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## What is Executive Coaching?

**“In the simplest terms, it involves expanding people’s capacity to take effective action.” Robert Hargrove**

The essence of executive coaching is challenging and supporting leaders in achieving higher levels of performance, helping them get unstuck from their personal and professional dilemmas, and assisting them in transferring their learning into results for the organization.

Coaches typically:

- Listen, listen, listen and create a place for executives to “be with themselves,” recognizing all that they are and bring to their Leadership role.
- Allow a process for an executive to “reframe” a situation and bring the Executive to a higher level of thinking.
- Encourage rigor in the way leaders organize their thinking, visioning, planning, implementation and expectations.
- Challenge executives to their own competence or learning edge.
- Build leaders’ capacity to manage their own anxiety in tough personal and professional situations.

The executive’s job can be defined in three broad areas:

1. **Communicating the territory** - that is, the purpose, the vision, and goals of the organization to key constituencies, and outlining opportunities and challenges.
2. **Building relationships and facilitating interactions** that result in outstanding team performance
3. **Producing results and outcomes**, more from the direct efforts of others than from one’s own efforts.

Executive coaching is the process of increasing the leader’s skill and effectiveness in accomplishing these three responsibilities of leadership.

Executives who are at the very top of their organizations have special concerns. Top executives deal with issues of stockholder or partner ownership, succession, loyalty, strategic alliances, and positioning in the marketplace. They also suffer from a belief that they should not ask for help, which exacerbates their “lonely at the top” experience. We address these matters with seriousness, openness, and friendship, and without being intimidated by the issues themselves.

There are five essential ingredients of executive coaching. **The first is having a results orientation to a leader’s problem** (“*What business challenges are you facing? How much time have you got?*”). To lose sight of outcomes is to waste the time, money, and energy of the leader. A coach’s job is to have a mission paralleling the leader’s drive for results.



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The second ingredient is **partnership**. The coach becomes a partner in the executive's journey toward greater competence and effectiveness. In the question: "*What keeps you from getting the results you want?*", the coach stands shoulder to shoulder with the executive in untangling and laying out the many factors, forces, and dilemmas facing the leader).

The third ingredient is the ability **to engage the executive in the specific leadership challenges he faces** ("*What is challenging for you about this situation, given the disappointing results?*"). This helps him/her explore what pulls him/her off course and what he/she typically avoids. He/she might also see the wake he/she creates in others as he/she works through his/her agenda. Within their collegial partnership the coach confronts the executive to look at ways he/she may be his/her own worst enemy in the problem situation.

In the fourth ingredient, the coach **links team behaviors to the bottom-line goals, and points out the need for executives to set specific expectations of their teams to achieve the results**. ("*Let's start with you defining more specifically what you expect from your team that would directly lead to higher results.*"). This is an essential connection, defining as much as possible what specific people processes are most relevant to these distinct business goals. In this conversation (linking results with team behaviors) I keep the leader's responsibility central ("*Then we can look at what will be required of you to produce those results through your team*"). This cycles back to the third ingredient, exploring the leader's challenges to do what is required.

The fifth, and perhaps most important ingredient is **sustaining purpose and passion**. ("*Is there alignment between your values and goals for this chapter of your life, and your roles in this organization? If not, how could you bring them into alignment?*") Effective executives are able to bring their authentic self to their lives as a whole – their values, passions, creativity, purposes, vision, and discerning judgment – and to any given problem or opportunity, personally and professionally. Often leaders are eager to bring their resourcefulness and authenticity to their work, but feel 'stuck' in an imbalance between life and work, between roles and relationships, and between current choices and their desired future. Maintaining alignment and balance are frequently *the keys* to maximizing a leader's job satisfaction, retention and productivity.

*"Nothing happens without personal transformation"*

W. Edwards Deming

When coaching executives, there are **three core values or principles** that can guide one's approach. The first is that *I bring my own unique, signature presence – myself – to the relationship*. Leaders need true partners in their developmental process.

Partnering is critical. It is a deep value necessary in working with leaders. They require peers who will meet them in their most daunting work challenges. They deserve coaches who are willing to be who they are and not hide behind a role.



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The coaching relationship is built on *trust*, the ability to mutually give and receive *feedback*, the ability to be *present* – on the part of both the coach and the leader – and to learn from their experiences. It is a highly interactive process. This also challenges leaders to bring the best of themselves to their roles. They are challenged to lead authentically and to utilize a more integrated self.

The second core principle is a *systems perspective*. When one focuses too narrowly on one individual alone – his/her personal challenges, the goals he/she has for him/herself, and the inner obstacles that keep him/her from being successful – you miss the grand “ecosystem” in which he/she functions, and the fundamental processes that either promote or impede the results that he/she seeks. It is important to identify how he/she is both influencing and being influenced by an entire web of interrelationships in and around the organization – the team, other departments, vendors, customers, regulators, and the global economy. These forces have an enormous effect on a leader’s success.

The third core principle is embedded in this method. It is the belief that *leaders have within them most of the resources they need to address the very issues that seem most daunting*. This does not refer to isolationist self-sufficiency. Leaders are certainly interdependent with those around them. I am referring to the resilience individuals have to possess to mobilize the resources at hand, both in them and in the people around them, to address pressing personal and organizational challenges.

Reference: “Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart...A Systems Approach to Engaging Leaders with their Challenges,” Mary Beth O’Neill, © 2000 Jossey-Bass Inc.

*“The significant problems that we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.”*

-Albert Einstein-

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Founding principal of Janet B. Matts, LLC, a Leadership Development firm specializing in Executive Coaching and Organizational Consulting, she and her team serve a variety of clients and organizations. She was the Director, Executive Assessment and Coaching for Johnson and Johnson with world-wide responsible for creating the infrastructure for the Executive Coaching process for the corporation, as well as Director, Leadership Practice for the corporation. In her 21 years with the company, she has focused her efforts on Education, Psychology, Learning and Development. Janet is a graduate of Moravian College B.A., Columbia University M.A. and the Hudson Institute Coach Certification Program accredited by the International Coaching Federation.