

Chapter 21

Enriching Executive Development: The Essential Partnership Between Human Resources Professionals and Executive Coaches

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IN THE ARSENAL OF TOOLS SENIOR HUMAN RESOURCES (HR) PROFESSIONALS USE TO develop business leaders within their organizations, executive coaching is well-established among them. However, little if anything has been written about HR leaders' relationships with external executive coaches.¹ Little has been expressed, or is perhaps understood, about the leap of faith and commitment these professionals can make to each other thus ensuring that the client² and the organization benefit fully from this investment in an executive's development.

In this chapter, the relationship between a senior HR professional, often the chief human resources officer (CHRO), and an external executive coach working with top business leaders is explored. It is an essential partnership because of its singular nature, and that through this collaborative partnering the coaching is enriched as a meaningful developmental resource. In my experience, this committed collaboration unfolds through a sequence of key actions.

Further, this essential partnership is reinforced by and thrives on (1) four primary relationship factors, and (2) four practice dimensions. Finally, most experienced executive coaches can articulate a model that typically includes four phases (data-gathering, feedback, coaching, and consolidation) and unfolds over several months to a year (Wasylyshyn,

2014). However, regardless of the specifics of a coach's model, the aforementioned primary relationship factors and practice dimensions combine to maximize the development investment in executive coaching specifically in terms of its sustained impact.

Four Primary Relationship Factors in the HR Professional/Executive Coach Essential Partnership

The identification of the four primary relationship factors is based on 30-plus years of experience³ that has included many essential partnerships with senior HR professionals. Specific input for this chapter is from the following HR leaders: Benito Cachinero-Sanchez, senior vice president of human resources at Dupont; Joe Forish, former CHRO at Rohm and Haas (now Dow); Tom Kaney, former senior vice president of U.S. Pharmaceuticals in global GlaxoSmithKline; Trish Maxson, CHRO of a global real estate company, JLL; and Deb Weinstein, former vice president of human resources in the research and development division of GlaxoSmithKline.

The four primary relationship factors that influence and solidify these essential partnerships are: (1) mutual trust and respect; (2) clarity of roles, responsibilities, and objectives; (3) clear boundaries of confidentiality; and (4) constructive triangulation. While these factors are fundamental in effective coaching relationships generally, there are nuances of significance in how they play out in these essential partnerships.

Mutual Trust and Respect

The primary relationship factor of trust and respect is best explained by HR professionals who have experienced such essential partnerships. In the words of Cachinero-Sanchez, "Trust and respect are essential in this kind of partnership on a personal relationship level, but there has to be trust and respect as well for the intrinsic value and competence that each one brings to the table. If the partners are not evenly matched in this regard, e.g., one of them is thinking the other is not appropriately competent, the personal trust and respect will not overcome the gap" (personal communication, October 31, 2016).

In Forish's view, "There has to be a mutual level of respect and intrinsic trust that each shares the best interests of the client and that neither will play games or engage in self-promoting behavior at the expense of the other or of the organization" (personal communication, November 3, 2016).

Weinstein emphasized the critical collaboration necessary when working with senior leaders. In her words, "There has to be trust all around the triad of client, coach, and HR partner and this trust fosters an environment that encourages challenge and open discussion that ensure focused efforts throughout the coaching—the necessary efforts to effect the behavior changes being sought" (personal communication, November 4, 2016).

Clarity of Roles, Responsibilities, and Objectives

Essential partnerships begin with a clear understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities. Cachinero-Sanchez maintained, "The inside/outside partnership can be very effective as each of the prisms that the partners bring to the table are unique

and distinct. Yet, it is important that before the work is done, there is a clear understanding of how the body of the work will be conducted—who will take the lead in what, and what principles will be used as the work unfolds” (personal communication, October 31, 2016).

Role clarity is important for every coaching engagement to be successful. Defining participants and timeframes are essential components of role clarity. Through their respective roles, these partners are committed to the progress of the identified executive and by extension to the continued success of the organization in which the executive is a key leader. In other words, the positive effects of this essential partnership can have cascading effects not just for the participating executive but for the whole organization. Further, in their reciprocal partner cadence, there is something in the partnership for both the HR professional and for the consultant, as well as for the executive.

