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Coaching: The Fad that Won't Go Away

By [Jim Bolt](#)

I ended my [last column](#) [1] noting that we would examine three very popular leadership development methods (Action Learning, Coaching, and Leader-Led Learning) in more depth. So let's start with executive coaching, which is now a billion-dollar industry experiencing explosive growth. Frankly, it wasn't very long ago that having coach was sort of a dirty little secret -- you kept it to yourself. It meant you were in trouble and probably on the way out. Now it seems everybody has a coach. It means we've arrived, that were a rising star, someone our organization is investing in for the future. Wow, what a turnaround!

Our findings in my firm's executive development surveys (mentioned in the last column) indicated a dramatic increase in the use of coaching: In 2004, 56% of the companies said that executive coaching would be a major learning method they would emphasize. Then in a 2006 follow-up survey, 51% said the use of coaching had actually *increased*. Given this nearly miraculous change in the status of coaching we recently decided, along with our research partner, Dr. Brian Underhill of CoachSource, to conduct a major research project to explore the murky world of executive coaching in depth.

Our study, *High-Impact Executive Coaching*, was unique in that it examined the topic in a 3-D manner, i.e., through the eyes of coaches, organizations that retain them, and leaders being coached. The study included 48 organizations and 86 leaders being coached. In this column I want to focus mostly on what we learned from the leaders being coached since it's highly relevant for anyone interested in either providing coaches to leaders or in being coached.

What did we learn?

First, let's clarify what we mean by "coaching." There are coaches for developing leadership skills, improving public speaking, managing transitions to overseas assignments, enhancing "executive presence," career coaches, life coaches, and coaches for just about everything else you can imagine. However, the vast majority of our respondents indicated "leader development" to be the primary reason coaches were engaged. The biggest change is from coaching being used as "fix it tool" for leaders with problems, to helping successful leaders get even better. In many firms, having a coach is seen as a badge of honor. And we found that coaching now reaches into the highest levels: 43% of CEOs and 71% of the senior executive team had worked with a coach.

And here's the bottom-line: 63% of organizations say they plan to increase their use of coaching over the next five years. Most telling, 92% of leaders being coached say they plan to use a coach again. Both indicate strong endorsements of coaching; the first by the organizations paying the bills, and the second by the leaders who are actually receiving coaching.

And what suggestions do the leaders themselves have for making the most of coaching?

- **Work hard, and smart.** Leaders interviewed tell us you will need to dedicate yourself and your time to your coaching experience. Let yourself be challenged, work through discomfort; be open to

new ways of doing things. Yet, don't become too dependent on a coach. You want to accomplish specific goals as quickly as possible. "You have to do the heavy lifting, your coach just guides you along the way," says Underhill.

- **Make sure your boss is supportive, and keep her/him involved.** The vast majority of leaders who were satisfied with the results of coaching reported supportive and involved bosses. Make sure your supervisors are behind your coaching effort, let them know what development areas you're working on, and check back along the way to see if they are noticing improvement.
- **Look for a great coach, but not your mirror image.** Your organization should offer you a choice of pre-identified, pre-approved coaches (if not, ask for it). Review their bios and interview them. Leaders told us "ability to build rapport" and "business experience" were far and away the most important factors in selecting a coach. Interestingly, "coach certification" and "cost" were the least important. Select a coach you can relate to comfortably, but one that will also challenge you and keep you on your toes.
- **Measuring ROI: It's about you.** Everyone seems to be scrambling to identify a coaching return-on-investment; 73% of organizations would like one. However, *you* can measure whether you have improved your skills as a leader. Underhill suggests conducting follow-up 360-degree leadership feedback surveys or short "mini surveys" to measure perceptions of your improvement as a leader as identified by those working for you, and by your peers too.
- **Don't drag it on.** We found that most coaching assignments last between six and 12 months. However some leaders said they were happy to let assignments continue well beyond 18 months. Determine the appropriate end point and stick to it. Much of your learning can and should be continued on your own without a coach.

Finally, one leader told us, "I would say if you have coaching done well, it can change your life, and your life as a business leader." Well it's crystal clear from comments like that, and this study, that for some leaders coaching provides a rich and unique development opportunity. For sure, it's here to stay.

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