

# Part One

## **CORE CONCEPTS**

The Coach's Stance

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# 1

## AN INTRODUCTION TO EXECUTIVE COACHING

*Coach:* What are the most pressing business challenges you face?

*Leader:* We've got to get our division out of the cellar. Consistently we perform behind the other four divisions, and the CEO's patience with us is wearing thin. I don't think he's going to put up with it much longer.

*Coach:* How much time have you got?

*Leader:* At the outside, maybe twelve months.

*Coach:* What obstacles prevent you from getting the results that you want?

*Leader:* My executive team isn't operating as a unit. They're pursuing their own business goals, not coordinating overlapping interests with other departments. In our meetings, when I ask for their opinions, they address issues only in their functional area. We're not doing any creative problem solving.

*Coach:* What impacts do these disappointing results have on you personally?

*Leader:* I have to work two jobs: my own and the vacancy on my team. In my first year as senior vice president, I had three positions in a row vacated, and it's taken too long to fill each one. It's like trying to drive a car with one wheel constantly missing: it prevents me from looking at the big picture.

*Coach:* This sounds like a great setup for self-perpetuating burn-out, for both you and your team. You'll never get the results

you need to succeed if you don't carve out the space to lead your team.

*Leader:* So tell me how to do it when I'm fighting fires!

*Coach:* You may, by default, be managing only what you know how to do rather than doing what is needed. You may need to go beyond your own leadership strengths to achieve significantly different, breakthrough results. What is challenging for you about this situation in the face of these disappointing results?

*Leader:* Leading this effort is a big challenge for me. It's the first time I've ever managed multiple functions. I've never spent energy on managing as a discipline in itself. I achieve success through technical know-how. I could use some help figuring out where to start.

*Coach:* Let's start by defining more specifically which actions on the part of your team would directly lead to the results you need. Then we can look at how you will achieve those results with your team.

Leaders hold a special position in the landscape of change. A leader's clarity of purpose and her ability to connect the people in her organization to that purpose go a long way toward mobilizing the necessary forces for change. Sometimes executives need help to fulfill the responsibilities of their special position. Executive coaches, who understand the demands and requirements of the change process, can help these leaders.

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*Leaders hold a special position in the landscape of change.*

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What would you do if the leader from the preceding dialogue were referred to you for coaching? What would be your goal with him? What would you want to accomplish? How would you determine if you were being effective?

These are the questions that effective coaches ask themselves every time they enter a new coaching relationship. They are also the questions that keep coaches, even experienced ones, up at night when the client or the situation reaches a particularly dicey phase.

A well-managed coaching relationship, along with an adequate period of time and a motivated executive, can lead to impressive results. That was the case for this leader, whose division became the top performer in the company within eight months.

This book explores how to think and act in ways that empower the executives you coach. It will help you become a valued resource to the leaders who need you most.

## **What Is Executive Coaching?**

The coaching partnership begins when the leader faces a dilemma and feels stymied. The essence of executive coaching is helping leaders work through challenges so they can transform their learning into results for the organization.

Coaches possess the trained yet natural curiosity of a journalist or an anthropologist to the client's work situation. In addition, coaches typically:

- Share conceptual frameworks, images, and metaphors with executives.
- Encourage rigor in the ways that clients organize their thinking, visioning, planning, and expectations.
- Challenge executives to expand their learning edge and go beyond their current level of competence.
- Build clients' capacities to manage their own anxiety in tough situations.

By "executive," I mean leaders who are in the top and upper levels of their organizations: the CEOs, senior vice presidents,

plant managers, and executive directors of organizations. I define the executive's job in three broad areas:

1. **Communicating the territory**, that is, the purpose, the vision, and goals of the organization to key constituencies, as well as outlining opportunities and challenges.
2. **Building commitment, building relationships, and facilitating interactions** that result in outstanding team performance.
3. **Producing results and outcomes** through the direct efforts of others as well as the executive's own efforts.

