

WHITE PAPER

World-Class Coaching: What Does It Really Take?

by Howard M. Guttman



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External coaches helping out in the executive suite are more common and accepted today than they were even a couple of years ago. Qualified coaches are gaining deserved legitimacy as core supports to help ensure that the massive investments organizations make to develop fully functioning executives actually pay off. The old view of coaching as a last-ditch effort to avoid flameout of great talent with fatal flaws is fading, as many successful people point to formal and informal coaching as a critical contribution to their effectiveness.

Still, the thought persists: Corporate executives are people who seem to have won the game, so why would they need a coach? For lots of reasons, including:

It really is lonely up there. As salary grade increases, so does isolation. You don't see much of your boss because she's in Beijing this week, and you're leaving for Caracas the day she gets back. Even when she's here, the heart-to-heart with you will have to fit into the thin space between the hostile analyst call and the third-quarter reforecast. Your peers are busy, too, and rather than spend time fostering mutual interdependence you only occasionally glance over at each other from your respective mountaintops. As for your direct reports, centuries-old fears concerning the perils of wanton fraternization tend to inhibit genuine camaraderie with those whose lives you supposedly control. Top it off with the fact that years of dedication to scaling the ladder have allowed non-office relationships to yellow and fade like last month's *Daily News*, leaving many executives with lives fairly deficient in intimacy.

You rarely get the unvarnished truth...especially when you need it most. A common belief is that the higher you go, the less feedback you need. You're successful, so you must have it all figured out by now, right? Straight feedback about you and what is really happening around you decreases with altitude in the organization. Your boss thinks you ought to be sufficiently sharp to read between the lines—you're certainly paid enough—and people below you struggle to balance truthfulness with self-preservation. As an outgoing CEO once advised his replacement, "Just

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because they laugh, don't think you're funny." Your own healthy ego, reinforced by a meteoric rise, can make it hard to remain objective about yourself. The result can be the slow, silent growth of potentially derailing blind spots that burst from the shadows just when the spotlight is brightest—and the stage biggest.

You are more than just a suit. If you occupy a top job, chances are you are a middle-aged man or woman with a lot going on outside the workplace. The world may see clearly that your numbers in yogurt-based sandwiches are off by a gazillion for the quarter, and you just lost your top marketer to Pepsi. What they don't see is that your mother is very sick and living with you; your son is taking a semester off to "get his head straight"; your doctor told you to stop running unless you want a plastic knee; and your spouse has seemed particularly distant of late. Add to all that the persistent pondering of the "meaning of it all" that you can't seem to shake, and you may be ready for a boil-over. Just when executive pressures are greatest, forces from your personal life combine to make it very hard to keep both eyes focused on all the balls coming at you.

With all this going on, the grip on the uppermost rungs of executive life is tenuous at best—a point brought home by a CEO moments after he promoted me. "Of course, you realize," he said with a warm smile and a hand on my shoulder, "that the day you get a job at this level is also the day that the bullet with your name on it is fired. It's only a matter of time until it finds you. But, hey, don't worry about it. Let it go and have some fun."

How can a coach help ensure that you—and your organization—stay on track and make it all work? A knowledgeable and effective executive coach can:

- **Serve as a smart, objective sounding board** to help pull your half-baked plans and strategies out of the circular dialogue in your head to test, talk about, improve, or maybe reject, before you try them on "real people."
- **Provide an unbiased channel for feedback** from the organization—along with help in interpreting the nuggets of importance that lie within.
- **Support and encourage even as they confront.** A coach of mine once remarked after hearing a talk I gave, "You often use humor very effectively," for which I thanked him. "No, you didn't quite hear me. You *often* use humor very effectively. But not this time." Oh. Got it.
- **Put organizational theory into pragmatic application,** identifying the simple models or principles that will illuminate and serve as easy-to-remember guides.

- **Deal with matters facing the *whole executive***, helping formulate an action plan to address *all* that fills your plate, personally and professionally—while knowing when to defer on issues best left for the therapist’s couch. A coach who can meet you in more than one dimension can get you on the path to a fuller, more integrated life.
- **Keep his or her ego to the side**, focusing on helping you and your organization achieve your respective goals. Beware the would-be Rasputin who becomes overly focused on his or her own notoriety or power—at the expense of the unfortunate client.

