

5 Questions to Answer Before Engaging a Coach

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After working with a coaching client of mine over the past year, we decided fresh feedback from her team members would help illuminate her progress. From individual phone conversations, it became clear that she had made some noticeable improvement in the coaching but was still falling short in the critical areas of organization and time management.

Some team member comments noted that, “Keeping things on task at meetings and not getting off on tangents or overtalking issues is a problem at times, with the cost being running out of time and not finishing all the agenda items. This can be frustrating to team members who like to see agenda items completed and meetings end on time.” Since these were specific areas she and I had worked on in our coaching meetings, it was hard for me to hear these comments.

What did the tests indicate? To figure out why this behavior was still happening, I went back to my coaching notes and her personality testing from the beginning of the engagement. These tests clearly described her as outgoing, expressive, warm, and comfortable in social settings, as well as talkative and confident in groups, trusting, open, and tolerant with people, and interested in the motivations and needs of others. When her team members described her strengths in my phone call to them, they used similar words to depict her.

On the test results related to organization and time management, she clearly tested as a trouble shooter, problem solver style. The upside of such a personality is a high degree of adaptability in solving problems in technical areas and interpersonal relationships. The downside, however, is usually lack of formal structure and organized planning—just what the team was experiencing.

So, her personality was closely aligned with her perceived strengths and her development areas, which raised the broader question in my mind: *to what extent can executive coaching impact an individual's behavior, given the limitations of their underlying personality?* This insight led me to five questions that individuals and organizations must answer before moving ahead with a coaching engagement.

The Five Questions:

How do the individual's personality and motivations as measured by standard assessments fit with the perceived weaknesses in their leadership approach? That is, do the personality tests adequately ‘explain’ the problematic behaviors that others identify? In most coaching engagements, the personality tests do not explain the person's weaknesses fully, which helps us focus in our work together on the gap between personality and observed behaviors. We typically look at underlying faulty beliefs and inadequate leadership skills to explain this gap.

How committed is the leader being coached to making the desired changes? This is always a bit difficult to ascertain fully on the front end, but I ask questions in my first contact with a potential coaching participant to illuminate what they think they need to work on to be even more effective in their role. Based on their answers, I determine whether to recommend going forward with coaching. In her situation, she seemed highly motivated and committed to growing in her leadership effectiveness, so I recommended moving ahead.

What is the likelihood of change in the desired direction and what degree of change is acceptable?

What are the organization and the individual saying a successful coaching result should look like, and how probable is this degree of change, given the individual's personality, motivation to change, and intelligence? In this coaching engagement, I believed on the front end that the individual's intelligence and motivation to change could overcome any personality traits that might keep her mired in her old approach. As in most cases, the organization was not looking to fix a fundamental flaw but, rather, hoped for changes that would result in a less frustrated team.

How much of the undesirable behavior is caused by structural issues around the person (manager, team composition, organizational rules), which are not in their control? Part of the issue in the case outlined here is that this executive's team was geographically distant and culturally different, representing five distinct countries of origin (including hers) and four time zones. To further complicate the situation, her manager's requests often were unpredictable and last-minute, and her administrative support person was not high organized or proactive in his approach. Both people tended to make her look even more disorganized.

Will the likely benefit of the changed behaviors be worth the cost of the coaching? This is the bottom-line question. Most organizations invest in coaching to help high potential leaders be positioned for promotion to larger roles, or to help create even greater effectiveness for a high value leader. The latter was the case for this female leader in our example. Because a successful coaching engagement is always the result of the interaction between the individual, their organization, and my approach, it is difficult to make guarantees on the front end.