

Coaching for Non Profit Leaders

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Can a non-profit executive director count herself as one of the people she cares about? In 2002 a Foundation set aside \$100,000 for executive coaching and professional development for any executive director of organizations that were currently being funded. They believed that there was a direct link between coaching executives and creating sustained healthy organizations. The process for applying for the money was as simple as an email outlining the coaching or professional development opportunity and an estimate of the cost. Six months went by and no executives applied for the money. The Foundation asked a consultant to interview the directors and see if she could find out why no one had applied for the funds.

Her findings revealed that the executive directors felt that if there was funding it should go to the people they serve rather than themselves. This belief created dissonance within them about seeking coaching help. This may be one of a number of reasons that coaching is underutilized in non-profit organizations. However, this is at odds with what is going on in other sectors of the economy. In 2007 annual spending in the US on coaching is estimated at over \$1 billion (Bolt, 2007). In a survey reported in *Fast Company* of 48 organizations, 43% of CEOs and 71% of senior executives had worked with a coach and 63% of organizations stated they plan to increase their use of coaching in the next five years.

The Changing Context of Work

Why is coaching on the rise in the United States and what does this tell us about the broader environment in which our organizations exist? One possibility is that the job of being a positional leader is not as simple as it once was. The external world continues to change rapidly. The illusion of control has been shattered and the way we lead organizations is changing.

It used to be that an effective leader could lead an organization to excellence. Now the growing complexity of the work makes individual leadership, no matter how effective, almost impossible. Positional leaders need leadership teams to lead their organization effectively.

Complexity and rapid change makes it impossible for one individual to keep up. In the past fifteen years, the language of high performance teams, fifth level leadership, and learning organizations have shown up in our literature (Collins, 2001; Senge et. al., 1994). The reason for this shift in leadership theory is that complexity and rapid change create a need for a team that provides organizational leadership. It used to be that members of leadership teams led their department or division and let the executive director worry about the whole organization. Today, leadership teams need to serve the whole organization not just their part of the organization.

Organizations are being challenged to be more flexible in response to outside forces. This requires an organizational structure that supports rapid response. Human service organizations need to explore new ways of organizing themselves, in order to shift program design, delivery, and staffing to fit with shifts in the external environment. For example, when the United Way in the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul recently shifted their funding priorities, many agencies and programs that had been traditionally funded by them were not going to be supported the future. This caused a significant ripple effect within the human service sector. It was the organizations who where most adaptable that were able to retain mission integrity and respond to shifts in funding priorities. Executive coaching provides the executive director with a strategic thinking partner that can help them redesign their organizations and develop strategies to respond to external threats and change.

The human service sector is being faced with many adaptive challenges. Ron Heifetz in his book *Leadership without Easy Answers* defines an adaptive challenge as a problem that requires group learning to define the problem and further group learning to solve the problem (1994). Leading an organization in an environment of adaptive challenges requires a different kind of leadership. Instead of knowing the answers and protecting the organization from outside threats, the executive director needs to become a facilitator of learning and have the ability to hold the tensions that cause learning to occur. This is just one example of the new leadership capacity that is required to build an effective organization today.

Another challenge facing an executive director is the development of talent in their organization. The human services sector rarely has the budgets to recruit and pay for high performance staff (Smart, 2005). However, they can attract talented people who are passionate about the mission of the organization. The executive director of today needs to have high-level skills at recruiting, developing, and retaining peak performers. When we recruit executive directors, we look for experience in the field, management ability, and a leadership vision. No one ever said that the leader also needed to know human development theory and be able to enhance the personal and professional development of staff.

When all these changes in the context of our work are put together it is no wonder that executive coaching is in demand in the for-profit sector, because the challenges the non-profit organizations face is very similar to the ones facing businesses. What the for-profit sector has figured out is that executive coaching is a very cost effective way to develop talent that knows how to lead in these rapidly changing and challenging times.