Executive coaching is the process of increasing the client's effectiveness in meeting these three responsibilities. For example, in the opening story, the executive was clear about the third responsibility: the results. He even had a sense about what was missing in the second area: the interactions he needed from his team. But he had yet to act on that knowledge: he was not defining the expectations he had for his team. Neither was he communicating to his team, with any conviction, the territory ahead and his vision for where they needed to go.

Some of you coach one-to-one with leaders exclusively. Others, myself included, use coaching as one tool in the toolbox used for larger organizational change projects with leaders (see Appendix D). Although my practice encompasses larger change efforts, this book focuses largely on the one-to-one executive coach work relationship because it is so critical.

It is easy to assume that this coaching relationship happens in isolation from the dynamics of the executive's team. Of course, it does not, even when you coach only the leader. Whether coaching the executive happens with the team or independently, that relationship must take into account the team and the organization. One of the purposes of executive coaching is to turn the leader toward his team so he can lead them more effectively. This approach can enhance the contributions of both the leader and the team.

I do wish to acknowledge the special concerns of executives at the very top of their organizations. Top executives deal with issues of stockholders, owners or partners, succession, loyalty, strategic alliances, and positioning in the marketplace. Many believe that they should not ask for help, which exacerbates their “lonely at the top” experience.

The biggest difference I find in coaching top executives as opposed to middle executives is one of tone and pace. Top executives require more toughness from those who partner with them. By toughness, I mean knowing when to sacrifice tact for directness to reach the punch line sooner. Although the pace is quicker and the tone may be blunter with top executives, the coaching approach of this book works well for middle executives too.

### **How to Be the Most Hard-Nosed Businessperson in the Room**

For as much as American and Western culture corporations have the reputation for being tough-minded and bottom-line oriented, too many organizational customers of executive coaching services invest in coaching with less rigor and outcome focus than they should. Organizations deserve to see a return on the investment they make in their executives through coaching. I make sure that I am seen as a business partner with my clients by sticking to these parameters regarding my work:

- **Refuse to be satisfied with executive coaching as “finishing school.”**
- **Refuse to undertake an initiative that has no business measures associated with it.**
- **Refuse to be a substitute for your client’s boss.**

By “finishing school,” I mean those vague requests for coaching that come because someone’s boss said she needed to “develop

more executive presence,” or “prepare herself for the next level of management,” or “I’m not sure what my boss meant, he just said that coaching might benefit me.” There needs to be an established need for coaching expressed in ways that mobilize the client toward a specific goal.

Attaching business measures to a coaching effort makes clear the connection between investment in the executive and the return that the organization will receive. It goes well beyond finishing school and starts delivering two-for-one results for organizations: they get both a developed leader and greater bottom-line results with the same investment dollars.

Everyone is overworked in the business environment, clients’ bosses included. I do not blame bosses for wanting to offload some of their supervisory work onto their subordinates’ coaches. It is just that I do not let them succeed at their attempts to do it. Executive coaching is not a substitute for performance management. The executive coach is an adjunct resource, not a replacement for the boss–direct report relationship.

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*Executive coaching is not a substitute for performance management.*

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### **Four Essential Ingredients of Executive Coaching**

Let’s revisit the coach-executive conversation at the beginning of this chapter. The coach’s sequencing of questions reveals four essential ingredients of executive coaching. **The first ingredient is maintaining a results orientation** to a leader’s problem (“What are the most pressing business challenges you face? . . . How much time have you got?”) To lose sight of outcomes is to waste the leader’s time, money, and energy. The organization needs him to stay focused on what will produce the key goods, services, or

information that define that organization's success. A coach's job is to support the leader's drive for results.

**The second ingredient is partnership.** The coach becomes a partner in the executive's journey toward greater competence and effectiveness. During the conversation (and in the question, "What obstacles prevent you from getting the results that you want?"), the coach begins to stand shoulder to shoulder with the executive in untangling and assessing the many factors, forces, and dilemmas facing the leader. Within this collegiality, the coach inquires, stimulates, and challenges the leader to perform at his optimal level.