In this White Paper, Howard Guttman, a standard-bearer for the new breed of truly influential and effective coaches, details what it takes to deliver world-class coaching to people smart enough to know that being smart just isn’t enough.

Howard is a gifted coach able to focus with laser precision, and in a few pages, on some of the toughest challenges facing executive coaches, from distinguishing the uncoachable from the merely tough to coach, to penetrating below the surface to the richer subtext of communication, and to dealing with those “moments of truth” when a coach must confront a client, warts and all.

Howard draws on a deep reservoir of experience—his own and those of his colleagues at Guttman Development Strategies—to contribute mightily to the art and discipline of executive coaching.

World-Class Coaching: What Does It Really Take?

The Six Practices of Highly Effective Coaches

Let's begin with a tale about Joan H., the very best coach I ever encountered. Joan H. was neither a guru, nor a published author, nor a notable flame on the speakers' circuit. She was just a manager—in fact, my first manager—but she was endowed with a superior gene for coaching.

My job involved writing articles for publication: a piece of cake, given my superb writing ability—or so I thought. My first assignment was to write an article on the pre-history of New Jersey. Eight agonizing drafts later, Joan judged my article good enough to go! Maybe Hemingway need not move aside....

Joan was a terrific coach whose effectiveness came from six basic practices that set her apart. I've tried to follow Joan's lead in my career as a coach of both individuals and teams.

- **Setting the bar high.** Joan knew what constituted excellence, and she wouldn't settle—or allow me to settle—for anything less. Joan persevered, draft after draft, without lowering her standards or giving up on me. As a result I reached a level of excellence I'd never attained before.
- **Stating “shoulds” clearly.** Clear shoulds provide targets, which in turn prompt desired behavior. This is why fund-raisers like to create visuals showing the amount of money collected compared to the goal. Joan didn't simply say “rewrite this and make it better.” She went over my work, paragraph by paragraph, pointing out the ideas that needed to be conveyed and the places where they weren't clear. Her feedback was specific, and while she never minced words or hesitated to tell me exactly what she liked and didn't like, the primary focus was never on how bad my writing was, but on how it could be made better. Interestingly, clear shoulds not only provide unambiguous targets to hit; they also help to clarify the current “as is” and the distance between the two. With Joan, the should-as is divide became crystal clear. My job was to close the gap.
- **Refusing to “rescue.”** Joan never said, “This is how I would rewrite it.” Instead, she put the onus on me, saying things like, “This paragraph is too wordy. What would you eliminate to make it more succinct? How could you express the same thought in fewer words?” She encouraged me to come up with solutions, which is what every good coach does.
- **Testing for understanding.** Joan never assumed that I understood what was expected of me. She provided feedback, then asked “So, do you understand what you need to do? How will you go about doing it?” This kept me going in the right direction.

- **Contracting.** At the end of every feedback session, Joan carefully laid out the next steps: What she expected me to have accomplished the next time we met and when that meeting would take place. Having a firm time and deliverable for every session kept me honest and on track.
- **Having patience.** Joan may have been frustrated by the need for draft after draft, but she never let it show. I was on a learning curve, and she gave me the time I needed to get up to speed.

Common Coaching Traps

Coaching takes place in real time, with all the speed bumps and traps that can derail even world-class coaches. Here's one of the most common traps: "colluding" with the client. In other words, not pressing the person or team to go beyond their comfort zone. Collusion is "feel-goodism" in the short run, but it is one of the biggest barriers to lasting behavior change. Joan's stretch goals challenged me and in the process echoed Robert Browning's dictum, "Man's reach ought to exceed his grasp."

Not knowing when to let go is another common coaching trap. You can't learn to ride a bicycle unless you're allowed to pedal on your own. It's the same with good executive coaches. They aren't rescuers; they don't carry monkeys. They don't have the conversations their client should be having, forge relationships for him or her, or make up for the person's inability to change. They provide support, guidance, and the skills clients need to ride solo.

