

Executive Coaching: A Working Definition

Lewis R. Stern *Stern Consulting*

Executive coaching (EC) has grown significantly in the past decade as an important organizational consulting intervention. This article proposes a working definition for EC that specifies its process and methods, differentiates it from other forms of coaching, and suggests a set of perspectives, principles, and approaches needed to guide its professional practice. It also puts forth a set of core competencies for professional executive coaches. Implications are also explored for how to select a coach, how to prepare for an EC practice, and how to understand why certain EC interventions are more effective than others.

Executive coaching (EC) is an important method that can be applied as part of an organizational consulting intervention. It entails a coach working one-on-one with executives to help them learn how to manage and lead and to assist them to establish, structure, plan for, and lead the executives' organization. This article puts forth and exemplifies a working definition of EC: what it is, how it is similar and different from other forms of coaching, what principles should guide its practice, and what it takes for a coach to apply it successfully. In addition, this article explores the implications of this definition for the training, selection, practice, and continued development of professionals who apply EC in their consulting practices.

The Origins of Coaching

The origins of the word *coaching* come from the Hungarian village of Kocs and the more comfortable, covered wheeled wagon or carriage (koczi) first developed there to carry its passengers through the harsh terrain, protected from the elements on their

way from their point of departure to their ultimate destination (Hendrickson, 1987). Over the centuries, the term itself traveled along several roads of use, from academic coaching (to carry the student more safely through exams) to sports coaching (to carry the athlete through practice, the game, and the competitive season). EC is just one more evolution of the term where a coach helps to carry an executive from one point to another.

What Is EC?

A Basic Definition

Executive coaching is an experiential, individualized, leadership development process that builds a leader's capability to achieve short and long-term organizational goals. It is conducted through one-on-one interactions, driven by data from multiple perspectives, and based on mutual trust and respect. The organization, an executive, and the executive coach work in partnership to achieve maximum learning and impact. (Ennis et al., 2003, p. 20)

Such coaching can be provided by the executive's boss, a peer, a human resources

Lewis R. Stern has more than 25 years experience as an executive coach, organization development consultant, and consulting psychologist. He is currently the president of Stern Consulting, a founder and chairman of the board of the Executive Coaching Forum, and on the advisory board and faculty of the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology's Institute of Organizational Consulting Psychology.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lewis R. Stern, Stern Consulting, 71 Fuller Brook Road, Wellesley, MA 02482. E-mail: sternconsulting@comcast.net

(HR) professional within the executive's organization, or an external consultant. In its most formal practice, a professional executive coach formally contracts with an executive and his or her organization to work in a collaborative partnership with the executive and others in the organization to achieve identified business results and the executive's learning objectives. Such a formal contract needs to incorporate agreed-upon ground rules, time frames, goals, and specific measures of success (Ennis et al., 2003). Regardless of the formality of the EC and who is providing it, what actually goes on in the coaching is driven by its objectives and the needs and preferences of the executive and the organization. It may entail any or all of the following: changing attitudes and habits; developing skills; preparing and developing for future assignments; and defining and implementing one's leadership charter, business goals, and strategies.

Structured EC Provided by a Professional Coach

Sometimes EC is spontaneous and informally incorporated into day-to-day interactions between business associates. When provided by the professional consultant, EC is more commonly preplanned and follows a structured seven-step process: (a) initial needs analysis, (b) contracting, (c) data gathering, (d) specific goal setting, (e) coaching, (f) measuring and reporting results, and (g) transitioning to a more long-term development effort for the executive and the organization.

The Essential Systems Perspective

The professional coach needs to understand and work within the organizational system (Ennis et al., 2003; Orenstein, 2002) rather than see the executive as he or she would be seen in a traditional counseling or

personal coaching relationship (with less emphasis on the organizational system within which the client works). To do so, the consultant needs to involve the executive's key stakeholders in the coaching to truly grasp and help the executive comprehend how his or her actions are affected by and impact the whole organizational system. These key stakeholders include the following: the executive's manager; the HR department; executive development professionals within the organization; and the executive's peers, employees, and others.