The non-profit sector can learn from their business counterparts. Executive coaching for executive directors and their leadership teams can create stronger and more effective organizations if they invest in coaching. The challenge is the mindset of the field. Can we count ourselves among the people we serve and supervise as worthy of an organizational investment?

The Framework that Drives the Coaching Relationship

In the new reality of organizational leadership, staff development, emotional intelligence, and experiential learning are essential competencies. Executives are finding themselves without these new capacities and experiences. Coaching is a valuable tool to address the gap between traditional leadership and the skills needed today.

Mark Moore's (1997) framework of "strategic triangle" aptly provides a framework to place the lives and daily struggles of nonprofit executives into context. He argues that leaders must manage the assignment of an organization's values and mission, functional capacity, and authorizing environment into a workable whole. What he does not say is that in the nonprofit sector those challenges are often the single province of the leader who often administers their organization in isolation.

Therefore, the strategic leadership triangle and its demands produce three particular challenges that executive coaching if done well, can provides assistance. Coaching has the potential to strengthen both the emotional and leadership capacity of an executive while providing a needed collaborative partner. The field experience indicates that leadership achievement, the quality of decision-making, and the reduction of executive isolation are by-products of the coaching relationship thus are usual results

Chetkovich and Kunreuther (2006) defined the conundrum of isolation and performance expectation in nonprofit leadership as:

- Direction with Participation – the demand of participatory mission development and solitary organizational management confounds leadership development

- Internal and External Growth – the interconnectedness of personal and agency growth, participation and transformation demands new models of leadership and executive development
- Demands of Organizational Maintenance – the executive’s personal capacity to manage the interaction of support and relevance while balancing conflicting demands calls for new methods of leadership support

It is therefore necessary to assist leaders to both grow and develop new skills while meeting organizational mandates. The core elements of coaching are rooted in this learning journey. Coaching becomes an opportunity for a leader to engage in personal and hopefully progressive transformation that ultimately affects their personal *and* organizational performance.

We acknowledge that the idea of coaching in the nonprofit sector is undeveloped. Growth we believe will be tied to the demands and challenges of the political, financial, and social landscape leaders find themselves. Ultimately, we expect a paradigm swing to embrace this form of executive enhancement.

There are seven pillars of executive coaching. Pillars do not stand-alone. Instead, each is a stepping-stone to the developmental experience and critical to effective outcomes for the leader and their organization. We believe that each pillar must be present to acquire maximum benefit from coaching.

- **CHALLENGE:** Coaching invariably begins with a challenge, or a problem the executive experiences. The identified challenge can be an organizational or personal dilemma or a gap between where they are and where they aspire to be. The executive has determined that modification in approach is necessary to institute change.

The immediacy and value of the challenge to the leader and/or the organization is the impetus that drives a coaching engagement and commits the executive to stay the course during difficulty.

- **COLLABORATIVE PARTNER:** The relationship between the coach and the executive is marked by equality and collaboration.

First, the executive must trust the coach. The coach must be perceived as being knowledgeable, experienced, personable, and credible to be useful to the executive’s dilemma.

Second, the executive must be willing to be transparent and at times vulnerable. Third, the coach must be willing to be a transparent partner that acknowledges the limits of

their ability. The best collaborative partners explore new territories together and alter directions when necessary.

- **CRITICAL ASSESSMENT:** It is important to the coaching relationship that there are explorative interactions between coach and executive. The coach listens to the executive's explanations and descriptions and reflects analytically. Together they critically assess the problem, its antecedents, and the role of the executive within the predicament.

It is the responsibility of the coach to identify potential resources (models, books, people, etc.) to broaden the scope of the executive in thinking about and/or responding to an impasse. The assessment can point to leadership style, personal conviction, cultural environment, etc., that is creating the obstacle or impeding the identified solution. A key component of the assessment is the commitment and agreement of the executive.

