

→ Coaching people at the top of their game demands a flexible approach that takes into account the challenges they face – as well as an ability to ask the questions that no one else will

IT'S NEVER BUSINESS AS USUAL for executives at the top of organisations, and their coaches cannot afford a business-as-usual approach either. The challenges that top executives face are not only greater than at lower management levels, they are qualitatively different. Charan, Drotter and Noel¹ describe the challenges of the top executive, or “enterprise leader”, well: they include taking tough decisions, satisfying multiple stakeholders and ensuring the organisation’s overall health and vitality. Global, legal and economic realities must be dealt with, and personal and relationship management challenges can be immense.

Along with building on tried and tested methods, there are a few critical things that a coach needs to do differently when coaching “at the top”.

1 Where can you add value?

Barring crises, the explicit reasons for coaching may often be vague or challenging and broad in their scope. Many of the usual reasons for a manager seeking a coach, such as specific skills or competency-building, have already been achieved to a “good enough” level and are usually no longer relevant. Instead, senior leaders may present challenges such as managing shareholder relations or turning around the business, or “phase of life” issues such as shaping individual legacy, retirement or personal fulfilment. Sometimes the real value of coaching is seen as a space and time to reflect, to brainstorm or even simply “to talk” – it can be lonely at the top.



Make it work

- Formulate your thinking in terms of “challenges” rather than “objectives”.
- Be comfortable with discussing the “big” topics, such as values or legacy.
- Use plenty of questioning to bring out the solutions.
- At the end of the session, ask the client what was beneficial.

Fatal flaws

- Spending too long in the exploration or diagnostic stage.
- Assuming your expertise or reputation is enough.
- Attempting to skip over the trust-building phase.
- Over-promising.

2 Know their business

Your expertise in human behaviour is not enough to carry you over as a credible executive coach. The higher up the organisational ladder your client is, the more overlap there will be between the personal issues and the organisational and business ones. There are few ways to lose credibility quicker than showing a lack of understanding of business or ignorance about the client’s industry and organisation. You need to be able to carry an intelligent conversation and ask insightful questions about issues that are on your client’s mind, even if they are outside your comfort zone.

“ Sometimes the real value of coaching is a space and time to reflect, or even simply ‘to talk’ ”

Make it work

- Update yourself prior to each meeting on recent developments in your client’s company and industry.
- Understand how the key executive teams are structured.
- Use the client’s language.

Fatal flaws

- Getting your facts wrong.
- Misusing terminology.
- Offering strategic business advice that you may be naive about.
- Assuming that “open questions” are the same as “intelligent questions”.

3 Be flexible

The variety of issues requires a high degree of flexibility from the coach and a repertoire broad enough to provide the right tool at the right time. While a clear development philosophy is important, getting stuck in one mode of coaching will quickly reveal its limitations. At some points the coach may need to be more challenging than he or she is comfortable with – at these times, great listening may make all the difference. On a practical level, busy schedules, frequent travel and unanticipated events often mean the coach may need to be flexible in terms of location, frequency and duration of meetings, and open to weekend or late-night calls.

Make it work

- Demonstrate strong situational coaching skills, shifting focus and intervention style frequently both within and between sessions.

- Expedite your learning to deal with the client’s challenges.
- Discuss flexibility of coaching location/frequency at the first meeting and agree on fee structure.

Fatal flaws

- Rigidly sticking to “process”.
- Ignoring topics you do not feel comfortable with.
- Insisting on a development plan.

4 Challenge the client

The last thing a senior leader needs is to pay good money to another “yes man” or someone who is in awe of their power. What they often want is someone who will help them to see themselves differently. For that to happen, the coach needs to be able to ask questions that other people can’t, or won’t, and to do so credibly.

Make it work

- Play “devil’s advocate” to open up discussions on new perspectives.
- Ask the tough questions.
- Raise the perspectives of others who may be affected by the leader’s actions.
- Bring up critical perspectives regarding the client’s decisions that you may have become aware of from credible outside sources (such as what you have read in the press).
- Offer your honest opinion.

Fatal flaws

- Shying away from tough questions.
- Falling into “tell mode”.
- Being influenced by the client’s position and role.

5 Consider what phase they are in

Titles such as “senior executive” or “top leader” actually contain a number of different phases that determine the critical issues likely to be addressed during coaching. Is the person moving into the senior role? Are they at their peak – what Kets de Vries calls the “consolidation stage”² – or the end phase? An individual moving into a senior role may wish to focus on issues such as relationship and stakeholder management or prioritisation, while a more established leader will probably be pondering issues such as strategy, growth and structural changes. Someone at the latter stage of their tenure will be more preoccupied with questions of succession and legacy. It is important to listen to the challenges facing the leader with sensitivity to the stage they are in.

Make it work

- Frame issues in relation to the relevant phase.
- Consider the relevant issues related to each phase to help you structure the agenda – for example: “So how have you been working to establish relationships with your new stakeholder groups?”
- Use different coaching tools for different phases.

Fatal flaws

- Ignoring phase-relevant issues, especially the first and last phases.
- Oversimplifying issues relating to tenure in role.

References

1. R Charan, S Drotter and J Noel, *The Leadership Pipeline*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2001.
2. M Kets de Vries, *Life and Death in the Executive Fast Lane*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1995.

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