



# Equilearn

## For Thought....

### Why You Really Need a Coach

A short article on the benefits of coaching and what to consider in a coaching intervention

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## Why You Really Need a Coach

Most successful people are self-directing and self-managing. They take initiative, they know what they want to achieve, and they have discipline. They have self-knowledge and know their strengths and shortcomings. They have action plans to follow in order to avoid procrastination and keep on track with goals.

Why would successful people seek out the services of a coach? Why do so many executives - who are already in top positions - request an executive coach as part of their benefits package? The answer is simple – it is because they know from experience that even their highly refined ability to see what is needed is *limited by their own assumptions and beliefs*.

It is like the blind leading the blind when you only have yourself to turn to. The problem is that we all use our inner assumptions and beliefs to make decisions. We are driven by motivations and values that are often outside our own awareness.

To take this further, age and experience provide self-knowledge and a certain wisdom. Most successful people know themselves pretty well and are able to set goals and make decisions that are in line with who they are, at least part of the time...but therein lies the problem. Sometimes our beliefs and assumptions are faulty or out of date. Yet we rarely take time to look at our assumptions and beliefs - they are too embedded in us.

Looking further:

- **Beliefs**

Beliefs are the assumptions we make about ourselves, about others in the world and about how we expect things to be. Beliefs are about what we think is really true and what therefore to expect as likely consequences that will follow from our behavior.

- **Values**

Values are about how we have learnt to think things ought to be, how we ourselves and others ought to behave, especially in terms of qualities such as honesty, integrity, openness.

- **Basic Assumptions**

Basic assumptions are our automatic responses and established points of view. We are almost always unaware of the nature of our own basic assumptions, but they are enacted through our behavior - what we say and do. Basic assumptions are usually rooted in infancy, early family and social life. Assumptions shaping our behavior also come from cultural and belief contexts.

- **Attitudes**

Attitudes are the established ways of responding to people and situations that we have learned, based on the beliefs, values and assumptions we hold. Attitudes become manifest through our behavior.

There are two kinds of beliefs that operate 'behind the scenes.'

1. **Empowering beliefs:** these are related to excellence and how it can be achieved.
2. **Limiting beliefs:** these are the beliefs we have that limit our behaviors; even though our behavior is not what we want, we don't believe we can change it, for one reason or another.



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Many of the situations that block us in our daily lives do so based on a framework of assumptions we make. Draw a different frame about the same set of circumstances and new pathways come into view.

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Have you ever tried to draw or paint a self-portrait? Even if you are artistically talented, this is a difficult task. To take a look at your assumptions and beliefs by yourself in self-portrait style, and to explore them - examine them for their usefulness and value, is even harder to do - if not impossible.

A coach can help you see what you can't see for yourself. A good coach will ask the right kinds of questions - the kinds you can't answer right away, the ones that make you think, reflect.

### The Questions that Challenge

One of the best ways to surface underlying assumptions and beliefs with your coach is to drill down with a series of questions such as the following. You make a statement, and your coach asks, "What's important about that to you?" You answer. The coach continues to ask, "And, what's important about that?" until you surface the most important and essential beliefs about yourself and your world.

To explore further, the coach would go on to ask about how you formed that belief, where it comes from. This exploratory discussion usually reveals an experience in childhood, one early on in a career, or something that has had a profound effect. There is a history around every belief, both the empowering ones and the limiting ones. But we rarely examine them to see if they are appropriate for what is going on in the present.

Both our social and work habits have been built on these assumptions. Even our relationships and marriages operate on beliefs formed from our early histories. And while circumstances may have changed since the start of these practices, their continued use tends to reconfirm the old beliefs - they often still feel right to us. We keep on doing what we have always done, and expect different results.

Examining your assumptions and beliefs with your coach requires trust and confidence in your relationship. First, you must be able to examine and explore without judgment. Next, you need a safe conversational environment to creatively explore and develop new beliefs, new pathways, new ways of doing things.

### It's All Invented Anyway

Invent new beliefs, new pathways? Yes. Ben and Rosamund Zander in *The Art of Possibility*, show that our beliefs are all of our own construction. "It's all invented anyway, so we might as well invent a story or a framework of meaning that enhances our quality of life and the life of those around us."

Here is what they suggest you ask yourself:

*What assumption am I making,  
That I'm not aware I'm making,  
That gives me what I see?*

When you have an answer to that question, ask yourself this one:

*What might I now invent,  
That I haven't yet invented,  
That would give me other choices?*





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Here's a story to illustrate this thinking ~

A shoe factory sends two salesmen to Africa. One sends back a text message:

SITUATION HOPELESS. NO ONE WEARS SHOES

The other communicates back:

GLORIOUS OPPORTUNITY. THEY HAVE NO SHOES!

