

## Walking the Walk...Coaches Guide Leaders on the Road to Success

How do executives become great, competitive leaders? How do they integrate evolving “best practices” into their everyday lives? How do they know what to do, how to be?

Many professionals happen into leadership positions. Often they ascend the management ladder through a series of organizational decisions that are not strategic. Here’s how many managers climb into executive ranks: You are a great editor, so when there is a supervisory vacancy in your unit, you apply, are considered and hired. You now have three colleagues under your managerial wing. Since you perform the editing job well, understand the issues of your former colleagues and have strong interpersonal skills, you fare well.

Several years later the manager of the PR department leaves for greener pastures and, as supervisor, you are automatically considered for her position. “What the heck!” you say. “I can learn this job.” And you do. From there you become a manager of people, tasks, budgets and more, learning as you go, without any extra-special training or course of study. You now have a desire to become the best executive possible.

So, how do you hone your leadership skills? How do you gain insight, self-awareness, and capture meaningful feedback? A Fortune 500 company used coaching as a leadership development tool with 43 executives and studied coaching’s impact. The 2001 study, conducted by Merrill C. Anderson, Ph.D. reported that coaching gave the company a very real return on its investment. Coaching measurably enhanced executives’ decision-making, team performance and the motivation of others. ([http://www.coachcentral.info/Merrill\\_study.htm](http://www.coachcentral.info/Merrill_study.htm)) Employee satisfaction and job satisfaction were positively impacted. Overall, participants appreciated their coaching experiences and recommended coaching to others. The quality and quantify of the executives’ work increased markedly.

An executive coach acts as an accountability guru – to hold leaders’ proverbial feet to the fires of learning on the job, selecting and executing new tools, increasing awareness of blind spots.

- Coaches assess and understand executive’s strengths and challenges and help them focus on ways to be more effective, efficient and productive in their business roles and personal projects.
- Coaches provide important feedback, candor, insights, and guidance from an experienced, objective vantage point.
- Coaches share tools and techniques specifically selected to improve leaders’ communication and problem-solving skills and help set and achieve personal and company goals.

### Getting Started Walking the Leadership Walk:

**People have to choose coaching.** Coaching is an investment of more than time and money; it’s a willingness to learn and change. Those being coached commit time,

energy and a willing spirit to the process. It can only be effective if the executive tells his or her coach the truth, always does the homework assigned, and faithfully practices the lessons learned along the way. Those being coached should receive encouragement and support from their immediate managers, too.

It's important to **select a coach who shares your values**, someone able to listen to your goals, willing to make the intensive, personal professional investment in your success. Picking a coach is a highly individual choice. Coaching works best when there is a match of personalities, guiding principles and just plain trust. Meet with any prospective coach. He or she should have a basic understanding of your industry. Take the time to thoroughly check out your coach by (1) spending time with him/her to get a *gut check* and (2) asking for and following up with education/certification and personal references. If you have even the slightest doubt about the match, keep looking. Coaching only works when both parties believe in one another.

Be sure clear about your **expectations for your coach and about your goals for yourself**. Without the firm foundation of shared expectations and common language, it's impossible to succeed. Take the time to plan with your coach what you want to accomplish, how you will work together, how long you are willing to commit to the process as well as how you will measure the success of coaching. Human behavior being what it is, six months is the least amount of time in which a person can identify, practice, use and begin to synthesize and apply new behaviors. Be sure to discuss with your coach how you learn best; for instance, do you like to receive information by hearing it, in writing so that you read it and/or by doing. Be sure to agree together how you will know you've succeeded; how will you measure your success? The Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, NC has published *Evaluating the Impact of Leadership Development: A Professional Guide* that will assist you and your coach in setting coaching evaluation criteria.

Develop a schedule for working your coaching plan to ensure successful goal achievement. Make sure that you and your coach have a **timed agenda for each session**. We meet with our coaching clients at least one a month for no less than one hour and a half per session. There are phone calls, emails and practical homework assignments between sessions. Adult learning is most effective when there is a combination of academic information, practice time with the new information (optimally in groups) and an opportunity to put lessons to use in real life situations.

Coaching provides a disciplined pathway to growth for leaders willing to embark on the journey.