- **INSIGHT/INTELLIGENCE:** The most important coaching effect is personal evolution. Significant experiences spark insight and heighten intelligence about self and organizational dynamics.

The progression to insight is often mysterious. Frequently insight happens in flashes, often connected to earlier experiences or perspectives. Commonly, executives connect to historical memories or places where they have been "stuck." It is here the flashes of insight create the most dynamic internal shifts, leading to shifts in approach or solution definition.

An intentional goal of coaching is expanding emotional intelligence. Using Hein's (2007), updated definition of emotional intelligence as the "innate potential to feel, use, communicate, recognize, remember, describe, identify, learn from, manage, understand, and explain emotions." Coaching aids the executive in exploring and recognizing emotional connections to the work and effectively uses that intelligence to transform self and eventually the organization.

- **REDEFINING WORLD VIEWS:** An executive fully engaged in coaching, experiences a shift in thinking and approach to problem definition and solution. New communication tools are often the reward of the shift. The "thinking shift" marks the first step in the change process for the executive and their organization.

The executive now possess new tools to tackle the original obstacles. They have grown in intelligence (emotional and organizational). The executive changes tactics, by redefining their role, and setting into motion redefinition for the entire system. It is

during this paradigm shift that transformation is realized and the power of coaching is best recognized.

- **COMPETENCE:** Leadership competence is evolutionary. The growth of leadership skill and aptitude happens in stages and phases. The executive adds to their toolbox during every phase of coaching. In so doing, each new obstacle is managed differently, competency builds, and their reputation and self-confidence grows. As executive competence improves and leaders become increasingly successful, the need for coaching wanes naturally. Coaching ends mutually because the partnership achieved its goals.
- **ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE:** Leader and organization are inextricably linked. The success of one drives the success of the other. The same equation holds true for failure. If the executive falters, the organization falters. Change instituted within the organizational structure can be linked to style and solution shifts of the executive, then the true power, and relevance of the coaching is highlighted. Ultimately, the shift in executive response forces the culture to shift in response.

The impact of coaching is realized by the executive when their worldview evolves and their approach to their work changes. The management and leadership of the organization shifts, often dramatically. The result is that these pillars of coaching form a platform for this transformation.

Coaching Formats

Coaching can be done in a variety of ways. Usually the coach and client discuss what would work best for them depending on geography and the purpose of the coaching. Most coaches work either over the phone or face to face. The frequency can vary depending on the type and hoped for outcome in the coaching relationship. For example, if the focus is work / life balance, the coaching relationship may be of shorter duration, like six weeks or less with one or two hours / week. If the purpose is organizational change, leadership capacity, or developing high performance teams a longer-term relationship is necessary, like 12 months with four hours of coaching / month. The longer relationship is needed because the result of the work takes time due, in part, to the complexity of the goal.

The frequency of coaching and the length of the coaching conversation are varied. Some clients like to meet twice a month for two hours each. Others like the discipline of weekly phone calls because it helps them stay focused. Still others like to meet once a month for a morning or afternoon. There is always some flexibility in the schedule to accommodate last minute shifts in schedules of the executive director.

In the end, the coaching format is driven by the preferences and learning style of the executive. The coaching relationship can offer emergency hot-line services as well, for those times when the executive needs immediate advice. When this occurs, the call transcends the regular schedule. These calls can be built into the coaching contract or be substituted for regularly schedule sessions.

There are some additional services that someone considering coaching might like to pursue. For example, if the coaching focus is leadership development of the executive or creating a culture shift in the organization a pre-assessment is very helpful. A pre-assessment could take the form of individual psychological tests, an organizational cultural audit, or qualitative interviews with the staff members who report to the positional leader or depending on the size of the organization the whole staff or key teams within the organization. These kinds of pre-assessments give the coach a more complete picture of the organization and people dynamics.

