

Working With Your Executive Coach

Engaging in Executive Coaching



By Mary Jo Asmus
&
Mary Sue Reining

Engaging in Executive Coaching

What is Executive Coaching?

The International Coach Federation (ICF) defines coaching in a generic way as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential”. Executive coaches focus their process on achievement of business and professional goals. An executive coach will work with an individual to define their goals, create an action plan, discover new and different ways to achieve their goals, and hold them accountable for taking action on that plan. Good coaches bring out the best in their clients and help the client enhance their self awareness and learning. Each meeting that you have with an executive coach is designed to be customized to you and to keep you focused on achieving the desired goals.

Coaching is often considered a form of consulting, although there are differences in delivery and client experience. Coaching can also be closely aligned with mentoring. The differences and similarities between coaching, consulting, and mentoring are highlighted as follows:

COACHING	CONSULTING	MENTORING
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus is primarily on an individual within the context of the organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus is primarily on an organization, but may take individuals in the organization into account	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus is primarily on an individual within the context of the organization
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Goal is behavioral change and professional/personal development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Goal is organizational change and/or development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Goal is learning and support for the individual
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Foundation for dialog is inquiry for self awareness, action and accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Foundation for dialog is leverage expertise, to give advice and recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Foundation for the relationship is to give advice, provide support and make introductions within the organization

Working With Your Executive Coach

The advantage of using an executive coach over other development options such as training is that the learning is customized to specific individual needs and goals. Just as a sports coach might work within an individual's needs and goals – taking into account their particular style, their pace of learning and their strengths, an executive coach will use all of these to provide a “made to order” learning and development solution for a client. Executive coaching is a longer-term and often more effective option to training alone. Much of executive coaching focuses on gaining valuable insight and behavioral change. Regular meetings with a coach that are interspersed with on-the-job assignments allow for action (in the workplace) followed by reflection (with the coach). Studies on how the human brain processes indicate that changes in behavior occur over time, resulting in physical brain structure change. With coaching, the behavior becomes “habit” and natural.

How to choose an Executive Coach

There are a lot of opinions about what type of credentials or background make an effective executive coach or what standards should be met for effective coaching. Many “coaches” have had little or no coach training or business experience. However, there are some principles that can be followed to increase the likelihood that quality coaches can be found when the need arises.

For those who are looking to contract with a coach or to bring coaches into their organization, it's a “buyer-beware” situation; many do not know where to look for good coaches or what to ask for in coach credentials. This has occasionally resulted in some unpleasant stories of “coaching gone bad”, with money lost and credibility for the executive coaching profession questioned. Additionally, because high-quality executive coaches are in demand, their capacity to take on new or additional clients is sometimes limited. This may contribute to higher service fees for executive coaches with appropriate backgrounds.

Working With Your Executive Coach

One of the best methods to find good coaches is to utilize good-old-fashioned referral networks along with descriptions for the specific criteria or characteristics that may be needed. This can be time-consuming, but in the end will yield the best results.

The following are criteria that should be explored with a prospective coach:

- **Business/corporate experience:** Does the coach have specific business or corporate experience and/or background? Have they coached executives in an organization similar to yours in size, complexity, or products/services offered?
- **Coach credentials and/or base number of accrued coaching hours:** How long has the coach been coaching? How many accrued coaching hours has the coach had?
- **Coach qualities:** Does the coach listen well? Does s/he have interpersonal skills that compel you to consider a long term professional relationship with her? Does the coach model leadership abilities and demonstrate an adherence to her own principles and practices?
- **Coach-specific training:** Has the coach had training in a coach-specific process and skill set? Is the training an International Coach Federation accredited program?
- **Educational background:** Does the coach have a college degree, and in what area?
- **Experience in giving feedback on 360° or other assessments:** Has the coach had training and/or experience in providing feedback and developing action plans around the assessments that will be used?
- **Location of coach and participant:** Is the coach located in a specific time zone? Although most and often all coaching meetings can be done over the telephone, time-zone proximity will make scheduling coach-participant meetings easier.
- **Willingness to sign a contract for services:** Is the coach willing to sign a contract or agreement for the coaching?