A third trap deals with executives who have been given an ultimatum: Go for coaching or go for the door. Getting a client to change behavior in this situation is a tough challenge, one made immeasurably tougher by the threat of repercussions from above. Avoid the trap of attempting behavior modification through fear; instead, keep the focus on facts. Begin the coaching process by interviewing those closest to the executive. Does he or she come across as a doormat or as Attila the Hun? When this particular person enters the room, does the air become thick with tension? Is the person perceived as a team player or a Lone Ranger? What do his or her colleagues perceive as the individual's greatest strengths and weaknesses? Answers here are the key to behavior change. They provide a "reflected self"—a sense of how others perceive him or her.

Data alone isn't always sufficient. Many executives are in complete denial; their view of their own behavior is at odds with that of their boss, peers, and direct reports. Sometimes it's possible to eliminate the disconnect by careful questioning: Asking the executive what he or she might be doing inadvertently to create these perceptions. In other cases, the client may continue to deny the facts. Then, the coach needs to examine his or her own style. Is it too direct? Is it possible that the client feels threatened and, as a result, has gone on the defensive?

The Seven Deadliest Roles Coaches Can Play

Here are seven roles that should be avoided at all costs:

1. Playing Confessor

Coaching is not about absolution, but about behavior change.

2. Playing Freud

Coaches don't get paid to fathom the "inner self," but to assess what's observable.

3. Playing Houdini

Coaches shouldn't pretend there's magic in coaching. They should explain their process to their client and to anyone else who needs to be involved.

4. Playing Solomon

Coaches shouldn't think they've got all the answers. For the best insights, they need to look to those who interact with their client on a regular basis.

5. Playing Tarzan

Coaches don't get paid to carry their client's monkey. The client must carry the burden and learn how to lighten the load.

6. Playing Apologist

Coaching is not about making excuses for the client, but about changing performance so excuses will no longer be necessary.

7. Playing Terrorist

Coaches don't win through intimidation, sabotage, or by rattling clients. Their only job is to help clients, not to destroy their ego—or career.

Sometimes executives recognize that the data is legitimate; they know that behaving differently would be to their advantage, but as one executive put it, "I just don't have the stomach to change." When faced with this kind of resistance, do as Joan did and refuse to collude. Continue to press the person, however gently, beyond his or her comfort zone, until the desired behavior change has been achieved.

Coaching involves following a step-by-step process: collecting and analyzing facts; sharing them with the client in an objective, non-threatening way; transferring the specific skills needed to bring about behavior change; and, finally, measuring results. As they proceed, world-class coaches adhere to Joan H.'s six practices and sidestep the traps that may get in the way.

Listening With the Third Ear: Key to Coaching Success

The CEO of an international consumer packaging company met recently in Europe with his company's divisional presidents to roll out a new global strategy. The initial response was enthusiastic, but one executive kept raising doubting Thomas-type questions. And, whenever this occurred, several of his fellow team members interjected with, "Good question" or "That's a good point." Listening with both ears, his colleagues heard only the words, which indicated that he was engaged in a legitimate search for information.

The session's facilitator, listening with his third ear, heard something different: All the questions were a veiled challenge to the CEO and his new strategy. Before the *sub rosa* opposition could corrupt the discussion, the facilitator wisely stepped in to confront the situation. To the doubting Thomas he said, "I'm getting the message that you're not on board with the new strategy, but it seems as though, rather than stating your objections, you couch them by posing questions. Why not just say that you disagree?" And, of the other team members, the facilitator asked: "Why the collusion? Why are you pretending that he's asking the questions in good faith—to get information rather than to sabotage the rollout?"

The facilitator's questions cut through the subterfuge, and after honest discussion the colluders admitted that they had been willing to play along with the aggressive questioner in the hope that he would come around to the CEO's way of thinking. The doubting Thomas admitted that he had some private concerns, and he and the CEO agreed to discuss these "off line" if they continued to trouble him.

Developing Your Third Ear

Communication involves implicit and explicit messages. **Explicit** messages are those that hit the auditory hearing apparatus—our ears. **Implicit** messages are the meanings behind the words. These may be conveyed through sound—in the degree of resolve or strength in a statement, for example—but they are also transmitted through body language, posture, eye movements, and so forth. Such messages aren't always audible; they are the subtext of communication.

