

Introduction to Journal 8

Executive Coaching and Performance: An Overview of the Path Ahead

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Almost 500 years ago, Ferdinand Magellan left Spain with 5 ships and 250 men on a journey around the world. Three years later, after enormous hardship, Magellan returned to Spain with only one ship and 18 men, having just completed the first circumnavigation of the globe. About 420 years later, the reclusive American billionaire, Howard Hughes, embarked on his own voyage around the world, this time by plane. His trip lasted just under four days. And, today, astronauts can orbit the globe in 90 minutes. That is more than 64 times faster than Hughes and more than 17,000 times faster than Magellan's original journey.

There are a couple of points to this little history lesson. First, while it is probably obvious to most people that the rate of technological change is increasing, what might not be so apparent for many is that change, in general, is now a constant part of personal and professional life. The implication is that we can no longer simply rely on "what worked in the past" to achieve and maintain excellence today and tomorrow. We need to continually learn, to adapt and to improve, just to maintain our relevance let alone achieve excellence.

Second, not one of these people who excelled or pushed the limits, could have

achieved their level of excellence without input from “trusted advisors”, whether in the days of the early explorers or in today’s fast-paced environment. It is perfectly normal and acceptable to seek advice from those who can provide competent guidance, motivation and inspiration in virtually all disciplines.

As a field, “executive coaching” has exploded in popularity in recent years and there are a large number of individuals from various backgrounds who call themselves “executive coaches”. Whether it is helping a business line manager plan for an important talk, assisting a VP in the diagnosis of a strategic issue, or guiding a CEO through a change management process or lifestyle change, these “trusted advisors” can play a critical role in several ways by : serving as a sounding board, helping to identify personal and leadership strengths and weaknesses, assisting in the development of an action plan, and getting others to see the opportunities and possibilities. Bottom line: executive coaches or trusted advisors help executives make specific positive behavioral changes while increasing their effectiveness as leaders and as people.

Issue #8 of the Journal of Excellence deals with coaching and performance. The first three articles deal directly with coaching executives while the last two articles offer potential coaches of executives some practical insights on how to be effective advisors. In the first article, Witherspoon and White describe four roles that coaches play in the corporate environment, depending on context and function and need. Coaching for skills helps people learn specific skills, behaviors and attitudes over several weeks or months. Coaching for development helps people prepare for advancement and it can take place over a year or more. Coaching for an executive’s agenda is a personalized ap-

proach that provides ongoing support on broader themes such as personal lifestyle issues, stress management, transitions, productivity improvement or shifts in strategy. Coaching for performance helps executives function more effectively in their present jobs. In sum, the authors present an overview of the basic uses of executive coaching in today’s business context.

In the second article, Marshall Goldsmith describes a unique concept called “feedforward”. Arguing that traditional feedback focuses too much on the past and on what has already occurred, Goldsmith often gets leaders and executives to focus their thinking on future possibilities and the behavioral changes that may help them perform more successfully, more consistently. We believe that Goldsmith’s approach is based on a solid foundation of communication and is an excellent way to help individuals and groups of people to maximize their performance and the performance of others.

The third article presents a unique experiential approach to executive coaching that blends elements of practical performance psychology with theatrical improvisation. Written in manuscript style for a theatrical play, Cathy Salit describes a workshop that she runs with groups of executives called “Directing a Performance” in which a parallel is drawn between the “theatre director” and the skills and abilities required of executives to be effective coaches and/or mentors in their organizations. The practice of traditional executive coaching is most often done privately on a one-on-one basis. The type of intervention described in this article has the added benefit of bringing together groups of 20-30 executives to observe each other’s behaviors and expressions and to learn in a shared environment.

In the fourth article, entitled “Mental strategies of elite Mount Everest climbers”, Shaunna Burke and Terry Orlick address the mental skills and perspectives required to be successful when facing an extremely demanding, life-threatening challenge. We all probably feel like we are facing a Mount Everest challenge at some point in our life. How well we get through those challenges has a lot to do with our mind-set and focus. Successfully climbing to the summit of Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world, has many relevant analogies for excelling and persisting through obstacles or set-backs in the business world. It really drives home the importance of having a vision of where you want to go, detailed planning, preparing for obstacles, focusing on the step in front of you, and developing a real sense of team support.

The fifth article entitled “Lessons learned from graduate students’ early consulting experiences” was written by a group of graduate students who were training to become coaches/consultants in the performance enhancement field. These newly graduated consultants, Jessica Fraser-Thomas, Kelly Doell, Louise Friend, James Galipeau, Alex Lamontagne, Kristin Marvin, and Paul Sealy share their views on what they learned from their applied internship experiences as graduate students in the sport and performance enhancement field. They also speak about the importance of being given the opportunity to gain hands-on experience, where they get quality coaching, mentoring and supervision in the applied consulting field. They have some important insights related to helping young or developing performance enhancement coaches / consultants become highly competent and confident in what they have to offer performers and leaders in a variety of contexts.

There are common elements across each of these articles. First, no matter the context, effective coaching and consulting require honesty and openness, both from a giving and a receiving perspective. Second, coaching in a business environment is similar to coaching in an athletic world where the desired outcome is quality performance and ongoing excellence, however defined. Third, regardless of the type, executive coaching is really about continuous learning. We would argue that the ability to learn, and the commitment to continue to improve, are perhaps the cornerstones of consistent high-level performance. Lastly, executive coaching in this context happens at three levels – directly for the individual who is being supported, indirectly for those around the individual who will be affected by the changes occurring in the individual being coached, and at the organizational level where effectiveness and productivity gains accrue as a result.

The path ahead for executives is filled with both challenges and opportunities. The role that executive coaches/trusted advisors can play becomes increasingly important as the rate of change and the complexities of work and life increase. When pursuing personal or professional excellence, there is value in looking at lessons from other high performance domains. Trusted advisors and executive coaches who can meaningfully address performance issues and help executives see possibilities along the path can add real value to any leader, team or organization.

Every day is an opportunity to become better in some way – better at listening, relaxing, focusing, eliminating distractions, coaching, leading, creating new visions and finding opportunities in tough times. We wish you the best in this quest along your own path.