have business/organizational understanding and depth of psychological expertise to know when to refer to outside resources.

To provide further perspective on the question, I polled several of my key clients. These are the top 10 characteristics they look for in a coach (and the ones that matter most to me!):

- **Courage** to give constructive feedback
- **Discernment** to see the potential in people, their untapped capability
- **Perspective** to draw upon from coaching other organizational leaders
- **Successful experience** related to the specific coaching need at hand
- **Solid grounding** in a valid, appropriate coaching model/point of view
- **Common sense**, so they can make the coaching sessions practical, applicable to work
- **Relationship focus**, to build rapport with participants, their managers, and HR
- **Partnership focus** for the long-term, with a stable, trusted coaching business
- **Availability/capacity** to work with participants when needed
- **Price point** that falls within the organization's budget parameters

The bottom line. Each organization is somewhat unique in how they view the value of coaching, why they choose specific coaching participants, what they hope to accomplish, and when their budgets make an engagement possible. Some organizations like to have a group of coaches from which to choose for particular coaching needs, others prefer a long-standing relationship with one coach who has come to know their organization's culture and leaders.

My perspective, as a licensed psychologist with more than 25 years of experience in the coaching field, is that depth of psychological expertise to identify issues not amenable to coaching, breadth of corporate and other organizational experience, track record of successful coaching with similar needs, fit with the organization's culture/brand, and a style that is both direct and empathetic, are the key parameters of the right coach for most organizations. Let us know your thoughts regarding the characteristics you look for in a coach.