Penetrating through to the nuance of a message, as the facilitator did in our example, requires an ability to listen with the "third ear."

Good coaches and facilitators typically have a keenly developed third ear. Their finely attuned sonar catches everything: where people are seated, how they are dressed, who has an arched eyebrow, who is turned away or avoiding eye contact, who is trying to catch the eye of a colleague. These are all messages, often as potent as the spoken word.

Here are a number of tips for developing the power of your third ear:

- Take the bird's-eye, wide-angle view of a team by mentally "flying" above it.
- Be with the action, not in it.
- Let go of your own agenda and focus totally on the individual or team you are working with.
- When working with a group, watch how members interact; focus on the flow, rather than the content, of their conversations.
- Don't be drawn into content discussions. If you have a point of view that should be shared, offer it, then quickly step back into the role of facilitator.
- Try not to focus on any one individual; observe everyone in the group.
- Look at people when they don't have the floor; like actions, **reactions** often speak louder than words.
- Pretend that you are a reporter responsible for writing objective copy about this individual or group: How would you sum up, in a headline, the way they interact? What other important messages need to be expressed?

Decoding the Message

When people speak to one another, especially about charged issues, they often “encode” the message rather than “let it all hang out.” The coach or facilitator must decode the message and feed it back to the speaker to ensure that he or she has it right.

Recall the case of the CEO and the strategy rollout. The facilitator told both the doubting Thomas and his colluders exactly what he had heard behind the words. He then communicated his understanding of the subtext of the messages. Once it became clear that the facilitator had “gotten it,” those involved acknowledged they had been playing a game. And only when both sides’ messages had been decoded, fed back, and acknowledged was the group able to move forward and deal with the issues openly and effectively.

The Moment of Truth

There arrives in just about every coaching and facilitating engagement a time when you must “tell it like it is.” To do otherwise, you risk becoming a colluder or co-conspirator in an individual’s or team’s dysfunctional behavior. This is the moment of truth, and walking the line between confronting and alienating others can be a perilous high-wire act. By accusing rather than reporting, blaming rather than explaining, coaches and facilitators risk losing the trust and respect of the people they’ve been hired to help.

Skilled coaches or facilitators are masters at giving feedback. First, they depersonalize feedback, presenting the facts without judging them.

Second, effective coaches and facilitators carefully formulate their comments. They work hard to avoid value judgments, both positive and negative. Whenever possible, they relate conclusions to observable behavior: “You say you are in agreement, but your tone of voice is angry and aggressive” or “You have told me you want to change your management style, but in the last meeting you held you cut off discussion several times.”

Third, effective coaches and facilitators present the facts and then ask the individual or team to confirm or refute them. This keeps them from being perceived as judgmental.

I recently worked with a group of executives who never seemed to reach closure. After each of their team meetings, the list of unresolved issues got longer and longer. They continually tabled resolution by requesting more information, raising more questions, adding more complexity. I asked them, “Have any of you noticed that the group seems to keep passing the baton, and that nobody ever forces closure? Why do you think that is?”

My questions forced the team members to look at themselves the way an outsider would, and the pattern suddenly became clear to them. Once they realized how dysfunctional their behavior was, they were determined to uncover its cause. They admitted openly that their organization's culture discouraged people from taking responsibility for decision making; no one wanted to "own" decisions, so they simply kept postponing them. I didn't tell them that. I described their behavior, as I saw it, and I asked them to draw their own conclusions. The moment of truth belonged to them, not me.

It's All About Accountability

The underlying challenge for any coach or facilitator is to make the individual or team 100 percent accountable for the outcomes of their interpersonal relationships. A coach's and a facilitator's charge—for which they, in turn, are 100 percent accountable—is to develop the ability of others, by a combination of role modeling and skills transfer, to interact as authentically as possible, in order to accelerate performance to the next level. And without a keen ability to listen with the third ear, a coach or facilitator is unlikely to help his or her client change behavior and move rapidly ahead.

Solving the Ultimate Coaching Conundrum

It's the ultimate high-stakes moment for an executive coach: Sitting across from you is an uncoachable client, or so you suspect. What are the telltale signs of uncoachability? How do you go about peering below the surface? What are the ground rules? And when—and how—do you cut the cord?