Each salesman has his own perspective with his own story to tell. Each has constructed his/her "truth" about the world encountered.

If you only have yourself as a coach, you may be missing an opportunity to explore beyond your assumptions and beliefs, both the limiting and empowering ones.

## Action Points

### 8 Keys to Picking the Right Coach

In times of recession, companies and organisations must do more with less. Providing executive coaches to high-potential performers is one way to get the most out of untapped talent.

"There's no question that future leaders will need constant coaching," notes Ram Charan, author of *Leadership in the Era of Economic Uncertainty* (McGraw-Hill, 2008). "As the business environment becomes more complex, they will increasingly turn to coaches for help in understanding how to act."

Willingness to be coached and a good fit are two of the key ingredients for a successful coaching relationship. This was reinforced in a January 2009 *Harvard Business Review* survey, in which researchers queried 140 top coaches about what companies should look for when hiring a coach.

According to the *HBR* article, there are two basic hiring rules:

1. Ensure executives are ready and willing to be coached
2. Allow them to choose the coach

Unfortunately, many executives select a coach based on referrals from colleagues, without adequately considering personal needs. The person sponsoring the engagement usually sends a few coaches for interviews and asks the executive to select one based on "fit." But what does a good fit actually mean, and how do you avoid hiring a coach who feels right but may not challenge you to grow?

Without a greater understanding of what happens in a coaching relationship, it's difficult to make a fair assessment and pick a good match. As the client, you should do the choosing, but you need some criteria to make the best selection.

We note a coach should achieve most of the following:

1. Strike a balance between supporting and challenging you/holding you accountable
2. Help create feedback loops with colleagues
3. Assist in clarifying your true strengths, values, purpose, and vision of success
4. Provide structure in the development process
5. Broaden your perspectives; motivate and energize you to value creating actions
6. Surface concepts, strategies, and tactics for your reflection and decisions
7. Maintain confidentiality & integrity
8. Deepen your self-knowledge through empathetic questioning and deep listening





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### Pick for Support and Ability to Challenge

Executives are recruited for their strengths. We don't expect them to show uncertainty, express fear or naturally ask for help. Executives who wish to grow, however, must do these very things.

You're more likely to open up to a coach who creates a safe, confidential environment. Coaches accomplish this in part by demonstrating that they understand you and respect your interests, values and concerns. This enables you to feel accepted, be honest about your thoughts and feelings, and be more willing to try new behaviors. In short to 'contract' is upfront and clear.

But coaches must be more than cheerleaders. They need to provide challenges that motivate you to perform beyond your habitual behaviors and perceptions; they must confront you directly, yet non-judgmentally, with the impact of your actions; and courageously probe the motives and assumptions underlying your behaviors. They need to surface any 'obstacles' that might hold you back.

Coaches who lack the capacity or courage to push you out of your comfort zone aren't doing their job. Learning is often achieved through a level of discomfort.

### Using the Coaching Relationship

Good coaches will use their personal experience with you to help you learn about yourself. How you treat your coach reflects how you treat others.

The way you select your coach is significant. Do you see the coach as a subordinate? A vendor or outside consultant? An authority figure or a professional whose primary relationship is with your boss or with your HR department? How do gender, race or other personal characteristics influence the way you interact with your coach?

Effective coaches will detect and decipher the subtleties within their clients' interactions. They will provide feedback on how a client's behavior impacts other relationships and goals.

Pick a coach who can raise issues appropriately and assist you to see how your behaviors affect others.

### Pick for Feedback Loops

Your coach should help you develop the skills needed to create relationships in which you can ask for honest feedback on an ongoing basis.

Instead of encouraging dependence, your coach should coach you to manage your development in the future. Through discovery, a good coach will encourage you to form productive links with colleagues and surface how to frame useful, specific feedback that is fit for your purpose.

Your coach will develop the practice in you to ask for feedback and manage the conversation without being defensive. This includes learning how to determine which feedback is relevant and valid, prioritize the issues you need to address and figure out how to handle them effectively.

### Pick for Clarifying Values and Purpose

How clearly do you articulate your core purpose, values and interests? Your vision of success?

A skilled coach supports you in clarifying your developmental, career and life goals – with permission. (These are the 3 areas of coaching and it is important that coach-coachee contract about the focus of each specific intervention.) A coach will work with you to develop capabilities around how to sort out your needs, wants, concerns and boundaries in any particular situation, allowing you to become more



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comfortable and act more consistently when completing goals, even in complex circumstances.