The Effective Executive Coach

The executive coach must be versed in the business and the skills the leader needs in order to succeed. The coach must be perceived by the leader as competent, confident, independent, business savvy, patient yet action oriented, credible, trustworthy, confidential, and genuinely interested in the leader and the leader's business. The executive coach works primarily one-on-one with the leader to carry him or her through the needed changes to implement organizational strategy or transform the people or the business to a place more capable of achieving career and business objectives.

Minimum Prerequisites for Professional Executive Coaches

The needed background and competencies of the professional executive coach are determined by the goals, activities, and circumstances surrounding the specific coaching intervention, the executive, and the organization. Based on my own experience coaching executives and training, coaching, and supervising internal and external coaches over the past 25 years, as well as the experience of other experts in the field, all consultants conducting EC, regardless of their professional affiliation or background, need some basic knowledge and

expertise (Brotman, Liberi, & Wasylyshyn, 1998; Frisch, 2001; Hunt, 2003; Levinson, 1996; MODOONO, 2002):

Essential knowledge and expertise in psychology.

- individual assessment
- individual differences
- adult learning
- organizational behavior
- change management
- organizational systems theory
- leadership
- interpersonal and group dynamics
- motivation
- organization development

Essential knowledge and expertise in business.

- familiarity with the language, history, and current conditions of the executive's industry and business environment
- strategic and tactical planning and implementation
- organizational communication (employee orientation, information sharing, setting of standards, roles and responsibilities, feedback, plans, changes, customer contact, and so forth)
- business ethics
- technology
- business functions: Finance, HR, marketing, research and development, manufacturing-service development, sales, and legal

Other targeted knowledge and expertise important for the coach. There are many other areas of expertise that coaches may need depending on the specific individual coaching intervention:

- conflict mediation
- development of values, vision, and mission
- quality and process management
- team development/building
- board relations
- labor relations

- video feedback
- career development
- organization restructuring
- work-life balance
- stress management

The Characteristics and Style of the Professional Executive Coach

The diversity of executives in search of coaches (Stern, 1998) is matched by the uniqueness of each executive coach. But there are some common characteristics and stylistic inclinations of executive coaches that appear to make it easier for them to succeed and be satisfied in the coaching role. Because most executives want practical, results-oriented, efficient, and customized coaching to address their particular needs, they are less comfortable with a coach who is primarily theoretical, abstract, and lecturing rather than the more practical, concrete, and experientially oriented coach. Because most EC is time bound, with somewhere between 5 and 15 sessions in the intervention, the consultant who is right for coaching is more interested, proficient, and oriented to getting down to the real work issues in the context of the organizational system of the business. The coach needs to care about the business of the executive's organization as much as the executive himself or herself. Because most executives are smart, process information quickly, and are impatient with slow analysis that does not get to the bottom line in short order, a smart, fast-paced, practical consultant who likes to work one-on-one with leaders is best suited for the job. For executives who are slower, more careful and contemplative thinkers, another coaching style may be more relevant. Most coaching requires the coach to fluidly go from strategic issues to the micro level of tactics and interpersonal and group communication. If an executive is to be helped, he or she needs a coach who can provide live feedback, serve as a role model, and

provide specific guidance on how the executive should behave and communicate to convey the right message and accomplish the goals with the highest priority. A consultant is best suited for the job when he or she is comfortable and passionate about both the strategic and the micro. Effective executive coaches have the patience to step back from day-to-day business and also dive into the moment-by-moment of what the executive could do differently for greater success. EC is not talk therapy. It is individualized leadership development, behavior modification, business planning, and organizational re-engineering. Above all, the executive coach needs to be well matched to the executive he or she coaches.

Success Through Partnering

In most situations, EC works best when the coach does not work alone as a supplier but in partnership with the executive, his or her boss, HR professionals within the organization, and other key individuals. All of these partners, including the coach, must follow some basic guiding principles for the coaching to achieve maximum success (Ennis et al., 2003):

- a systems perspective
- a results orientation
- a business focus
- collaborative partnering for the mutual benefit of the executive and the organization
- a focus on building the competence of both the executive and the organization
- a continual emphasis on the integrity of each member of the partnership and of the coaching process
- judgment, using common sense, informed intelligence, and professional ethics to guide decisions when traditional procedures or standards do not provide the answers to unpredictable situations

Differentiating EC From Other Forms of Coaching

In the last 20 or so years, at the same time EC evolved as a recognized practice or methodology, many other forms of coaching have also morphed into our organizational and personal lives. Personal coaching, career coaching, spiritual coaching, new leader coaching, team coaching, financial coaching, and many others have all become popular. What differentiates EC most from these other forms of coaching is its dual focus on working one-on-one to develop the executive as a leader while also helping that leader to achieve business results.