Working With Your Executive Coach

- **Willingness to subscribe to ICF Code of Ethics:** Does the coach subscribe to an ethical code? If not, would they be willing to sign a contract that includes subscribing to the ICF Code of Ethics (see www.coachfederation.org).

There may be other specific criteria that are important as well, but this list will provide a beginning to a screening process for finding the executive coach that meets your needs.

In addition to the credentials outlined above, you'll want to make sure that the coach is right for you- some may call this "chemistry". In order to have a safe environment in which to discuss your goals, it is important that the coach is reliable in maintaining confidences and exhibit an attitude of non-judgment. The coach must have the ability to establish trust quickly. Trust is one of the most important elements of a coach-client relationship and is key to having an optimal coaching experience.

Deciding What You Want Out of Executive Coaching

There are lots of reasons that an executive may decide to hire a coach, including (but not limited to):

- Transition into a new position or organization
- Learning flexibility in communication or leadership style
- Obtaining a promotion or new position
- Developing leadership skills
- Focusing on priorities
- Getting organized
- Improving work relationships
- Enhancing team dynamics
- Balancing competing interests
- Developing and communicating a vision and mission

Working With Your Executive Coach

- Obtaining feedback and setting goals from 360 assessment results
- Having a partner to confidentially discuss issues and support better decisions when insight and perspective are needed

Whatever the reason, you will get the best results when you wholeheartedly engage in the coaching process and take responsibility to move into action. The best coaches recognize that they are “catalysts” for their clients to achieve their goals, and that the actual work is done by the client. The foundation for skilled coaching conversations is inquiry, which means that the solutions to your dilemmas are yours – and the actions that you take become your responsibility.

Your executive coach will first work with you to gain clarity around your goals. Your goals may be based on feedback you’ve received, or assessments (such as a 360) that you’ve taken. In some cases, you and your coach may work with a “sponsor”, often your manager; in order have support and accountability for the actions to be taken toward your goals.

What to Expect of Your Executive Coach

- **Ethics:** You should ask, and expect to receive (verbally or in writing) the ethical guidelines the executive coach will follow during your work together. Examples of these guidelines are those that are followed by coaches who are members of the International Federation of Coaching shown as Appendix A.
- **Confidentiality:** Your coach is responsible to maintain confidentiality around most aspects of your mutual coaching relationship. This includes non-disclosure of your name, your organization, and details of your action plans and your discussions without your permission. Most coaches will have you sign an agreement that includes a confidentiality statement. It may be noted that exceptions to this confidentiality agreement include informing your manager or appropriate sponsors if

Working With Your Executive Coach

you are not attending meetings, or suspicion that an ethical or legal violation has occurred.

- **Meeting Venue and Timing:** Coaching can be done “in person” or over the telephone. Many executive coaching engagements will include both.

The number of meetings, how often you meet with your coach and the length of the coaching engagement may vary depending upon your unique challenges and goals. We encourage you to ask about this – some coaches will not specify the length of engagement. Many coaches will let you know the minimum length of the engagement (in months and number of meetings). You and/or your sponsor will have the opportunity to extend that, if needed.

- **Cost:** Executive coaching is a customized learning process, geared specifically for the individual. As such, it can be expensive but valuable for the individual who is motivated to make changes specific to their individual challenges. Costs for executive coaching vary widely. The following factors may have an impact on the cost:
 - Education, background, and experience of the coach
 - Length and number of coaching hours agreed to
 - Whether coaching will be done over the phone or “in person”
 - Types of assessments or feedback that will be obtained
 - Materials provided
 - Any additional work as part of the coaching agreement: three-way meetings with your manager or sponsor, the coach observing you in the workplace, etc.

Contracting the Coaching Engagement

Contracting and designing the coaching engagement

Once you have chosen the coach that you feel you wish to work with, it is important that the details of the coaching engagement, including length, venue, assessments, involvement of others, and cost be agreed to. If the participation of a third party is important (your manager or other sponsor), they must also be involved in the design of the coaching program.

It is important that all parties involved agree to the level of confidentiality that will be maintained. You may choose to tell others of this relationship, or others may “surmise”, but in most cases, the coach should keep this information confidential unless they have specific agreement from you to reveal that you have a coaching relationship.