**The third ingredient is the ability to engage the specific leadership challenges that the executive faces** ("What is challenging for you about this situation in the face of these disappointing results?"). This helps him explore what drives him off course and what he typically avoids—for example, seeing the waves he creates for others as he works through his agenda. Leaders naturally resist concentrating on their own actions while looking to others for results. Within the coaching partnership, the coach confronts the executive to look at the ways in which he may be his own worst enemy and thus prevent himself from achieving the results he wants.

**In the fourth ingredient, the coach links team behaviors to the bottom-line goals and points out the need for executives to set specific expectations for their teams.** ("Let's start by defining more specifically which actions on the part of your team would directly lead to the results you need.") This is an essential connection. Coaches help clients define specifically the people processes that are most relevant to the business goals. **They keep leaders focused on their results orientation but also widen their view of what their teams need to do to get there.** It is important in the conversation linking results to team behaviors that the leader's responsibility remains central (note the coach's last comment in the dialogue: "Then we can look at how you will achieve those results with your team").

## Core Principles That Guide Executive Coaching

When I coach executives, I adhere to three core values or principles. When diligently observed, these principles result in an exponential improvement in coaching effectiveness. The first two principles—bringing your signature presence to the coaching process and using a systems perspective in your practice—are discussed extensively in the Core Concepts section in Part One of this book. The third principle—applying a coaching method—is fleshed out in the Methodology chapters in Part Two.

*PRINCIPLE 1: Bring your own signature presence to coaching. It is the major intervention tool that you have.*

Coaches challenge executives to lead authentically and bring a more integrated self to their work. When we coach our clients, we must bring ourselves forward as well.

Bringing your unique signature presence means that you inhabit the role of coach in ways that no one else does. You do not perform *techniques* on executives. You know how irritating it is when someone is doing a technique *on* you? Leaders can instantly detect a cookie-cutter technique. Instead, leaders need true partners in their developmental process. I have already used the word *partner* several times because it is a deep value that I hold in working with executives. They require peers who will join them in their most daunting work challenges. People do not want leaders to hide behind a role. We have to be equally brave ourselves. Our executive clients deserve coaches who are also willing to be who they are rather than hide behind the coach role.

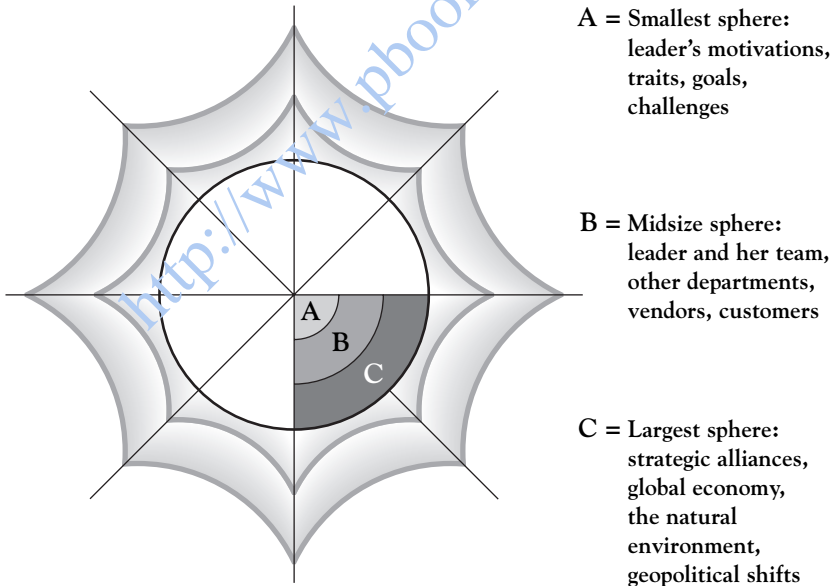
The coaching relationship is built on trust, the ability to give and receive feedback, and genuine presence on the part of both coach and leader. It is a highly interactive process. Your signature presence as a coach can evoke the signature presence of the client.