EC often incorporates some of these other forms of coaching. But it is important to differentiate the coaching methods that are often practiced separately from EC by specialists with expertise limited to one or two forms of coaching. A personal or life coach requires a very different set of knowledge and expertise than a career coach or an executive coach. The following list differentiates some of the other popular forms of coaching from EC:

Personal or life coaching primarily focuses on an individual's personal goals, thinking, feeling, and actions and how the individual can change his or her life for greater personal effectiveness and satisfaction.

Career coaching primarily focuses on the individual's short- and long-range career objectives. It helps the client to decide on career directions and then plan, seek, or change them over the short or long term.

Performance coaching focuses on an employee's specific performance potential, job requirements, deficiencies, or derailers and on how to fill performance gaps and shape the job to optimize the individual's performance.

Newly assigned leader coaching focuses on helping the leader to assimilate into a

new role and successfully define and implement his or her new business charter along with key constituents and his or her team.

Relationship coaching focuses on specific relationships between individuals and helping form or change those relationships for greater productivity and satisfaction.

High potential or developmental coaching helps employees with potential for greater responsibility to develop the skills and prepare for moving into new roles.

Coaching to provide feedback debriefing and development planning helps individuals understand and use their assessment results and 360-degree feedback in the context of their personal and professional history and their career and business objectives.

Targeted behavioral coaching aims to modify specific behavior or habits (e.g., intimidation, risk aversion, nonassertiveness) or develop new behaviors to allow an individual to be more effective in his or her current or future roles.

Legacy coaching helps the retiring or winding-down leader to identify the legacy he or she would like to leave behind and to take the appropriate actions to make that legacy become a reality.

Video coaching is defined by its method of using immediate video recording and playback to allow people to become more aware of how they come across to others and to shape their verbal and nonverbal communication to convey the intended messages and achieve the desired influence.

Team coaching, different from most of the other coaching methods, provides one or more coaches who specialize in team dynamics and effectiveness to work together with the leader and each member of a team. The team coach "has an ongoing, helping relationship with both the team and the individual executive" (Diedrich, 2001, p. 238).

Examples of Consulting Situations in Which EC Can Be Especially Effective

Organizational consulting takes many forms. Some are more appropriate and have greater potential than others for the consultant to incorporate EC. The following are examples of applications in which EC can be especially helpful as part of larger consulting efforts.

Executive Assessment, Development, and Succession Planning Programs

EC can be an especially effective method to develop high-potential leaders, get key players who have derailed back on track, and assimilate and accelerate the learning of leaders who are newly assigned to critical roles. It can also be effective in the development and improvement of individual skills and practices of executives at the senior level. In all of these situations, one-on-one coaching can show good results that may not be addressed as well by more traditional, group, or less intensive methods of development.

Performance Management

Executives can be coached on how to convey specific performance expectations and how to give more direct feedback. But many senior executives find it difficult to take the extra step to shape their employees' performance. The executive coach, similar to a sports coach, helps "players" to see what they are currently doing, demonstrate what they should be doing differently, and work painstakingly, through trial and error, to experiment, practice, and re-practice the desired techniques until the players consistently get the desired results. By providing such coaching to an executive, the coach also serves as a role model for the executive to coach his or her employees to shape their behavior as well.

Consulting to Help Build Organizational Values, Vision, Mission, and Strategy

Many executives lack an understanding or appreciation of the importance of shared values as potential drivers of interpersonal trust, team cohesiveness, culture, and employee commitment. Others are stuck in neutral, lacking personal drive as a result of not being sure why they are working and what they care about most in leading their organization. In conjunction with consulting to help design and facilitate the strategic planning process, a coaching relationship can be especially effective in getting executives and would-be executives to think, plan, and act differently as strategic leaders.