### Pick for Structuring the Development Process

Your coach must help you manage each step of the coaching project:

- ☐ Establish a contract
- ☐ Establish a realistic and specific roadmap from an evidence-based starting point
- ☐ Review and reflect on feedback and plan development and goal attainment
- ☐ Hold regular coaching conversations that include the practice of new behaviors/ways of working
- ☐ Support implementation in the workplace
- ☐ Assess for results

Many people tend to let coaching sessions slide when urgent work matters arise or they experience an inherent resistance to change. Together, you and your coach will develop a roadmap that defines goals and keeps the process moving over time.

### Pick for Broadening Perspectives Motivate and Energize

Your coach should broaden your perspective by assisting you to understand and break free of any limiting beliefs and assumptions. A perspective shift may be the most significant factor in changing behavior and results.

A perspective shift can occur when your coach:

- ☐ Surfaces additional viewpoints
- ☐ Challenges constructively
- ☐ Looks at situations as others might/might not
- ☐ Asks new questions of different types
- ☐ Offers new approaches via skillful questioning

A perspective shift will change your assumptions, expand what you find useful, alter how you perform, use key skills to enhance your ability to create organizational and personal value.

### Pick for New Concepts, Strategies, and Tactics

You may be so engrossed in your work environment that you've never developed a clear understanding of your role. A good coach will help you step back and get a clearer picture of what is- and isn't-part of your role.

Good coaches present a mental model of what leadership means, what it takes to be effective and the key skills required. They highlight skills relevant to a client's particular situation and assist with implementation in daily interactions.

For example, which of these key leadership skills do you need to learn/hone?

- ☐ Collaboration
- ☐ Expectation management
- ☐ Influencing
- ☐ Conflict management
- ☐ Developing others



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### *Pick for Confidentiality & Integrity*

Trust and integrity are essential in the coaching relationship. Your coach must effectively navigate risky waters filled with sensitive, confidential information. A coach may be engaged with several members of the same organization or team; it is vital to respect boundaries, maintain confidentiality.

This is not an easy job, and it's one of the most important skills a good coach acquires with experience. When interviewing prospective coaches, find out how such situations are handled. How have they dealt with similar challenges in the past?

### *Pick for Deepening your Self-knowledge*

Behavioral change is not the sole coaching goal. Coaches challenge coachees to review themselves towards achieving honest self-knowledge, the first step towards excellence in self-management and the management and leadership of others. A qualified, experienced coach can add value by:

- ☐ Coaching you in your relationship management
- ☐ Challenge your assumptions about yourself
- ☐ Challenge you to face your gremlins
- ☐ Facilitating your conversations with colleagues in rehearsal mode
- ☐ Encouraging you to recognize your mental models thus collaboratively generating choices going forward

If your coach doesn't raise these points in your initial conversations, make sure they're included in the coaching process.

### **Roles a Coach Should Not Play**

Coaching methodologies vary widely. Some begin with 360° assessments; others use in-depth interviews or assessments. Regardless, your coach should clearly define the process' start, developmental plan and conclusion.

A good coach will consciously avoid roles that hinder your ability to take independent action, eg:

- ☐ **Cheerleader** A coachee should not tell you how great you are from the sidelines.
- ☐ **Therapist** A coach should not deal with your personal adjustment and psychological issues, even if qualified and licensed to do so. Your coach must focus on the context of your business performance, career goals, and (if contracted) personal goals.
- ☐ **Executor of the Boss's Agenda** A coachee is not there to influence you to conform to a superior's expectations, even if given an agenda when assigned.
- ☐ **Shadow Manager** A coach cannot/should not advise you on business decisions
- ☐ **One-Sided Advocate** A coach must look at all viewpoints to surface choice for you and resist taking a side. The choice will always be yours.

Two loaded and complex issues often arise during coach selection: [good fit and credentials](#).

Balance feeling comfortable with the person against your need to be challenged as you grow. You must believe a coach can help you change. On credentials and training, the executive-coaching field is not associated with traditional career paths or specific educational backgrounds. Most coaches enter the practice after a gradual evolution and may come from HR departments, specialize in people/leadership development or organizational effectiveness. Others may have external consulting experience specializing in organizational change, business strategy or the counseling and psychology fields. Many have years of business experience in executive offices, while others are retired CEOs.

What really matters? The ability to understand and work with individual and organizational dynamics.