The Roles of the Individuals Involved in the Executive Coaching Engagement

- **The Executive Coach’s Role:** The executive coach’s role is that of a guide or a “catalyst” to assist you in interpreting your assessment or feedback results; developing an action plan; helping you to reflect on your behavior and actions; and moving you forward with your goals through progressive, ongoing coaching meetings. A good coach will know which questions to ask you and how to ask them in a way that will facilitate all of these. The coach will hold the client responsible for achieving their goals. The coach is not responsible for any actions or behaviors taken on the part of the client.
- **Your Role:** Your role is to engage in, and take primary responsibility for your coaching experience. This will include attending scheduled meetings; drafting the

Working With Your Executive Coach

action plan; setting agendas for each meeting with your coach; keeping your action plan current and checking in with your sponsor; and completing any assignments that you've agreed to.

- **The Sponsor's role:** A sponsor is usually your manager, but on occasion, may also be someone from human resources. Their role will be to support you from the inside of the organization in your development. To that end, they will be responsible to keep your action plan alive throughout the coaching engagement. The sponsor should be regularly asking you about progress on your coaching action plan. You, your coach and the sponsor may meet together several times throughout the coaching engagement to discuss progress and any barriers to action.
- **Human Resources Role:** Occasionally, Human Resources or a Program Manager in Organizational Development will be involved in a coaching engagement. The Human Resources responsibility is to provide general oversight of the engagement or program, make sure appropriate communication flows are in place and that confidentiality is maintained internally.

Assessments and Feedback

Many coaches will include assessments as a part of their coaching package. These assessments may run from the familiar, such as Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, DiSC, or 360's to those that may be less familiar. Regardless of the assessments the coach uses, it is important that they provide appropriate interpretation and feedback on the results, including discussions about how those results are important to your current situation.

- **Behavioral/personality assessments:** These types of self-reporting assessments can be a valuable adjunct to the coaching you will receive. They'll provide you with

Working With Your Executive Coach

some personal insight into a variety of aspects about your personality and behavior. These instruments can be a great foundation for beginning the discussion about your strengths and opportunities, which can lead to some ideas for setting goals and taking action on your Action Plan.

- **360's:** Also a great adjunct to the coaching you will receive, a 360 assessment will provide you with feedback on how your behavior is perceived by those you interact or work with. The people who will participate in providing the feedback will usually include your manager, your peers, your direct reports and “others”, including customers, vendors, etc. These will normally be the colleagues who have had a chance to observe you in action and know your behaviors well enough to provide feedback on them.

There are many ways for 360's to be conducted, including use of electronic survey instruments, interview, or a combination of both of these. The key to a successful 360 experience is confidentiality. All feedback providers must feel secure that information provided back to you will not identify or associate them with specific feedback or comments. A coach who is experienced in these kinds of assessments will take the utmost care to assure anonymity of the respondents.

Action Planning

A coaching action plan forms the foundation for the goals and actions you will take. It is a dynamic document that may change as you move along in your coaching engagement. Your coach may provide you with a template to draft your plan, which will include your goals, action steps, timelines and how you will measure progress. You should count on your coach to assist you in drafting your plan, although the primary responsibility for the plan belongs with you.

Working With Your Executive Coach

Also, be aware that your Action Plan may be shared with your manager so that they may appropriately “sponsor” your development on behalf of the organization.

- **Setting Goals:** You may or may not know what you want to work on with your coach, depending on how you came to coaching. Some executives in “high potential” leadership development programs, where a coach is provided as a part of the program may have not thought much about what they’d like to work with a coach on. Others may have come to coaching primarily because they know exactly what opportunities they’d like a coach to help them with.
- Some organizations allow a great deal of latitude on coaching goals. They may be personal goals, professional goals, or a combination. Consider your most recent performance evaluations, 360 results, feedback from your colleagues or manager, and other assessments for ideas. In any event, it is suggested that 1-3 goals in a six-month coaching engagement, is plenty for most people, especially if they are broad.
- **Action Steps:** Your goals will need to be broken down into smaller, manageable action steps. Putting these action steps to paper is sometimes the most difficult part of drafting your action plan, but it is extremely important to know the specific actions you will take to achieve your goals.
- **Timelines:** Consider reasonable timelines for each action step. All timelines should be within the timeframe of your coaching engagement.
- **Measures:** Measures also tend to be difficult to set. Often the actions are behavioral, making them difficult to track and measure. The measures do not need to be complex; and it may be impossible to put actual numbers to them. See Appendix B for an example of an “immeasurable” action.