Building and Improving the Effectiveness and Collaboration of Executive Teams

When an organizational consultant attends executive team meetings as part of the consultation process, he or she can apply EC techniques with the leader and members of the team to help them change negative behaviors (e.g., interrupting each other, making passive-aggressive comments that interfere with positive team interaction, not following established meeting agenda, or applying leadership practices that foster negative groupthink). Where some of these behaviors can be addressed publicly in the team meeting, others need repeated, private, direct feedback and practicing of alternative behaviors outside of the team before and after they are applied in team meetings.

Conflict Resolution and Mediation

Many conflicts are responsive to consultant intervention and mediation, but the conflict-related behaviors keep repeating

themselves in new situations. Some executives have a tendency to provoke useless conflict or keep conflict going when other more constructive responses would be more helpful. The executive coach can use behavioral rehearsal and video feedback, replaying conflict situations with new responses, to help shape more constructive conflict management techniques.

Change Leadership and Change Management

When senior managers are barriers to organizational change, EC can help to change the managers' behaviors that create the barriers. Often the coach helps to build the senior manager's personal comfort with ambiguity, change the executive's demure announcements so they begin to show passion and conviction for needed change, and develop the manager's positive verbal and nonverbal responses when others suggest changes.

How to Prepare for a Practice as a Professional Executive Coach

Professional executive coaches are not born. As described above, it is a specialty of organizational consultation that requires a complicated combination of knowledge, skills, and stylistic inclinations. Significant research is still needed to examine the relative truth and importance of the principles and guidelines suggested in this article (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Ennis et al., 2003). If one is to accept the definitions and prescriptions as outlined in these pages, several implications need to be considered by anyone interested in preparing himself or herself for or beginning to practice EC.

What Prospective Executive Coaches Need to Do

1. Evaluate themselves honestly to decide if they have the real interest, passion,

style, and propensity to work intensely, one-on-one with executives to help them get better as leaders and achieve their business objectives.

2. Build a base of thorough knowledge in psychology, business management, organizational dynamics, and leadership development that goes beyond reading a few popular books. If they already are knowledgeable in some of these areas, they need to fill the gaps in the others through reading, course work, and mentoring from experts and through other forms of study.

3. Gain significant experience to build a strong repertoire of skills in basic business management, leadership, organizational consulting, and one-on-one coaching skills.

4. Decide what kinds of EC they want to provide: Who do they want to coach; in what kinds of functions and organizations; in what geographic areas; toward what ends for their clients; toward what ends for themselves; applying what kinds of EC methods; and as part of a consulting organization, a network of independent consultants, or as an individual practitioner?

5. Develop a plan to gain more tailored knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the practice they have defined for themselves (industry specialization, expertise around specific targeted functions—research and development, sales, HR, marketing, and so forth—specific coaching methodologies, and so forth).

6. Build an infrastructure to support the EC practice they have targeted: marketing, support materials, contractual templates, a referral network for consulting needs beyond their own expertise or for collaborative consulting projects, business office technology and support, and so forth.

7. Develop a plan for their continued professional education.

8. Market themselves and develop referral sources in their target geographic, industry, and functional arenas.

9. Develop resources and outlets to manage the stresses, conflicts, and changes associated with the practice of EC.

Based on the working definition set forth in this article, significant changes may be needed in the training and selection of executive coaches. Training and certification programs for coaches need to greatly increase the scope of their curriculum and the selection prerequisites for acceptance of their participants. Expecting coaches with little prior applicable knowledge or experience to be able to meet the complex demands of an executive and his or her organization is like expecting a person off the street to do eye surgery with a few days of discussion about vision and a few hours of lab work.

What Executives and Their Organizations Need to Look for in Selecting an Executive Coach

No two EC situations are alike, so each organization and executive needs to evaluate prospective executive coaches on the basis of some basic information and some specific criteria unique to their particular needs and circumstances. The following set of questions can help executives and their organizations select the right executive coach to help meet their needs:

1. Does the executive coach have the required basic knowledge and skills?

2. Does the coach have the special knowledge, skills, style, theoretical approach, and experience applicable to the goals of the specific coaching situation?