It can also be helpful to have the coach do targeted training or development with key teams or the organization. This can help reinforce the directions and intentions of the coaching work. For example, if the executive wants to shift the leadership culture of their senior team, having the coach come in to share concepts on high performance teams or fifth level leadership can help the team understand the conceptual underpinnings of the culture shift their executive wants to achieve. This kind of team development can jump-start the change work for the organization.

In table 1, these different options are summarized. The table is designed to give an “at-a-glance” view of coaching formats.

Coaching Content	Length of Coaching	Frequency	Type of interaction	Hours of Coaching	Pre / Post Assessment	Staff Development / Training
<i>Leadership development of executive</i>	12 months	Once / week	Phone or face to face	Four hours / month	Very helpful	Helpful
<i>Strategic change or organization transformation</i>	12 months or more	Once / week	Phone or face to face	Four hours / month	Very helpful	Very helpful
<i>Targeted capacity building</i>	6-12 months	Two times / month	Phone or face to face	Four hours / month	optional	N/A
<i>Individual</i>	6 months	Once /	Phone or	Four	Helpful	N/A

<i>performance issues</i>		week with some extended sessions	face to face	hours / month		
<i>Work – life balance</i>	1-3 months	Variable	Phone or face to face	Two hours / month	N/A	N/A
<i>Career planning and development</i>	1-3 months	Once / week with research in between	Phone or face to face	Two hours / month	N/A	N/A

All the categories could shift depending on the needs and desires of the executive. In our experience, the presenting issue is rarely the only thing that is talked about. Because individuals are whole people, a coaching relationship focused on organizational change or leadership will eventually include work / life balance, career development, capacity building and life purpose.

Types of Interactions – The Process of Coaching

Coaching conversations have many nuances and detours on their way to achieving the coaching outcome. At its core, coaching is about learning and thinking together. There is no power relationship in coaching. Both the coach and the executive come together as equals. The coach is not a trainer or a teacher downloading knowledge and skills. The coach is actually a facilitator of learning that brings concepts and experience to the executive.

The value of these conversations to the executive is experienced at many levels. First, having a coach provides the executive with a thinking partner and helps break the isolation that executives often experience. Because a positional leader is watched closely, and what they say shapes people’s actions, the executive is conscious of this dynamic and careful of what information they share. This constrains what the executive can talk about and to whom.

The executive can share aspects with the leadership team or board members, but confidentially and organizational politics create limitations to what is shared publically and can make the job isolating at times. A coach provides a place where the executive can share worries, work through problems, vent, reflect, gain insight, develop strategy, and learn. Below is a list of the kind of interactions and conversations that can occur in a coaching relationship.

- ***Provides a point of pause and opportunity for reflection for the executive:*** in the fast paced world of non-profits, especially those in the human services sector, it is easy to just put your head down and focus on getting through the day. This is a dangerous place for a leader of a non-profit who is working in an era of rapid change and interdependency. Focusing on the day to day does not provide the leader with the balcony perspective needed to anticipate and plan for the future of the organization. The coaching conversation causes the executive to slow down enough to reflect on what is happening and see deeper into the dynamics they are experiencing. It allows the executive to step back and make sense of the patterns and reorient their focus.
- ***Learning and insight for the executive:*** the coach helps connect concepts from the literature to the practitioner's experience. A good coach has access to knowledge and concepts that help the executive make sense of their world and develop a deeper understanding of what is occurring in the organization. The coaching relationship is an intentional learning journey between two people where both bring their knowledge, experience, and insights to the focus of the coaching work.
- ***Just in time coaching and problem solving for immediate issues:*** there are always adaptive challenges or irritating struggles that occur in the day-to-day life of the executive. The coaching work can be a place where these day-to-day challenges can be discussed and a strategy developed.
- ***Venting:*** sometimes an executive just needs to vent about an issue they are facing at work. Managing emotions is critical to an executive's leadership performance. The coaching conversation can be a place where the executive can safely vent their frustrations, anger, hurt or other emotions and work through them so they don't spill over onto their staff members, board, outside constituents, and stakeholders.
- ***A confidant regarding personnel issues:*** one of the tasks of leadership is to develop staff members' capacity. To do this, an executive needs to understand human development theory and practice, not just human resources and legal issues. A coaching conversation is where the executive can process and reflect on personnel issues and develop strategies to coach individuals and teams into higher performance.
- ***A place to talk about the intersection of the personal with the professional:*** personal issues show up at work in the same way work issues can show up at home. Sometimes when an executive is stuck, there are personal issues that must be recognized and addressed. The process of refining and sharpening one's leadership ability requires that a person be self-aware and understand their impact on others. A good coaching relationship allows for the working through both personal and professional issues.