Working With Your Executive Coach

Working With Your Coach on the Action Plan

Once you have clarity on your goals and have drafted an action plan, the vast majority of your time with your coach will be spent on taking the steps needed to achieve your goals.

- **Meetings with your coach:** You may find it curious that the agendas for meetings with your coach are your responsibility. Aside from a check-in on any fieldwork that you committed to from the previous meeting, the topics of the meetings are up to you. The reasons for this are sometimes not obvious, but they have to do with the fact that only you are responsible for your development. By setting the agenda for each meeting, you become accountable for your own growth. The coach becomes the “guide” for your journey, and holds you accountable for taking action – but other than that, your progress is completely up to you.
- **Assignments:** You and your coach will co-design the assignments that you will be responsible for between meetings. Generally, this work will be in keeping with your goals and action plan, and will be accomplished within your daily work. If the coach assigns fieldwork that you disagree with, it is important for you to refuse, change or suggest alternatives.
- **Support and accountability:** If you have a sponsor, you will find that you are supported and accountable to both your coach and your sponsor. In addition to regular meetings with your coach, you and your sponsor should also meet on a regular basis to discuss your progress, successes and challenges with the action plan. Your manager will assist, when possible and practical, in removing any barriers to achieving your goals that you may be experiencing.

Working With Your Executive Coach

Beyond Coaching

Toward the end of your coaching experience, you will want to reflect with your coach and sponsors about whether you have achieved your goals as completely as you'd hoped. In our experience, the use of an action plan and the support of your coach and sponsor make success feasible for the motivated individual. There are situations where it may make sense to extend the coaching engagement beyond the agreed-upon period; as when the goals have not been fully realized or new goals have emerged during the coaching process.

In any event, it might also make sense to draw up a plan for your development post-coaching. What other opportunities do you want to take advantage of? Consider asking your sponsor to support you in those opportunities. Make a commitment to your ongoing development, and consider arranging check-in sessions with your coach at three or six months in the future.

The important part about working with a coach and moving beyond coaching is that success can only be realized when you understand and take personal responsibility for your role and your behaviors in making transformation happen. Coaching can be a wonderful, liberating experience when you are motivated and engaged in the process.

Working With Your Executive Coach

APPENDIX A: ICF CODE OF ETHICS

Part One: Definition of Coaching

Section 1: Definitions

- **Coaching:** Coaching is partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.
- **A professional coaching relationship:** A professional coaching relationship exists when coaching includes a business agreement or contract that defines the responsibilities of each party.
- **An ICF Professional Coach:** An ICF Professional Coach also agrees to practice the ICF Professional Core Competencies and pledges accountability to the ICF Code of Ethics.

In order to clarify roles in the coaching relationship, it is often necessary to distinguish between the client and the sponsor. In most cases, the client and sponsor are the same person and therefore jointly referred to as the client. For purposes of identification, however, the International Coach Federation defines these roles as follows:

- **Client:** The "client" is the person(s) being coached.
- **Sponsor:** The "sponsor" is the entity (including its representatives) paying for and/or arranging for coaching services to be provided.

In all cases, coaching engagement contracts or agreements should clearly establish the rights, roles, and responsibilities for both the client and sponsor if they are not the same persons.

Working With Your Executive Coach

Part Two: The ICF Standards of Ethical Conduct

Preamble: ICF Professional Coaches aspire to conduct themselves in a manner that reflects positively upon the coaching profession; are respectful of different approaches to coaching; and recognize that they are also bound by applicable laws and regulations.

