

# EXECUTIVE COACHING:

## EVERY THING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ... BUT DIDN'T KNOW WHO TO ASK

An interview with **Penny Tompkins** and **James Lawley**, specialist executive coaches.

### **What is Executive Coaching?**

Since the advent of regular appraisal interviews and other forms of feedback, most people have a fairly good idea of their strengths and weakness at work. However, knowing *what* you want to change and knowing *how* to go about changing it require two different approaches. Executive Coaching involves one to one meetings with a specialist trained in how people change. It is designed to pinpoint specific changes that will be the difference that makes the difference in a person improving their performance.

### **What is the difference between Executive Coaching and Employee Counselling?**

Employee Counselling is a valuable approach and tends to be used when people are suffering from significant emotional or behaviour difficulties. Often it is the last resort in a disciplinary process or after a traumatic event in a person's life such as a sudden death of a loved one. It tends to be orientated towards fixing problems.

While Executive Coaching may well involve an individual resolving emotional difficulties, this is not its main focus. The focus of Executive Coaching is very much outcome orientated: "What do you want to achieve?" rather than "What is the problem?"

### **What do people come to you for?**

Basically, there are two types of change: Remedial and Generative. Remedial change is when someone has a problem. They may say things like "I lack the confidence to present to large groups of people," or "I'm overworked and I can't seem to delegate," or "I have a personality clash with my manager," etc.

Other people say, "I'm a pretty good manager and I'd really like to improve my ability to support my people during this corporate change," or "I've just got promoted to the Board and I realise I need some new ways to influence my fellow directors." This is Generative change: taking a strength and making it even better or broadening a skill so it is effective in even more situations.

### **What are the most common issues people ask you to help them with?**

Lack of confidence and fear are the big ones. You'd be surprised how many people, even in very senior positions think they lack confidence. And this can take many forms; from fear of public speaking, to being unable to say "no" to feeling inferior to peers.

Also, with the move to flatter structures and emphasis on empowerment, managers are having to learn new skills, especially how to coach their people to high competencies and how to support them through the corporate change process. Executive Coaching can help these managers learn new ways of relating to and supporting their colleagues (even the 'difficult' ones!).

### **How long does Executive Coaching last?**

This is variable, because sometimes one session is enough for someone to set themselves on the right road. However we find most people prefer to have change happen over time. This means they can put new behaviours and skills into operation, receive feedback and adjust accordingly. Therefore the standard programme includes an initial session of 1.5 to 2 hours, followed by 5 further sessions each a month apart.

### **What actually happens in an Executive Coaching session?**

Firstly, everything that happens is completely confidential between the individual and the coach unless the individual chooses otherwise. Secondly, as each person is unique, no

two coaching sessions are the same. Having said that, there are some general similarities, e.g. The first meeting is devoted to getting really clear about:

*Outcomes:* What do you want and how will you know you have achieved it; what is your evidence for success? This gives us a direction to work towards and provides a form of objectivity to this very subjective work.

*Current Situation:* Exactly what is happening now -- what is the strategy operating that maintains the behaviour and what is the motivation that keeps things repeating and therefore the same?

*Long Term Effects* of getting what you want for yourself and others. There are always consequences for any change, and being aware of these in advance is vital to the process.

Surprisingly there have been times when just coaching a person to answer these questions has been enough for them to change their behaviour in the direction they want to go! Usually more is needed, and there are a whole range of processes available to facilitate the move from where an individual is (Current Situation), to where they want to be (achieving the Outcome) so they and the company get the results they want (Long Term Effects).

In further sessions, progress towards the Outcome is reviewed. Then 'micro goals' are defined and the next step on the way to the overall outcome is addressed. Often the person being coached is surprised how much change occurs *in the session*. This makes it much easier for those changes to be implemented in the work place.

### **When is Executive Coaching recommended compared to other forms of development?**

We would recommend Executive Coaching when:

- Development is required that is specific to you and would probably not be adequately addressed by a general skills training.
- The problem is not something you feel comfortable discussing in a group.
- You are unable to attend a training course (which could take you away from your job for several days).
- It is more appropriate for you to discuss your development with a specialist from outside the company.
- Support is required over a period of time (say, 6 months).
- You have tried other approaches without success.

### **Is Executive Coaching only useful for individuals?**

Some far-sighted companies have offered their whole management team the opportunity to get support through Executive Coaching. This is run with two Executive Coaches who work with team members in a group setting so that everyone's development is open and supported by the group process. This unusual approach has proved enormously effective for those who were willing to take a giant step in their own development.

*If you always do what you've always done,  
You'll always get what you've always got!*

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