For the HR professional there is the opportunity to deepen the leadership bench of the organization, increase his or her understanding of the executive client, and enrich rapport with this leader thus becoming an even more valued resource to him or her. Further, especially if the external coach is trained in the behavioral sciences, the HR professional may acquire deeper insights into employee motivation, fears, psychological defenses, and work-related anxieties. For the executive coach, there is the certainty that the client has been depicted accurately and that updates on the client’s progress or lack of progress are specific and timely enough to be addressed effectively in the coaching.

Clear Boundaries of Confidentiality

While the topic of confidentiality should always be discussed and understood at the outset of an individual executive development engagement, the HR/executive coach essential partnership can be tested at various points during the course of the work. For example, the boss or another senior executive or perhaps even a board member may request of the executive coach specific information that is beyond the established boundary of confidentiality. Such requests may involve the findings of tests used, comments made by others in organization-based feedback, or even information about the executive’s private life. This is when the HR and executive coach partners must discuss such requests, remain united in their commitment to the boundaries of confidentiality, and appropriately field such requests.

It is important to note that when there is enough communication exchanged regarding traction of the coaching process and progress being made, the pressure for confidential information rarely occurs. Further, when members of this essential partnership remain vigilant about and active in giving the boss guidance about how he or she can abet the coaching process, all parties feel more aligned, engaged, and satisfied about the status and value of the engagement.

Constructive Triangulation

The term *constructive triangulation* refers to the steady flow of collateral information shared between the HR professional, the executive coach, and the client. As experienced as the executive coach may be, he or she remains an outsider and is, therefore,

never as close to the daily play-by-play reality of how a top leader is leading—and perceived within the organization—as is the HR partner. Even in the presence of the most open, trusting, and transparent relationship with a client, for the executive coach to rely completely on the client's depiction of events is risky in terms of client objectivity. Typically, this flow of collateral information conveys timely input related to (1) people leadership actions and decisions, (2) the extent to which the client's behavior change efforts are perceived in the organization, and (3) other business factors that have implications for the coaching (e.g., an upcoming staff reduction).

Through the use of constructive triangulation (Wasylyshyn, 2017), a number of interrelated coaching psychodynamics are managed. These include clients' concerns about their relationships with their bosses and the trajectory of their careers. Further, there are times when sensitive personal events such as an impending divorce or illness of a family member can distract or otherwise decrease an executive's performance. In these instances, and with the client's permission, the HR professional and executive coach can collaborate on the best way to manage communication to senior management so that the client is not misperceived.

Further, in the confidentiality of this essential partnership, unexpected events can be managed effectively. For example, when a client raises the possibility of leaving the company, the coach preserves confidentiality but can also "signal" the HR partner. This can be done by the coach saying, "I think this executive is restless about getting to the next level of responsibility, so I urge you to tell the boss it's time to have a sit-down with this executive focused on future opportunities with the company." In such instances, the coach would also urge the client to have frank conversations with both HR and the boss. In short, through the HR/executive coach essential partnership, there is a careful sequencing of actions that can often result in retaining a valued leader. Research has shown that one of the primary reasons high-potential employees leave companies is the boss's discomfort in having a development dialogue (Ashkenas, 2014).

As the client makes progress in the coaching, the HR and executive coach partners can leverage constructive triangulation. Specifically, they can play an important "ambassadorial" role in conveying this growth and progress to key stakeholders in the company, especially as it relates to a client's readiness for increased responsibility (Wasylyshyn, 2017). For example, this can occur in organization-based talent reviews, as well as in private discussions with the client's boss and or senior talent management leaders. The HR partner can accomplish this with a convincing degree of granularity given his or her ongoing collaboration with the client's executive coach.

Maxson cited a factor that merits consideration and research. In her view, the value of the HR/executive coach partnership is amplified when the partners, "Help a company find and see the lovable aspects of leaders" (personal communication, November 5, 2016). Maxson's observation strikes a deeper chord as related to the complexity and potential of organization-based relationships. From the perspective of positive psychology, she hints at the weight, loneliness, and relentlessness of corporate-level leadership roles and how both the HR and executive coach can provide affirmation that influences

positive emotion toward and within the leader. According to Fredrickson (2003, p. 163), “Because an individual’s experiences of positive emotions can reverberate through other organizational members and across interpersonal transactions with customers, positive emotions may also fuel optimal organizational functioning.” Further, both neuroscientists and psychologists, including Seligman (2006) and Hanson (2013), maintain that we can take advantage of the plasticity of the brain to cultivate and sustain positive emotions. In short, the astute and caring observations of clients’ behavior as shared between HR and executive coach partners become a powerful resource. This is a wellspring for something senior business leaders are expected to give others but rarely receive themselves: focused empathy, encouragement, and compassion.

