

To Destigmatize Executive Coaching, Reserve It For The Few



Mitch Mitchell Forbes Councils Member
Forbes Coaches Council
Leadership

POST WRITTEN BY

Mitch Mitchell

Mitch leads the coaching practice at **FMG Leading**, a human capital strategy and advisory firm.



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While executive coaching has long been accepted as a valuable tool for increasing leadership performance as part of onboarding efforts, promotions and other career milestones, management has often held at least somewhat biased thinking that equates

coaching with serious leadership flaws. This stems from an old-school mindset that understands excellence as an inherent quality and thus views the need for coaching negatively, a sign of subpar talent or problematic qualities.

Companies would be wise to recognize this misconception and help top leaders and employees unlearn this mentality, as building the strongest possible leadership bench through coaching often represents a more strategic and less costly alternative to “buying” new talent, especially in tight job markets when recruiting presents a challenge and expense.

But this only holds true if organizations can see the building process through the right lens.

Communicated, modeled and conducted properly, executive coaching opportunities should be considered a privilege and badge of honor, saved for high-performers with good raw material. Meaningfully, this necessitates that coaching not be confused with fixing. Problems are fixed. Dilapidated houses are fixer-uppers. These negative connotations only reinforce the above-mentioned stigma.

Coaching should not signify a leader needs extra help or that his/her attributes need to be fixed, but rather serve as recognition of an individual’s potential in the natural path of growth and development. It’s an earned distinction, not a sign of being broken.

It’s helpful to consider and refer people to common practice in sports. All world-class athletes have coaches, often more than one, and don’t graduate to a level where they no longer need them. Rather, the most talented, clutch performers make continuous use of the very best outside input, feedback and learning opportunities, especially through their trusted partner-coaches. Securing such a coach is an essential first step upon recognition that a person has a high level of athletic talent.

Similarly, executive coaching is most effective, and therefore most valuable, for those with higher levels of raw business or management talent. Recognition of such talent warrants an investment in coaching.

One of the best means of elevating the perception of coaching is simply selecting only top performers for coaching engagements. This helps reestablish the true meaning of coaching without much fanfare. It’s usually no secret who in an office is considered A (or

B) team versus C team, so if only members of the company A and B teams are assigned coaches, it won't take long for others to want one, too. Having a coach means you're good!

It also makes sense economically. At its most basic level, coaching represents a significant financial investment. Companies should consider carefully who will make the most of these dollars, using the 80/20 rule and selecting the smaller group that will produce more significant results.

What's more, reserving coaching opportunities for "only the few" produces a halo effect, creating loyalty and improving morale by showing that top leaders recognize talent and believe in meritocracy. This holds true for those selected for coaching but also can be motivating for those who aren't.

When organizations take this strategic approach to coaching and talent — carefully communicating what coaching is, who it's for and why — they create significant motivators for current and future leaders. Coaching becomes a tangible goal for top talent and those who aspire to get there. Many of an organization's best leaders will view coaching as something to strive for, providing a reason to maintain their current career path and keep improving in order to have their own coaching experience.

All of this creates a classic win-win situation. It empowers organizations' best leaders with coveted development and growth opportunities while organizations reap the rewards of maintaining their best people ... who only get better! This cycle can be amplified in business cultures that take a holistic approach to continuous improvement, making life-long development and growth an essential part of their DNA.

Top leaders can further destigmatize coaching by communicating to an organization's ranks the help they've sought out and received — including executive coaching — at various points of their careers. Such honesty reflects the kind of culture that puts talent first and is consistent with the experience of most successful individuals who've learned that excellence is not at all inherent, but requires dedication, hard work and a desire to constantly improve.
