

# Are You Coachable?

*If not, you may be out of a job.*



by Howard M. Guttman

**T**HE ULTIMATE HIGH-stakes moment for an executive coach comes when you are sitting across from someone you suspect is an uncoachable client. What are the telltale signs? How can you peer below the surface? What are the ground rules? And when—and how—do you cut the cord?

These are significant questions. An executive's career and sense of well-being can hang in the balance, as well as the coach's reputation, or employment.

Here are four lessons, gained from experience, to help you separate the uncoachable from the tough to coach:

**Lessons 1: Collect relevant data, since data is the raw material of coaching.** Begin by collecting data from the executive's boss, peers, and direct reports, as well as from his or her "sponsor"—the internal mentor who recommended the intervention. This data provides initial clues that indicate the degree to which the executive will respond to coaching. Here's one of the best data-collecting questions to ask the sponsor up front: "What specific behaviors point to the executive's need for coaching?"

**Lessons 2: Drill down further, especially if you suspect difficulty.** Try asking four more questions: 1) Has the executive gone through prior, unsuccessful attempts at coaching, perhaps by the organization's HR professionals? 2) Does the person have a reputation for being unable to accept criticism or for being completely intractable? 3) Is the executive's sponsor, or internal mentor, truly committed to supporting him or her? 4) Has the person engaged in "acting out" or exhibited abnormal behavior in the presence of co-workers? "Yes" answers to the first two ques-

tions are red-flag indicators that success of this assignment is iffy, as is a "no" answer to the third. A "yes" answer to the fourth question suggests that it's time for a psychiatrist or psychologist. By the way, "no" answers to the last three questions don't necessarily guarantee that coaching efforts will succeed. Think of them as merely a green light to move ahead to the next stage.

**Lesson 3. Probe deeper in face-to-face meetings.** Here, the experienced coach looks for certain clues: When presented with co-workers' comments, how defensive is the executive? Does he or she deny that there is a problem? Does the executive persist in holding on to "stories" to explain the problem or shift the blame? For example: "I refuse to play politics so I'm not one of the boss's favorites," "I have much higher standards than the rest of them, so they resent me," or "I've been singled out because I'm a member of a minority." Does the person fail to recognize either the advantages that will come from changing his or her behavior or the consequences for not changing? Does the motivation for change come more from an external source than from the "inner person?"

"Yes" answers to these questions are a clear indication that there may be too much resistance for the coaching to "take." If so, it's time to meet with the executive's boss, the HR professional who facilitated the intervention, or both, to explain that you are probably in the uncoachable zone.

**Lesson 4: Now it's time for you to deliver the bad news to the executive.**

Here's the great "Crossing the Rubicon" of coaching: Once you determine that an executive is unwilling to change, there's little else you can do. You've entered the uncoachable zone. In addition, many executives are willing but unable to change, and, unfortunately, they need to be given the news as soon as you recognize their uncoachability. When you are dealing with the uncoachable, the sooner you can make the call, the better for everyone involved. The organization saves time and money; the executive is spared the agony of trying to do the undoable; and your credibility remains intact.

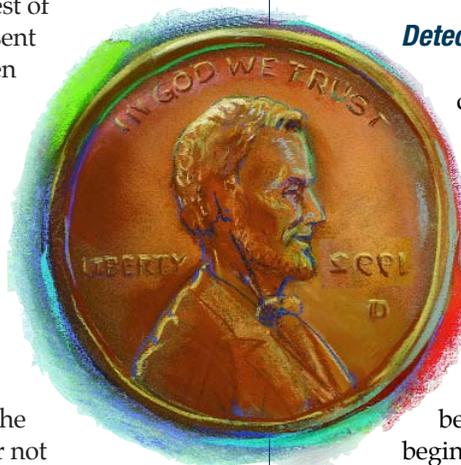
These are usually cases where the "Peter Principle" is at work. For example, a successful operations manager is promoted to a general management position but is unable to think strategically. Or a freshly minted manager continues to manage by tantrum despite anger-management training. In some cases, additional training may help, but often it's just the wrong "fit," and the best solution may be to undo what's been done.

## Detecting Counterfeits

Truly uncoachable clients are the exception, and, try as they might to conceal it, they often reveal themselves during the coach's first encounter—if not sooner. While it's ideal to identify an uncoachable client before an intervention

begins, it's not always possible to do so. Some executives feign willingness to change; after all, their job and career are likely on the line. How can such "counterfeit" players be distinguished from the simply tough to coach? Even the shrewd uncoachable executive leaves telltale signs: Here are five dead giveaways:

**1. Naysaying.** One major difference between the uncoachable and the tough case is the ability to let go of negative attitudes and "stories." When a client persists in repeating "this won't work,"



you know it's a lost cause. A breakthrough is possible only when the client is willing to redirect negative energy into positive behavior change.

**2. Failure to follow through.** Response time is an indicator of authenticity. The executive who doesn't check in at the agreed-upon times, postpones meetings, or fails to complete "assignments," is not someone who is fully committed, and it takes tremendous commitment to change behavior.

**3. Lack of specificity.** Here's a revealing question to ask early on: "If this coaching is successful, how will your relationships with co-workers change?" The more specific the answer, the more likely the executive will succeed. Specificity tells the coach that the executive has done the soul-searching and that he or she can envision a better scenario. On the other hand, "I don't know" typically indicate trouble ahead.

**4. Failure to focus on behavior change.** Self-awareness is just the first step. Listen for this question from the executive:

"What do I need to do differently?" The question indicates a willingness to change. For example, one department head realized that her penchant for razor-sharp criticism in meetings caused her employees to shut down and not contribute. Without her answering the question, "What do I need to do differently?" with a specific action plan for change, coaching would have been a venture in futility.

**5. Lack of humility.** Humble pie may not be a meal many senior executives would savor. But humility is necessary to achieve healthy business relationships with those whom you've alienated. Recommendation: Encourage the client to sit down with those who were interviewed prior to the intervention to thank them for their candid feedback. Then, have the client paraphrase the feedback, explain what he or she intends to do to correct the problems, and ask if any additional actions need to be taken to repair the business relationship. Last, have the client make clear to co-workers

that, going forward, continuing open feedback will be welcomed.

### ***Elements of Coaching Success***

Given the seriousness of the situation, the coach needs to answer the one critical question: "Is this executive uncoachable or merely tough to coach?"

In grappling with this question, remember the four key factors to coaching success: 1) basing your intervention on hard, accurate data; 2) having an internal mentor to support the client; 3) compatibility between the skills and style of the coach and the client; and 4) willingness on the part of the client to go beyond his or her comfort zone and exhibit new behaviors. This last factor—the extent to which the client embraces the change process—separates the coachable from the uncoachable. **EE**

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**ACTION:** Enjoy coaching your team.