These are not merely theoretical questions. An executive's career and sense of well-being can hang in the balance, and the coach's reputation, not to mention his or her continued employment, is on the line. Here are a few tips, gained from hard-fought experience, to help separate the uncoachable from the merely tough to coach and to achieve success with even the most challenging cases.

Timeliness and Godliness

Here's Lesson One: When it comes to dealing with the uncoachable, timeliness is next to godliness. 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.

In my experience, truly uncoachable clients have been the exception, and, try as they might to conceal it, these individuals often reveal themselves during the coach's first encounter with them—if not sooner.

Data is the raw material of coaching. A good coach always begins by collecting data from the executive's boss, peers, and direct reports, as well as from his or her "sponsor"—the internal mentor who made the recommendation. This data provides the 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?" Next, drill down further, especially if you suspect difficulty:

- Has the executive gone through prior, unsuccessful attempts at coaching, perhaps by the organization's HR professionals?
- Does the person have a reputation for being unable to accept criticism or for being completely intractable?
- Is the executive's sponsor, or internal mentor, truly committed to supporting him or her?
- Has the person engaged in "acting out" or exhibited abnormal behavior in the presence of co-workers?

"Yes" answers to the first two questions 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, although infrequent, suggests that it's time for a psychiatrist or psychologist rather than an executive coach.

Probing Deeper

The "right" answers to these 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: probing 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 and the HR gatekeeper to explain that you are probably in the uncoachable zone. Next, it’s time for the coach to deliver the bad news to the executive.

Crossing the Rubicon

Here’s the great Rubicon of coaching: Once you determine that an executive is unwilling to change, there’s little else that can be done. Once again, you’ve entered the uncoachable zone. In addition, many executives are willing but unable to change, and, unfortunately, they too need to be given the news as soon as you recognize their uncoachability.

These are usually cases where the “Peter Principle,” or some variation thereof, 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 more often it’s just the wrong “fit,” and the best solution may be to undo what’s been done.

Uncovering Counterfeits

While it’s ideal to identify an uncoachable client before the coaching process begins, it’s not always possible to do so. Some executives feign willingness to change, and understandably so: Their job and career are likely to be on the line.

How can such “counterfeit” players be distinguished from the simply tough to coach? Even the shrewdest uncoachable executive leaves telltale signs for the attentive coach. Take these dead giveaways:

- **Naysaying.** One of the major differences between the completely uncoachable and the tough case is the ability to let go of negative attitudes and “stories.” When a client persists in repeating, over and over again, that “this won’t work,” you know it’s a lost cause. A breakthrough is possible only when the client demonstrates the willingness to redirect negative energy into positive behavior change.
- **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.

- **Lack of specificity.** Here's a revealing question to be asked 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 be to 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 that there's trouble ahead.
- **Failure to focus on behavior change.** Self-awareness is just the first step. Listen for this question from the executive you are coaching: "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.
- **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.

The Elements of Success

Dealing with uncoachable executives is one of those high-blood pressure moments in the life of a coach. Given the seriousness of the situation, the coach needs to be able to answer, unequivocally, the one critical question: "Is this executive uncoachable or merely tough to coach?"

In grappling with this question, remember that there are four key factors that determine coaching success: basing your coaching on hard, accurate data; having an internal mentor to support the client; compatibility between the skills and style of the coach and the client; and willingness on the part of the client to go beyond his or her comfort zone and exhibit new behaviors. It's the last factor—the extent to which the client embraces the change process—that separates the coachable from the uncoachable.

About the Author

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Mr. Guttman is the author of *When Goliaths Clash: Managing Executive Conflict to Build a More Dynamic Organization*. He is a frequent contributor to professional journals such as *Harvard B-School Working Knowledge*, *Human Resource Executive*, *The Journal of Business Strategy*, *Leader to Leader*, and *Pharmaceutical Executive*; is quoted frequently in the business press; and is a sought-after speaker.

Mr. Guttman frequently addresses corporate and academic audiences on such topics as "Conflict Management as a Core Leadership Competency," "Putting Performance Into High-Performance Teams," "Best Practices in Executive Coaching," "Alignment: From Strategy to Implementation," and "Designing and Implementing Results-Focused Training."

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