

# EXECUTIVE COACHING, THE NEXT MANAGEMENT PANACEA

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By Dennis Heath



Your leadership team is in good shape. They have risen through the ranks as highly capable individuals. When they walk in the room, staff sit up and the office moves up a gear. These leaders believe they are sharp, strong, always understood, clear in their direction and never undermined. So why isn't your business working as efficiently and effectively as it should be, and why is there a feeling that the workforce is not 100% committed?

According to a recent edition of the UK's Sunday Times Business Edition these are exactly the questions that an increasing number of the top British executives are asking themselves. But they are not hiring teams of consultants, lawyers and accountants to find the answers. They are turning to business coaches to help them discover and put into practice more effective leadership behaviours.

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When an executive isn't working at full efficiency, it isn't only the business that suffers. Often long working hours and moods of frustration and impatience together with poor business results have a negative impact on family life. Inevitably, feelings of inadequacy towards the family then reflect back into the business. And so the vicious cycle continues. One such victim of the cycle, Jeremy Lang, former Chief Executive of Chilprufe, a major British clothing manufacturer, stated after working with a coach, "I am working 50% more on my business and 50% ahead of last year. I seem to have 50% more time for me and my

family. I am 100% happier". It sounds like a miracle, but the transformation was not due to any form of magic. Mr Lang experienced the benefit of executive coaching, a process that helps to bring clarity of thought where there was none and turns new ideas into tangible action. The role of the coach is not to offer solutions, indeed a professional coach may know little or nothing about his client's industry. The coach's skill is in bringing a sense of self awareness to his coachee and in asking tough questions that challenge his client's perspective on difficult issues, at the same time encouraging new approaches to business and people concerns. Once the executive has arrived at the best solution the coach will request action; clearly defined, date bound, measurable, action. It is this process that create the kind of results experienced by Mr Lang.

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Will coaching work in Singapore? Certainly. But first there has to be a change of attitude in local companies towards executive development, as well as in the executives themselves. There are two issues that hold back executive development here. One is a mindset in some organisations that looks purely at the cost of developing their top talent, not the benefits. Organisations with this attitude also tend to ignore the much greater cost of depending on ineffective leadership. Low staff morale, high staff attrition and poor financial performance are all signs that the leadership team is

not performing at its best. The second hurdle is the executive's own mind set. Some local senior managers consider coaching and development beneath them, akin to a loss of face. As a result, HR managers hesitate to suggest coaching, for fear of rebuke. In contrast, managers in some US companies worry if they are not assigned a coach. They may feel that their employer has stopped investing in their future and are therefore being viewed as "past their sell-by date". Whereas the reaction of a Singaporean manager when offered a coach tends to be, "So what's wrong with me?" But things are slowly changing. I recently heard of a local government agency that is hiring coaches for every one of their senior managers, including the CEO. It's a progressive move and one that other local organisations would do well to consider, now that professional coaches are available on the doorstep.

In the past, shipping coaches over from Europe and the USA made coaching prohibitively expensive for Singaporean companies. Fortunately, there is now a good supply of qualified coaches available locally. In fact the local branch of their professional body, the International Coach Federation, now alone boasts over 70 members, a mix of executive coaches, life coaches, career coaches and people who aspire to be coaches.

Whilst straightforward training is necessary to gain the skills and knowledge to lead a team or an organisation, at the topmost levels it is behaviours that separate the good from the great. To go from good to great and to share the experiences of Jeremy Lang, look for your local coach, it will change your work and your life.