Section 1: Professional Conduct At Large

As a coach:

1. I will not knowingly make any public statement that is untrue or misleading about what I offer as a coach, or make false claims in any written documents relating to the coaching profession or my credentials or the ICF.
2. I will accurately identify my coaching qualifications, expertise, experience, certifications and ICF Credentials.
3. I will recognize and honor the efforts and contributions of others and not misrepresent them as my own. I understand that violating this standard may leave me subject to legal remedy by a third party.
4. I will, at all times, strive to recognize personal issues that may impair, conflict, or interfere with my coaching performance or my professional coaching relationships. Whenever the facts and circumstances necessitate, I will promptly seek professional assistance and determine the action to be taken, including whether it is appropriate to suspend or terminate my coaching relationship(s).
5. I will conduct myself in accordance with the ICF Code of Ethics in all coach training, coach mentoring, and coach supervisory activities.
6. I will conduct and report research with competence, honesty, and within recognized scientific standards and applicable subject guidelines. My research will be carried out with the necessary consent and approval of those involved, and with an approach that will protect participants from any potential harm. All research efforts will be performed in a manner that complies with all the applicable laws of the country in which the research is conducted.

Working With Your Executive Coach

7. I will maintain, store, and dispose of any records created during my coaching business in a manner that promotes confidentiality, security, and privacy, and complies with any applicable laws and agreements
8. I will use ICF member contact information (e-mail addresses, telephone numbers, etc.) only in the manner and to the extent authorized by the ICF.

Section 2: Conflicts of Interest

As a coach:

1. I will seek to avoid conflicts of interest and potential conflicts of interest and openly disclose any such conflicts. I will offer to remove myself when such a conflict arises.
2. I will disclose to my client and his or her sponsor all anticipated compensation from third parties that I may pay or receive for referrals of that client.
3. I will only barter for services, goods or other non-monetary remuneration when it will not impair the coaching relationship.
4. I will not knowingly take any personal, professional, or monetary advantage or benefit of the coach-client relationship, except by a form of compensation as agreed in the agreement or contract.

Section 3: Professional Conduct with Clients

As a coach:

1. I will not knowingly mislead or make false claims about what my client or sponsor will receive from the coaching process or from me as the coach.
2. I will not give my prospective clients or sponsors information or advice I know or believe to be misleading or false.

Working With Your Executive Coach

3. I will have clear agreements or contracts with my clients and sponsor(s). I will honor all agreements or contracts made in the context of professional coaching relationships.
4. I will carefully explain and strive to ensure that, prior to or at the initial meeting, my coaching client and sponsor(s) understand the nature of coaching, the nature and limits of confidentiality, financial arrangements, and any other terms of the coaching agreement or contract.
5. I will be responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries that govern any physical contact I may have with my clients or sponsors.
6. I will not become sexually intimate with any of my current clients or sponsors.
7. I will respect the client's right to terminate the coaching relationship at any point during the process, subject to the provisions of the agreement or contract. I will be alert to indications that the client is no longer benefiting from our coaching relationship.
8. I will encourage the client or sponsor to make a change if I believe the client or sponsor would be better served by another coach or by another resource.
9. I will suggest my client seek the services of other professionals when deemed necessary or appropriate.

Section 4: Confidentiality/Privacy

As a coach:

1. I will maintain the strictest levels of confidentiality with all client and sponsor information. I will have a clear agreement or contract before releasing information to another person, unless required by law.
2. I will have a clear agreement upon how coaching information will be exchanged among coach, client, and sponsor.

Working With Your Executive Coach

3. When acting as a trainer of student coaches, I will clarify confidentiality policies with the students.
4. I will have associated coaches and other persons whom I manage in service of my clients and their sponsors in a paid or volunteer capacity make clear agreements or contracts to adhere to the ICF Code of Ethics Part 2, Section 4: Confidentiality/Privacy standards and the entire ICF Code of Ethics to the extent applicable.

Part Three: The ICF Pledge of Ethics

As an ICF Professional Coach, I acknowledge and agree to honor my ethical and legal obligations to my coaching clients and sponsors, colleagues, and to the public at large. I pledge to comply with the ICF Code of Ethics, and to practice these standards with those whom I coach.