In education, the phrase *teaching above the neck* is often used to describe traditional classroom teaching. A coaching relationship is a learning journey that involves the head, heart, and spirit. The types of interactions in a coaching process are varied. Due to the nature of the one on one partnership, it has the flexibility to be shaped to meet the unique needs and interests of the executive.

Outcomes of Coaching

The coaching experience is practice-based and engagement specific. The interchange between coach and executive focuses on what is relevant. The challenge of coaching in many ways predetermines outcomes. The executive has problems to solve and expectations to meet, often with a timeline. Outcomes therefore are related to both organizational and leader development and achievement. There are personal, emotional, structural, and intangible outcomes that are a by-product of coaching.

Below is a list of outcomes that we have observed as coaches or experienced as a coaching recipient. The list is not exhaustive. It cannot be. Coaching by design is very personal and its impact is individually defined. Coaching if done well, leads to an intra-physic and environmental phenomena called transformation.

Outcomes:

Enhanced Emotional Intelligence – Enhanced emotional intelligence is often a result of the coaching experience, as an executive becomes more self-aware of personal triggers that have impacted their leadership effectiveness.

Leadership Development – Is an outcome where the leader modifies personal style and mode in working with stakeholders, culture, and strategic agenda. The executive now possess a well-stocked tool kit and uses it as a means to improve performance, and unlock human and organizational potential.

Leadership Affirmation – Is an outcome of coaching. When working with a coach, the executive becomes more aware of their strengths as a leader and therefore feels more confident in what they bring to their organization. The nature of coaching provides the executive with a person whose primary role is to encourage, support, and serve him or her. Having an authentic trustworthy relationship in one's life has a powerful effect on the affirmation of the executive as a positional leader and an individual. The impact of this experience causes the executive to increase the transparency between themselves and the organizational stakeholders. Over time, this transparency impacts the way decisions are made and the direction the organization takes.

Altered Organizational Performance – Coaching becomes a catalyst for trying new methodologies. Revised definitions of existing problems and models are experimented with, creating new environmental responses. The organizational culture responds differently, because the leader is interacting with the environment in new and often exciting ways. Therefore, mistakes are corrected, and successes are celebrated and institutionalized.

Interdependence – Coaching highlights the stakeholder role of everyone in the organization. There is an interdependent relationship between leader growth and staff, board, and organizational growth. Achievement is owned jointly and progresses along developmental lines. Executives learn that it is impossible to be effective as an autonomous agent in an interdependent world.

The outcomes of effective coaching have a direct and significant impact on both the individual executive and the organization. Given the benefits of coaching and the changed environment in which nonprofit executive work, coaching becomes a valuable and necessary investment for both the individual and the organization.

Summary

At the beginning of this article, we shared a story about executive reactions to being offered coaching by a foundation. We posed the question “Can a non-profit executive count herself as one of the people she cares about?” We believe that there is a strong case for using coaching as a vehicle for serving the individual executive, strengthening the organization, and in turn providing more effective service to the people our organizations care about. The external world continues to change rapidly. The illusion of control and single leader has been shattered and the way we lead organizations has changed. Coaching is an essential strategy to help nonprofits and their leaders respond to the challenges they face today. We think the returns are well worth the investment.

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