

Coaching Leaders: When to Use an Internal versus External Coach

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You *can* **enhance** or **damage** your image, value and credibility in Human Resources when choosing an internal or external coach! Each coaching assignment is unique and brings a new set of challenges. That's why it is essential to carefully analyze each coaching assignment **prior** to making that decision.

The International Coach Federation defines the role of a “*coach*” as “one who helps people set the best goals with clarity and purpose and achieve them; focuses people to quickly and easily produce results; and provides the tools, support and structure for people to accomplish more”.

“Coaching” is the key buzz word today! Coaching has been around since the sixties as a core skill used in leadership management and change management. It has taken on a new life with the demand today for people to accelerate in achieving results faster in their overall business/work performance.

One of the major challenges facing organizations today is to retain top talent. Executive coaching is one vehicle used to send a strong message to the high performer that he/she is being groomed for succession planning in the organization. Coaching is essential for new employees or team members to become deeply rooted in the culture of the organization within a short time.

Establishing Trust is Key

In general, whether the coaching is for senior or middle management, it's all about “Champions in Leadership” at all levels in the organization. It is a temporary partnership. Initially **establishing trust** is the key success criteria to any coaching relationship. The coach then begins to evaluate the level of self awareness, personal development and leadership development of the individual.

Role of Internal Coach

What is the role of an internal versus external coach? The internal coach is an employee of the organization and most often appears on the organization chart

under titles such as internal organization development consultant, performance improvement specialist or human resource executive.

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Dr. Frederic Hudson, Ph.D., founder of The Hudson Institute (an international coaching and learning organization in Santa Barbara, California) says the role of an internal coach is to: “help facilitate company policy, identify and train new leaders, concentrate on performance coaching, sometimes lead conflict management groups and help keep executives on course with the strategic plans of the company.”

The role of an internal coach is often most conducive to coaching an individual who is in a position below his/her own level in the organization. For example, each manager provides ongoing coaching in further developing the skills of his/her staff. The coach needs to provide a learning environment that fosters growth for employees.

Role of External Coach

External coaches are usually self employed or work in a management consulting firm. Hudson says: “Executives in organizations often seek an external coach because of the increased assurance of confidentiality, making it possible to open up more fully to the issues and concerns on his/her mind.”

Advantages and Disadvantages

An internal coach has the advantage of understanding the history, knowledge and values of the organization and is more familiar with the ongoing challenges and politics of the organization than an external coach. Therefore, an ideal assignment for an internal coach who is in the role of a director/vice president HR in a corporate office is to coach the head of a “division” of the corporate office as long as he/she is not a direct peer.

“Stakes can be high in loss of credibility if the consequences of an internal coaching assignment are not thought out ahead of time” says Joan Andersen, M.A., C.H.R.P., Human Resources Executive at Honda. “The coaching process can easily lead to issues of ethics and compromising of values for the internal coach”. For example, it may not be advisable for an HR Vice President who has an overall company performance goal of changing the company’s values, to coach an employee who is having difficulty accepting the new values of the company. The line between coaching and constructive discipline may become blurred because the HR Vice President is playing two contradictory roles simultaneously.

“It’s not advisable for the HR vice president to be the internal coach of a peer or colleague in the organization”, says Linda Blakney, M.B.A., M.A., Career Coach

and Counseling expert. “There are often fears around trust and confidentiality. A colleague may feel inadequate and fear that the information may be shared with others and possibly negatively impact his/her future career.”

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The **external coach** can often provide more **objectivity** for the client. Hudson says: “The advantage of the external coach is that the work “**is**” the client, allowing for the gradual incubation of amazing scenarios in many directions.” The external coach has the advantage of using a **holistic** approach.

There is a definite advantage to using an external coach to *fast track* a high performer being groomed for succession planning. The individual is more open to communicating his/her potential opportunities and obstacles.

Since **trust, chemistry and fit** are key to the success of coaching, it’s important for HR to be able to provide a short list of potential internal or external coaches for individual requests. The individual **must be ready, aspire to** and have a **strong genuine desire** to be coached.

Success to date in my own coaching practice indicates that it is critical for the external coach to obtain agreement from the organization **and** the individual on the **overall coaching mandate**. It’s equally important for the individual to understand that the Assessment Report is shared with the organization. However, information discussed in the one-on-one coaching process related to the Assessment Report is **confidential** between the external coach and the individual.

Major Benefits of External Coaching

Organization:

- Retain high performers with incentives other than financial rewards
- Reduce costs related to absenteeism and turnover by enabling employees to have a better work/life balance
- Develop key individuals for momentum in Succession Planning
- Guide individuals and organizations through transition
- Achieve long term sustainable performance results from employees.

Leaders:

- Reconnect the individual with his/her **true** value system
- Provide clarity and focus to accelerate in achieving overall business performance
- Compress learning time to maximize skills and potential of the individual while increasing the time he/she has to contribute expertise to the organization

- Build skill competencies faster by reinforcing behavior through one-on-one coaching
- Translate leadership theories/concepts into “useful insights” to impact communication, decision making and overall strategies

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Hiring an External Coach

Find a coach who has the specific skills, background and knowledge to **apply** the expertise. An external coach with a Certified Human Resources Professional designation (C.H.R.P.) as well as professional coaching skills is an asset.

He/she builds a bridge between the individual and HR to further enhance relationships and credibility within the organization. A solid knowledge and understanding of leadership development, strategic planning, succession planning and lifestyle management concepts are essential to successfully meet the coaching needs of executives today.

Ensure the external coach has a philosophy to ***build on the leadership strengths of the individual and act as a candid and strategic sounding board.*** Additionally, the coach needs to select appropriate assessment tools and develop customized training modules.

In conclusion, it's critical to make the right choice based on the individual assignment. There are benefits and challenges to internal and external coaching. With either choice, ensure you select a coach who has the expertise to ***deliver the mandate.*** By making the right choice, you can enhance your image, value and credibility for ongoing support of the executive team.