If I breach this Pledge of Ethics or any part of the ICF Code of Ethics, I agree that the ICF in its sole discretion may hold me accountable for so doing. I further agree that my accountability to the ICF for any breach may include sanctions, such as loss of my ICF membership and/or my ICF Credentials.

Approved by the Ethics and Standards Committee on October 30, 2008.

Approved by the ICF Board of Directors on December 18, 2008.

Working With Your Executive Coach

APPENDIX B: COACHING ACTION PLAN

Name: Jim Smith **Position:** Director, Acme Corporation

Identify 1 - 3 Competencies you will work on (from your 360° results):

Finding balance in delegation: what I must do vs. what is appropriate for my staff to do
 Managing Up, Across differing Business Units at Acme

Goals: Identify 1-3 goals that you are most passionate about working on.	Measures: How will each goal be measured (can be quantitative or qualitative)?	Potential Business Impact: What is the value to you and the business if you do not achieve your goal? What is the value to you and the business if you do?	Target Date: Set a target date for each goal.
Achieve Delegation Balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feedback/Input received from my Manager & Coach Specific delegation examples/projects listed, considered and delegated Philosophical change in my expression (negative) of delegation Time becomes available to do higher level activities ; last minute stress to complete tasks diminished 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building Bench Strength from my directs Additional points of view in problem solving and shared experience leading to higher “yield on deliverables” Promote & develop the “growth” culture of delegation vs. handing off work 	February 1
Upward Management Skills (cross functional orgs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific feedback obtained from direct & next-level management Specific target(s) identified for me to gain exposure to in differing Business Units 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to additional perspectives to help solve problems Aggregate & Inventory additional “objectives” to improve my business modeling Help me to be a better coach to those that I mentor 	June 1

Working With Your Executive Coach

Specific Actions: What action steps can you take to achieve your goals?

1. Create a delegation philosophy to choose what elements are delegate “able”
2. Choose 1-2 objectives with quarterly targets for top 2 management potentials
3. Find two opportunities in our Leadership Development program to promote my successes and help my area
4. Work with a specific Business Group on an initiative to help assist my “selling up” goals

Working With Your Executive Coach

About The Authors

Mary Jo Asmus is an executive coach who is passionate about helping leaders to develop the work relationships that will make them extraordinary. She has worked with hundreds of leaders in private, non-profit, government, and community organizations to help them to become every bit as strategic about their relationships as they are about achieving business results.

Mary Jo owns and operates Aspire Collaborative Services LLC, established to work with leaders and teams who are smart - but have hit a brick wall with the people they work with. With 30 years in business including a stint as a Fortune 100 executive, she understands the intricacy and politics of relationships in organizations. She empowers her clients break through the wall with strategies that are customized to their needs, with a focus on organizational results.

Mary Jo facilitates leadership assessment, coaching, learning, team building, and authors a popular blog about work relationships for leaders (www.aspire-cs.com). She is married, has two amazing daughters and shares office space with an exceptional pug. She can be reached at mary.jo.asmus@aspire-cs.com or 269-372-2688.

Mary Sue Reining is an Executive Coach, Leadership Expert and Consultant with more than 26 years of senior level experience assessing, partnering and coaching executives and leaders, helping them upgrade their performance for both current and future positions and assignments. Known for her professionalism, exceptional interpersonal skills, and her proven business acumen, she enables her clients to stretch and achieve the desired level of performance and career satisfaction. Mary Sue's experience and accountability for fiscal results and people leadership coupled with her formal training in organizational development and corporate coaching enable her to build strong relationships based on trust and credibility with her clients.

Mary Sue's clients have represented a number of industries and markets, including technology, health care, education, non-profit, manufacturing, insurance and faith based organizations. Assignments have included one-on-one coaching and assessment, strategic planning, change management, team facilitation, executive training/development and board retreats.

Mary Sue is an avid learner and invests continually in her own growth and development. She completed her Masters in Management and Organizational Behavior / Organizational Development in addition to a Graduate Certificate in Managed Care from Benedictine University. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology from Baylor University and is a graduate of Corporate Coach University. Mary Sue owns The Reining Leadership Group, Inc., www.reiningleadership.com and can be reached at msreining@reiningleadership.com or 630-637-6070.