

# “A Coach is much more than just the wearing of a badge”



When I entered management consultancy in the 1970's there were very few management consultancy firms and even the large accounting practices were novices. In fact very few folk even understood the term. In those days to join a management consultancy company you had to be academically and professionally qualified, be an experienced manager at a relatively senior level and have the right personality to communicate with all levels of management.

And on top of this you underwent training for some 10 weeks training in the evenings and at weekends, and all under considerable pressures. It was not unknown for some to be sacked at the end of the training because they failed to achieve what was expected of them.

Now I am not suggesting that this is the only way to become a management consultant, as that would be arrogant of me, but the truth is that anyone today can become a management consultant.

There is no recognised professional qualification, no apprenticeship to be served and no examination to be passed.

In fact the emergence of many of the new breed of consultants has arisen either from being groomed in a large accounting practice or because they were made redundant (or retired early). In the latter case it was not unknown for this to happen on a Friday, and on the Monday a plaque appeared on the office door with the words "Management Consultant". True, some have proved to be very professional & successful but unfortunately this has not always been the case.

I think that today, some 30 years on, we are seeing a new breed of person emerging called the Executive Coach along very similar lines to that of the management consultant. But do we know what a coach is, never mind a successful one? So let me first attempt to distinguish between what I understand to be a mentor and a coach. To me:

- **Mentor** describes someone who is an internal supporter who provides reassurance, personal reflective space and insight into networks while a
- **Coach** describes someone who is an external facilitator who helps clarify the situation, sets goals, explores options, encourages the identification of solutions and opportunities, provides feedback and assists in action planning.

But what really makes a successful executive coach is a mix of real-world business experience and personal characteristics, including:

1. **High-level business experience:** For the relationship to work, the executive and the coach must at a minimum be peers. To be able to provide appropriate guidance, the coach should have not only worked in the corporate world, but also have held senior line positions.

2. **Interpersonal skills:** The coach must be adept at handling all sorts of complex, touchy interpersonal dynamics, at sizing up a situation quickly, and dealing with a plethora of personalities. Good listening skills are also critical.

1. **Integrity:** Executive coaching often involves discussing not only sensitive personal issues, but also high-level, strategic, confidential information. Honesty and the ability not to betray a confidence are essential.

2. **Political savvy:** To be effective, executives must be able to navigate the tricky political waters of their organisation. A competent coach needs to be up to helping him or her do that without becoming part of the management team.

3. **Flexibility and creativity;** You never quite know what's going to happen when lots of egos, ambitions, and agendas collide. And that calls for the ability to react quickly, to come up with new solutions, and discard ideas when they seem ineffective and come up with new ones –fast. At the same time, the coach should be comfortable with ambiguity, fast change, and lots of uncertainty.

4. **Tough love:** Ultimately, coaching is all about achieving real, bottom-line results. The coach needs to be able to confront tough issues, hold people accountable, and demand that tangible outcomes are achieved.

5. **Comfortable at the top:** Unless the coach can relate to upper management—and understand the expectations of Boards and Shareholders—he or she won't be able to grasp the subtleties of each coaching situation.

6. **Organisational insight:** The goal of executive coaching is to strengthen a person's performance, but only as it relates to real corporate objectives. That requires an understanding of both the executive's and the company's needs, and how to make them work together to achieve clearly defined goals.

While more traditional coaching only tries to fix an executive's management style, a good executive coach today should be tackling skills that tie directly to corporate objectives and focus not only on interpersonal behaviour, but also on hard-core business skills—with the goal of linking individual effectiveness to organisational performance. No longer mostly therapists by training, they tend to be business people themselves, with the kind of high-level corporate expertise needed to help even Managing Directors do their jobs better.

So can I put out a plea, namely that before we all start to call ourselves Executive Coaches that we become much more careful with the terminology and much more demanding about the competencies and experience expected of the coach.

We as coaches and those wanting to use our services must realise that executive coaching is a collaborative, individualised relationship the aims of which are to bring about sustained behavioural change, improve corporate and personal performance and transform the quality of the executives working and personal life.

Only when we appreciate this and fully understand what experience and competencies a coach must have, then and only then, should we think of putting up the plaque and wearing the badge.