Four Practice Dimensions in the HR/Executive Coach Essential Partnership

Four practice dimensions I have used in coaching senior business executives also have implications for actions shared by the professionals in the essential HR/executive coach partnership. As indicated earlier, such shared activity can enrich and contribute to the sustained effects of development investments made in executive coaching. These four dimensions are referred to as: (1) echo, (2) anchor, (3) mirror, and (4) spark (see Figure 21.1).

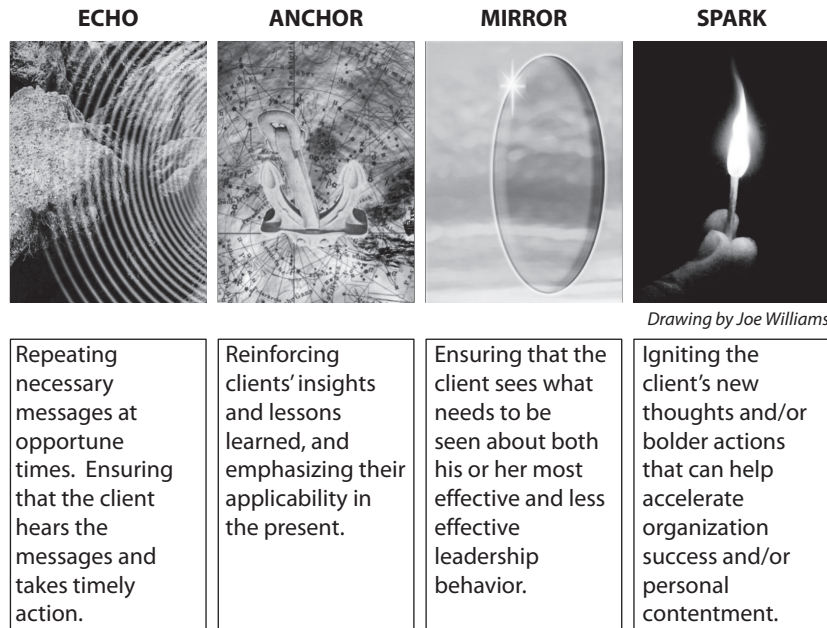


Figure 21.1 Four Practice Dimensions*

*These practice dimensions, while used in the coaching of executive leaders, are adapted for use in the *essential partnership* between HR professionals and executive coaches.

Actions Taken from the Echo Dimension

Actions the HR partner and executive coach share in the echo dimension involve a frequent reminding or *echoing* to each other of the identified objectives of the coaching engagements. Their shared vigilance of this enables the focused assessment of progress made and an objective, fact-based scrutiny of the need and nature for any further development activity. For example, some clients may request a continuance with the executive coach. If such a continuance occurs, the coach's role shifts from *executive coach* to *trusted leadership advisor (TLA)* (Wasylyshyn, 2015); however, the essential partnership with the HR professional remains the same.

Finally, given the nature of company cultures, HR professionals can remind ("echo") messages to executive coaches about cultural realities that must be taken into account as they work with executive leaders. For example, the CHRO partner in a company that had just completed a major merger reminded the coach never to use the phrase "legacy issue." In this company, the "legacy" word had come to be heard as a linguistic sabotaging of ongoing culture change initiatives.

Likewise, given comments an executive client may make about the effectiveness of the coach's HR partner, the coach has the opportunity to give this partner timely feedback. The feedback may be positive, such as praise for work well-done, and therefore reinforcing the HR partner's activities and helping build emotional resonance between the executive client and the HR professional (Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 2002). Or the feedback may be critical. For example, senior business leaders often express disappointment about an HR leader's responsiveness regarding pressing people issues (e.g., recruitment, performance, compensation issues). In such instances, and with the permission of the client, the executive coach has the opportunity to convey (*echo*) constructive feedback. This can influence candid dialogue between HR partners and coaching clients with the goal of improving their rapport and the HR partners making productive adjustments.

