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Consultants and Coaches

Can you tell them apart?



I had the opportunity to attend a Leadership and Development Conference recently, and I really enjoyed getting a broader view of trends and priorities in our industry. But, I was also struck that the majority of firms in the industry are consultants, not coaches. And, after being asked to distinguish between the two several times at the conference, it seemed like a good topic for a newsletter.

The bottom line is this: consultants counsel companies and coaches counsel people. Both roles have great value, but the role and value of each are quite different and it's helpful to understand the distinctions.

Companies hire consultants to help their teams identify opportunities and define clear strategies to reach them. Leaders hire coaches to help them define their role in the strategy and strengthen their ability to influence others with the strategy. At SW&A, we take it a step further and help leaders create clear messaging to influence and engage employees in the stated direction.

A strategy without the perspective and insights of a consultant may not be attainable; a leader without a coach may not have the right focus and message to engage people in the vision. And because the coaching relationship becomes more of a one on one engagement, it's critical for leaders to know how to identify the right coach as a resource.

No two coaches are created equal and most engagements begin with a chemistry meeting. I've been to many chemistry meetings over the years, and I'm often asked what matters most in a coaching engagement. I'm not sure these points are objective because they align with our priorities, but I hope they're helpful!

Four Criteria to Look for in an Executive Coach:

1. Empathy vs. Sympathy

It's hard to get honest feedback at a leadership level, and it should be the number one expectation of a coach. No one likes just the bad news, but coaching without honest and straight forward feedback loses its value quickly. It isn't always easy to be completely honest with someone, and it takes good intuition and insight to share feedback as a perspective. Coaching has to be able to help you see blind spots, challenges and gaps in your approach.

Gauge it – If you want to know how a coach gives feedback, ask them to evaluate something about you.

2. Active vs. Reactive Listening

In the context of communication, a good coach can help you consider the different perspectives on a topic not just feed your own perspective right back to you. In most coaching situations, I explain to a leader that coaching will be as much about the leader's key audiences as about the leader himself or herself. And, the reason is that in order to help someone drive influence, you have to help them understand how they create intentional and unintentional impressions.

Gauge it – If you want to know how a coach frames perspectives, ask for input on your interaction with someone you find hard to read or to collaborate with.

3. Challenger and Comforter

There are times when you need a coach to build your confidence, and there are times you need to be humbled. We all need that. You want to find someone who has a good cadence of “telling it like it is” and helping you get over the rough spots in a new role. Your coach should be your champion and your energy. But, the cadence should feel good enough that this person can kick you in the rear if you need it.

Gauge it – If you want to know how this coach pushes your buttons, ask for input on a perspective that you don't want to adjust or change.

4. Understand Approach and Methodology

Every coach has a different approach to helping you reach your goals. You should understand and buy into that methodology before you sign up for it. I'm often told that my work with someone is hard work. I'm genuinely focused on helping someone improve their skills or impact, not just talk about them. My favorite comment from one executive was in our second session when I told him we were going to roleplay a specific issue that we identified in our first session. He looked at me with surprise and said, “Wait! We're actually going to work on this stuff?” Yes, we are. And in fact, in our sessions you'll leave with homework and relevant concepts to put into practice the very next day.

Gauge it – If you want to know what coaching sessions will be like, ask the coach for an example of how they will help you accomplish your goals.

Coaches and consultants are valuable resources for companies and leaders. But, it takes good alignment to make either relationship work. And, if you're looking to strengthen your influence and impact as a leader, let's test the chemistry. I think you'll find that we're pretty good at getting results.

Call us when you need us!



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