

Executive Coaching

by Michael O'Brien



Over the past few months, Bob, a senior vice president with a small financial services company, has been getting increasingly upset with his staff. Every time there is a missed deadline or some unexpected problem, he blows up, angrily lashing out his staff. As a result, his employees now tread lightly around him. They feel like they are walking on egg shells. Everybody's afraid they are going to make one wrong move and be the brunt of yet another Bob tirade.

Susan is a successful, seasoned executive who is going places in her organization. Her colleagues groan, though, when they see her heading into meetings. During every meeting — whether they're deciding when to hold the company picnic or how to handle a crisis — Susan grabs the floor, quickly voicing her opinions. Throughout almost every meeting, she talks non-stop and everyone else must fight to get a word in edgewise. They are beginning to despise her.

Sam, a bright young executive, has just been named to a very senior position at his firm, a Fortune 500 company. His older, more experienced colleagues, however, are somewhat circumspect of Sam and his talents. They do not fully trust or respect him. Sam feels their mistrust and is terribly frustrated. Sam thinks that

because he has the title his colleagues should automatically respect him and should include him in their informal meetings and networking within the company. These executives are grappling with three seemingly different kinds of on-the-job dilemmas, yet all three are facing the same kind of challenge, making them ideal candidates for executive coaching — a tool more and more executives are turning to when they need help at work.

Executive coaching involves a highly confidential one-on-one relationship between an executive and a coach wherein the coach helps the executive work on specific problems or issues at work over an extended period of time. Through face-to-face meetings, phone calls and observation sessions, the coach helps the executive notice and change thought and behavior patterns that are preventing them from performing their best at work. For example, in Bob's case, a coach would work with him to ultimately get him to stop blowing up at the staff.

Conventional thinking says executive coaching is becoming popular with executives who have moved up the corporate ladder due to their technical brilliance and are suddenly thrust into management spots and have little or no people skills.

Emotions behind behaviors

While executive coaching can certainly help managers deal with interpersonal issues, when done properly, it should go one step farther and address the intrapersonal issue — what is going on inside the executive's mind — that is causing the interpersonal problems at work. One begets the other.

For example, at first blush, the three executives described earlier, Bob, Susan and Sam, all appear to be having "people" problems at work. Bob, the screaming boss, is not communicating properly with suburbanites and they are now terrified of him. Susan does not appear to know how to conduct herself in meetings and is alienating her co-workers. Sam is not accepted by his peers and needs to work on building his relationships with them.

In order to "fix" their interpersonal problems, all three need to take a closer look at themselves.

They need to better understand their own thoughts and emotions so they can improve their relations with others.

For instance, take Susan. After working with an executive coach, it turns out that Susan feels that because she is a woman and because she wants to be successful she thinks she will be viewed as weak if she does not charge into a meeting like gang busters and take control. Deep down she thinks she will not get any respect if she does not assert herself strongly and make her opinions known among her peers.

In Bob's case, he has recently heard rumors of layoffs through the management grapevine. With his son headed to college this fall and his daughter getting

married next month, it couldn't come at a worse time. Every time an employee screws up, he feels like a red flag is going up over his department and he is moving one step closer to the unemployment line. He is terrified that he, a middle-aged executive, is going to find himself out on the street.

Feeding Self-Doubt

Sam is frustrated because he cannot influence his colleagues. He does not understand that respect does not come instantly and that he must work on winning their trust. Secretly he fears that maybe he is "in over his head" and that he really isn't up to the job. His self-doubt leads him to overcompensate in his interactions with the older executives — he talks too much and doesn't listen carefully to them, resulting in them trusting him less which only feeds his

self-doubt. Typically, an executive coach's role would be to first help the executive become aware of his or her counter-productive behavior and try to find out what is going on beneath the surface to make him or her act this way. What beliefs and assumptions do they have that is making them behave this way? Are these beliefs valid? The coach helps the executive explore these assumptions and find out if they are in fact true. In Bob's case, this might mean actually having Bob talk to someone in senior management about the truth of the company's health.

The coach then works with the executive to explore alternative ways of thinking and behaving. For instance, next time

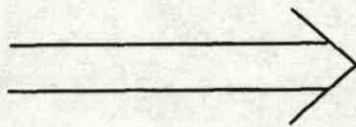
"Every time an employee screws up, he feels like a red flag is going up over his department and he is moving one step closer to the unemployment line."

Sam needs to make a decision, would it be beneficial for him to go to his colleagues and ask for their opinions? Sam might also learn to reframe his self-doubt into thoughts that empower him to let others help him mature and grow with the job.

In Susan's case, could she make a vow to hold off for three minutes during her next meeting before expressing her opinion? Or could she consider expressing her opinion early on and then asking others for their input? Could Bob figure out another way to convey his disappointment and get work back on track without screaming?

By becoming aware of their behaviors and understanding the thoughts and emotions behind these behaviors, executives can eventually choose to act differently. At first, the new behavior will be a conscious effort and feel a little clumsy, but over time it will become a habit — just like the old ineffective behavior, like when Susan dominated meetings. Change is not easy for anyone, especially successful executives, but if an executive has the will to change, they can change. They will find that as they look inward and make changes in themselves, their relationships with others will soon flourish. SV

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Oftentimes it is easier to see the need for executive coaching by taking a look at what you don't want your executives to do or be. Here's a brief list of problematic behaviors and attitudes that may signal the need for developmental coaching:

Executives who:

- get angry or upset with others frequently
- deal inappropriately with failures, such as not admitting when they are wrong, trying to cover up mistakes or always coming up with a list of excuses why something did not turn out right
- are unable to influence others positively
- harbor resentment or unexpressed anger
- live an unbalanced lifestyle, such as habitually working 80 hours a week
- refuse to show up as leaders for change
- are overbearing or talk too much and dominate meetings
- are unusually withdrawn or uninvolved.