Actions Taken from the Anchor Dimension

As this essential partnership takes hold, there are mutual observations regarding the client's progress that yield opportunities for the partners to compare notes and to take actions that help the executive internalize, or *anchor*, the progress in ways that make the new behavior reflexive. For example, with an executive who must continue to address conflicts in his team, the HR partner, who has the opportunity to observe the executive in action, can both reinforce the client's progress and heighten his attention to this issue before certain team meetings. The executive coach can support progress made by encouraging the leader to continue to take the specific actions that most influenced his desired behavior change.

Actions Taken from the Mirror Dimension

Taking actions from the mirror dimension, that is, the timely holding up of a mirror to help a client see what he or she needs to see in order to be maximally effective is a familiar activity and responsibility for both HR professionals and executive coaches.

However, in this essential partnership, the power of their committed truth-telling to the client is intensified. Specifically, the constant comparing of notes in essential partnerships sharpens and/or signals when truth-telling needs to occur and/or be amplified. While each partner will have her own way of delivering it, the objective is shared.

Use of this *mirror* dimension can also be useful within the essential partnership itself. For example, a CHRO told me that her language was “too shrinky” in meetings with other C-level leaders so she intentionally used less psychological terms. Likewise, an executive coach told her CHRO partner that his habit of rapidly bouncing his foot up and down in leadership team meetings sent the message that he was either bored or impatient. Unaware of this body language, he made conscious efforts to avoid it and in doing so, the depth and quality of team discussions improved significantly.

Actions Taken from the Spark Dimension

The value proposition of the HR/executive coach essential partnership is also increased by actions taken from the *spark* dimension. Specifically, through their ongoing dialogue, these partners can identify actions and/or additional resources for enriching the coaching. For example, with executives who need to be more impactful in formal stage presentations, arrangements can be made for them to work with a communications expert who will use video technology to generate positive effects. Further, given the executive coach’s experiences in numerous other companies, there is an accessible pool of possible ideas and/or approaches that can influence or *spark* the thinking and planning of the HR partner in terms of talent management practices.

Conclusion

The *essential partnership* between internal human resources leaders and external executive coaches is a win-win for everyone involved: these professionals, their executive clients, and for the companies in which the clients work. The reverse is also true. The value proposition of executive coaching as an executive development resource is diminished when it does not involve the reciprocal commitment characteristics of such partnerships. This essential partnership is fueled by mutual trust, collaborative respect, role clarity, and safe boundaries of confidentiality. Further, such partnerships will need to increase given the new normal for commercial ventures and those in the not-for-profit sector as well. All these workplaces will require highly evolved leaders who are relentless, market facing, intuitive, and nimble enough to synthesize quickly the barrage of both quantitative and qualitative data flying at them often from stakeholder groups spanning the planet.

Increasingly, the surge of this new normal intensity, complexity, and uncertainty is expected to be managed by leaders promoted before they have had sufficient time to acquire the experience and concomitant wisdom to lead consistently well. They will need to mature rapidly in informed places where they can think aloud with smart colleagues, clarify their thoughts, vet their concerns, integrate it all into coherent and sound strategic decisions, and then direct the execution that will ensure

competitive and profitable distinction. This rapid development of mature and ready leaders will also need to occur in supportive places—like within a strong coaching relationship.

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Notes

1. For the purpose of this chapter “executive coaches” refers primarily to professionals who integrate their own business experience and/or understanding of business dynamics with training in the behavioral sciences and who apply this integration in leadership development engagements with senior executives. These executives are focused on making certain behavior changes that they believe will increase their overall effectiveness. Often these consultants are former senior level human resources professionals or consulting psychologists.

2. In this context, the executive is considered the “client” and the organization is the paying “sponsor.” This ensures an appropriate boundary of confidentiality for the executive—critical to establishing and maintaining trust. However, at the same time, there must also be sufficient communication regarding progress so that organization stakeholders are satisfied with this investment in the executive’s development.
3. This experience includes consultation to hundreds of business leaders representing every global sector and a broad array of industries.