You can help clients learn that bringing themselves to their goals, challenges, and relationships is crucial to their success.

*PRINCIPLE 2: Use a systems perspective. It keeps you focused on fundamental forces. These forces either promote or impede the interactions and results of the executives you coach.*

A systems perspective is essential to executive coaches. We must pay attention to the system, the nested set of spheres, where our clients work (Figure 1.1). Those forces may have an enormous impact on your client's success. They influence the very challenges, goals, and obstacles she faces, the ones you are working

**Figure 1.1 The Leader's System**



*Note:* Even the image of a nested set of spheres is too confining to convey, among other things, the fluidity of interconnecting systems. To indicate the sensitivity of any system's sphere to the influence of changes in neighboring systems, I chose the image of the web because it connotes strength and responsiveness to changes. Imagine the web intersecting through all the spheres.

on together. This is a nonlinear perspective that allows you as a coach to recognize patterns of interaction within and across spheres.

When you focus too narrowly on your client alone (the smallest sphere), including her personal challenges, her goals, and the inner obstacles that keep her from being successful, you miss the whole grand ecosystem in which she functions. She is both influencing and being influenced by an entire web of interrelationships in and around the organization, including the team, other departments, vendors, and customers (the middle sphere). Also important are external contexts, which include the global economy and the natural environment (the largest sphere).

Viewing an organization systemically constitutes the foundation of Peter Senge's influential work (1990). He emphasizes the effects of feedback loops on a system. Feedback loops are the consequences or repercussions of a system's behavior in interaction with other contexts, and they provide input back to the system by acting as either a brake or an accelerator to people's activity. He focuses on the way slight changes can alter the entire system.

The perspective that I use here is compatible with Senge and the mind-set of feedback loops, but the scope is different. Rather than looking at how the external environment interacts between the largest sphere and the organization, I look at the system of a leader and the other constituents in the middle sphere around her.

Why keep my view on the middle sphere rather than the largest one? Leaders reflexively look out to the horizon. They constantly scan for large themes, trends, threats, and opportunities. In fact, leaders can learn to do this better by being introduced to systems thinking through the largest sphere, as Senge and others have done.

What has been underdeveloped, however, is the systems focus on the middle sphere. Leadership problems can originate in their own backyards, specifically the system of interactions in place between them and the people with whom they work most closely. As coaches, we can help them change their way of interacting by examining the middle system and their role within it. Executives

can then unlock an enormous array of the resources they and their teams possess to learn from and work with the larger environment (the largest sphere).

*PRINCIPLE 3: A coaching method is powerfully effective when you incorporate the first two principles together with it: bringing your signature presence and using a systems approach. Otherwise the method will achieve at best short-term results.*

The coaching method I outline in this book follows four straightforward stages: contracting, planning, live-action intervening, and debriefing. Professionals in the organizational development field will recognize the methodology as classic action research applied to coaching. Like action research, this coaching method aims to achieve business results while fostering the sustainable capacity of clients to apply what they learn to other organizational situations.

There is great value embedded in recognizing that leaders already possess most of the resources they need to address the very issues that seem most daunting. This resilience mobilizes clients to use the resources at hand, both in them and in the people around them, to address pressing organizational challenges.

The four phases of the methodology progress in a linear, step-by-step manner. However, nonlinear human responses can undo the most carefully constructed methodologies. Coaching methods unravel in our hands at the very times we depend on them the most: with executives on the verge of implementing a vision, leaders in the midst of large change efforts, or executives in the heat of interdepartmental conflicts. As an antidote to these afflictions of chaos and stress, I advocate mining the resources of one's presence and focusing on what happens within and between the system of the human beings caught in the dilemma. Making the most of the moment can be the leverage point for change when it is explored fully and then linked back to concrete results.