3. Is the coach familiar with the industry, business functions, market, or other environmental factors that are important to the executive to be coached?

4. Is the coach committed to follow the EC principles as described above?

5. Is there satisfactory chemistry between the executive and the coach based on how the executive perceives and responds

to the coach's approach, personality, style, and professional demeanor?

6. Does the coach participate in ongoing continued education and professional development to apply EC as part of his or her consulting practice?

7. Will the contractual arrangements for the coaching fit within the preferences and limits of the executive and his or her organization (fees, time availability, flexibility of schedule, consulting policies and procedures, and so forth)?

Although it is essential to get the right coach for the EC situation, there are many other factors besides the coach that will affect the success of the coaching: the readiness of the executive, the support from the boss and the organization, the HR infrastructure, and so forth. Only through a partnership between the right coach, collaborating with the executive and his or her organization, will coaching succeed in achieving the executive's and the organization's objectives.

Conclusion

There is no one best way to practice EC. Only when more extensive research is conducted and validated will we have adequate data to substantiate which are the most important variables that differentiate successful training, selection, and practice of EC from less effective approaches. We have no single accepted definition of EC. Certainly, it only takes going to one conference on the topic to see that the term is used by different practitioners and clients to mean everything from life coaching, to process consultation, to psychotherapy, career coaching, and leadership development. The definition proposed and exemplified in this article is an attempt to bring us one step closer to a shared definition of EC, continuing the exploration of its value and beginning to answer questions about what makes it work better in some situations than in others.

The current state of the art of EC is in a similar situation to that of the tumultuous Medieval times in Hungary when the unknown carriage maker saw the opportunity to design the first coach. That craftsman imagined a way to carry the weary traveler along the harsh terrain to go faster, feeling fewer bumps and being protected from the dangers of accelerated travel through bad weather and around dangerous turns. Today, it is the organizational consultant who can provide the coaching to help carry the weary executive through the constantly changing and harsh environment faced by business leaders of the 21st century. Each executive coach may drive a somewhat different vehicle. We may go faster or slower, use one horsepower or another. But the essential elements of effective EC are simple: Know where the executives are starting and where they and their organizations want to end up. Then, help carry them through to their destinations so they encounter fewer bumps along the way, arrive ready to carry on, and are better prepared for their next journey!

References

- Brotman, L. E., Liberi, W. P., & Wasylyshyn, K. M. (1998). Executive coaching: The need for standards of competence. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 50, 40–46.
- Diedrich, R. C. (2001). Lessons learned in and guidelines for coaching executive teams. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 53, 238–239.
- Ennis, S., Stern, L. R., Yahanda, N., Vitti, M., Otto, J., Hodgetts, W., et al. (2003). *The executive coaching handbook*. Wellesley, MA: The Executive Coaching Forum (<http://www.executivecoachingforum.com>).
- Frisch, M. H. (2001). The emerging role of the internal coach. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 53, 240–250.
- Hendrickson, R. (1987). *The Henry Holt encyclopedia of word and phrase origins*. New York: Henry Holt.

- Hunt, J. M. (2003, April). *Successful executive coaching experiences: Report on a case study research program*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Orlando, FL.
- Kampa-Kokesch, S., & Anderson, M. Z. (2001). Executive coaching: A comprehensive review of the literature. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 53, 205–228.
- Levinson, H. (1996). Executive coaching. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 48, 115–123.
- Modoono, S. A. (2002). The executive coach self-assessment inventory. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 54, 43.
- Orenstein, R. L. (2002). Executive coaching, it's not just about the executive. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 38(3), 355–374.
- Stern, L. R. (1998). Five types of executives in search of coaching. *The Manchester Review*, 3(2), 13–19.

E-Mail Notification of Your Latest Issue Online!

Would you like to know when the next issue of your favorite APA journal will be available online? This service is now available to you. Sign up at <http://watson.apa.org/notify/> and you will be notified by e-mail when issues of interest to you become available!

Copyright of Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice & Research is the property of American Psychological Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice & Research is the property of American Psychological Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.