
WHO NEEDS AN EXECUTIVE COACH ?

By Dennis Heath



Leadership development in the form of Executive Coaching has well and truly arrived in Singapore, but what is it and what qualities do you look for in a good Coach?

Three years ago a small band of qualified Coaches formed a local chapter of the International Coach Federation, a global, self regulating body for professional Coaches. There were just twelve members and we met at the chapter President's apartment. Now there are almost seventy members, a mixture of Life, Career, Business and Executive Coaches with varying degrees of training and experience. So what has happened to bring about such rapid growth in the coaching profession and where does it fit in the overall scheme of human development interventions?

One of the primary drivers of coaching's arrival in Singapore is the availability of Coach training locally. Coaches no longer have to go to Australia, Europe or the USA to get their basic training. Secondly, many MNCs in Singapore have used coaching as a global management development strategy for years and until recently have had no choice but to fly Coaches in from elsewhere to assist with management development plans. Companies previously unfamiliar with the benefits of coaching are now starting to catch on. Singapore government agencies have also enthusiastically embraced coaching to boost leadership performance at senior levels. Hence there is a ready market for those local Coaches, now professionally qualified.

Having said the market is growing, there is still a certain mystique and a number of misconceptions surrounding coaching and how it works. It is regularly confused with training, consulting, mentoring and counselling. Some brief definitions may help to clarify the differences.

Training usually takes place in a group setting and is designed to transfer new skills and knowledge from the trainer to the participants. Training may be followed by various methods of reinforcing the skills learned, but often training is short term with little or no follow-up.

Consultants possess specialist knowledge of a particular industry or function. They apply that knowledge to issues within an organisation and charge a fee based on time and content delivered.

A Mentor is usually someone within an organisation who passes on functional and organisational knowledge and experience to someone internally who has less knowledge and experience.

A Counsellor typically assists someone suffering from an emotional disturbance due to some past event to come to terms with the past and return to a stable, normally functioning emotional state.

A Coach on the other hand, assumes that he or she is dealing with a normally functioning human being. Coaching conversations are always future orientated. Unlike trainers, consultants or mentors, they may have no knowledge of the function or industry in which the client works. Coaches are not subject matter experts in that sense. Their expertise lies in core skills designed to help a client achieve peak performance. They do this by assisting clients to discover new and more effective ways of going about their work to achieve results that meet or exceed their own, as well as their employer's expectations.

Such core skills include:

- Empathising and creating rapport
- Powerful questioning
- Active and intuitive listening
- Direct and honest feedback and reflection
- Discovering the root cause of an issue
- Pushing the boundaries of the client's comfort zone
- Co-creating action plans with the client
- Tracking goals and progress
- Identifying behavioural changes that will positively impact performance
- Providing support and encouragement over an extended term, typically six months

The key difference between coaching and other forms of human development is that solutions, plans and ideas for positive change come from the person being coached, not the Coach. The Coach may share past experience or provide skilfully timed prompts, but ultimately it is the client who provides answers and commits to action. Another difference with coaching is that the Coach/client relationship is completely confidential, to the same degree as that of a client and lawyer. It is in this atmosphere, over the course of a coaching engagement that a client builds the confidence to share ideas and even anxieties or insecurities with the Coach, in the certain knowledge that nothing said in a coaching session will leave the room without his or her permission.

When engaging an Executive Coach, what attributes should you look for? Coaches come from many different backgrounds but in order to understand the human dynamics and politics in large organisations they have typically held reasonably senior positions in major corporations. To ensure you are engaging a competent

Coach, used to dealing with senior management, ask who some of their customers are and at what level they have coached. They will not tell you the name of individual clients but they will probably not have a problem naming corporations that have engaged them. By all means ask about their industry background but don't be put off if they were not in the same industry as the person they will coach. Remember, coaches do not need to be subject matter experts. However, ask about their formal Coach training and do not accept vague answers. If they have not gone through a formal Coach training programme, they are not Coaches. However, if a Coach is ICF accredited then it is a sure guarantee that they have undergone minimum levels of formal training, have a good degree of experience and have undergone an accreditation examination.

To find a Coach, a good source is either the global ICF web site, www.coachfederation.org or the local chapter site, www.icfsingapore.org. You will find a variety of Coaches on the local site including Executive, Life and Career Coaches with different

levels of experience, targeting different market sectors. Some work on a private basis with individuals, while others only contract with corporate bodies. If you are an HR or Learning and Development professional responsible for engaging Coaches on behalf of your company, try to meet a number of qualified Coaches and then let the coachee choose which one to work with from your shortlist.

When used as part of an overall leadership development plan, coaching can produce dramatic upgrades in performance, better internal and external relationships and higher levels of confidence and self-awareness in the coachee. Wise investment in coaching is ultimately evidenced in the goal of all businesses, a healthier bottom line.

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