Integrating these three principles into your coaching practice ensures greater success in your efforts to evoke, promote, and challenge the executive to operate from the same principles as well. They need to find **their signature presence** in the unique way that they lead. **A systems perspective** can keep them from getting lost in the patterns and processes of the organization. **Their method** of leading needs to be informed by the ability to mine the moment.

### **Coaching with Backbone and Heart**

In bringing your signature presence, you bring your ideas, biases, and ability to constructively challenge your clients. You also need to maintain strong relationships and connections with those leaders. **Backbone means knowing and clearly stating your position, whether it is popular or not. Heart is staying engaged in the relationship and reaching out even when that relationship is mired in conflict.**

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*Backbone means knowing and clearly stating your position, whether it is popular or not. Heart is staying engaged in the relationship and reaching out even when that relationship is mired in conflict.*

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These two seemingly opposing functions work quite well together. Each withers in isolation from the other. For example, speaking strongly while shutting others down or being highly empathic without stating your views can diminish effective communication. Executive coaching is a continual dance of balancing backbone and heart while you work with your client.

A healthy backbone is strong and flexible. Having backbone does not mean that you are fixed in your positions. You can still be open to being influenced. You know where you stand, however, even as you are shifting your position with new information.

One way to test for your own ability to have both backbone and heart is to take an inventory of your coaching interactions:

### *Bringing Backbone*

- Does my client know what I think? How often do I say, “I agree with you,” or “I disagree with you” and clearly state why?
- Do I identify what I need from my client in our working relationship in order to be most effective with her?
- Can I give my position without blame or defensiveness?
- Can I state my opinion without jargon or arcane concepts?
- Can I give hard feedback when I need to?

### *Bringing Heart*

- Do I empathize with my client’s situation?
- Can I clearly articulate his position and reflect it back to him?
- Do I identify and communicate the hunches I have about possible deeper reactions, feelings, and thoughts he is leaving unsaid?
- In the face of disagreement or conflict with my client, do I keep engaging with him, or do I retreat and disengage?
- Do I continue to stay in touch?
- Do I express appreciation for the degree of difficulty in the client’s situation and also the degree of accomplishment he has achieved?

Everyone seems to come equipped with the ability to show either backbone or heart more naturally, but executive coaching requires you to do both, whether they come naturally or not. Executives deserve nothing less from you. As an executive coach, you must develop your competence to access and use both functions in your work with leaders.

The main reason we have to be strong in both functions is that a coach helps executives develop both backbone and heart. In my experience with executives, I have rarely found a leader who is a natural in both areas. **Executives have to bring backbone by standing up for and articulating their positions in the face of others challenging them. They bring heart when they have compassion for those they lead and seek to understand their challenges, concerns, and ideas.** The more you learn how to balance backbone and heart in your coaching work, the more you will know how to help clients do the same. The upcoming chapters in this book address some ways to do just that.

## Chapter One Highlights

### *What Is Executive Coaching?*

1. Coaching activities
  - Use your curiosity to learn about the client's situation.
  - Share conceptual frameworks.
  - Invite the client to be more rigorous in his thinking.
  - Build the leader's capacity to manage his anxiety.
2. Assess the executive's ability to:
  - Communicate the territory.
  - Build commitment and relationships and facilitate interactions.
  - Produce results and outcomes.

### *How to Be the Most Hard-Nosed Businessperson in the Room*

1. Refuse to be satisfied with executive coaching as a "finishing school."
2. Refuse to undertake an initiative that has no business measure to it.
3. Refuse to be a substitute for your client's boss.

***Four Essential Ingredients of Executive Coaching***

1. Bring a results orientation to the client's problem.
2. Be a partner.
3. Engage the client in her specific leadership challenges.
4. Link team behaviors to bottom-line goals.

***Core Principles That Guide Executive Coaching***

1. Bring your own signature presence.
2. Use a systems perspective.
3. Effectively integrate your signature presence and systems perspective into the coaching method.

***Coaching with Backbone and Heart***

1. Backbone: State your positions clearly.
2. Heart: Tune in to the relationship with understanding and compassion.

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