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Professional Section

THE COACHING SPONSOR – THE SECRET INGREDIENT IN SUCCESSFUL EXECUTIVE COACHING

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When your coaching client is an employee looking to move forward in a work context, the coaching contract involves three parties – the coaching client; the coach; and the organisation that employs the client and pays the coach. Most coaches working in this situation will take a coaching brief from an organisation sponsor. Usually that sponsor will be the coaching client's line manager. Sometimes that sponsor is part of the Human Resources or Talent Development team. My experience is that not many coaching programmes benefit as fully from the coaching sponsor as they could. How do I know this? I have been a coaching sponsor; I have supported line managers as sponsors when I worked in Human Resources; and I have talked to a number of sponsors in the organisations to which I now provide a coaching service. The common view is that the coaching sponsor represents a lost opportunity. This article looks at how the coach can help the sponsor to contribute more fully.

Sometimes the failure to get the most from the sponsor sits squarely with the organisation. Some line managers want no active part in the coaching relationship. I am not the only coach to have experienced coaching contracts where the client's line manager thinks his/her job ends with giving permission for the client to have a coach and then signing the coaching invoice for payment. In this situation the coach is sometimes able to find someone in the Human Resources or Talent Development team to step in to take the role of the coaching sponsor. Sometimes, however, the HR or Talent team is just too far removed from the coaching client for any of them to be able to add real value in the rôle of coaching sponsor. When that happens, through no fault of the coach, the coaching work must go ahead without the active involvement of a sponsor. The opportunity to benefit from a sponsor's input is lost.

Disappointingly, sometimes this failure to benefit fully from the input of the coaching sponsor sits with the coach. Some coaches prefer to keep the organisation that employs their client at a distance. As a senior HR Business Partner said to me recently, "There have been many occasions when I have been frustrated by being shut out of the coach/client relationship. It has left me wondering if we're really getting our money's worth from coaching and whether we would be better off looking at other development options".

As I have said above, I do recognise that there can be considerable challenges in identifying a coaching sponsor and finding a way to engage him/her appropriately in the coaching programme. However, I believe strongly that the right sponsor, properly involved, can add so much to the coaching programme that it is in the interests of both the client and the coach to try to make this happen. Over the years that I have been coaching, I have come to appreciate how much more my coaching client and I can achieve when we have a good sponsor to work alongside us.



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I think it important to specify at this point what level of engagement I would ideally like the coaching sponsor to have. What I am seeking is an initial briefing session between the coach and the sponsor, plus a review session with the sponsor, the client and the coach about halfway through the coaching programme. I am not suggesting that the sponsor takes an active rôle in the coaching sessions, nor am I suggesting a constant dialogue between coach and sponsor. What makes a difference to the coach's ability to help the client is not frequent interaction between coach and sponsor, but good quality interaction.

Organisations are getting much better at buying coaching. They are selecting coaches more carefully and starting to think about how they will assess the success of a coaching intervention once the coaching programme is over. Usually, this takes the shape of setting a few coaching goals up front and measuring achievement against them at the end. However, in my experience, these goals are rarely specific enough to be of significant value to the coach and the client as they start work together. A better approach would be for the coaching sponsor to invest time having a good quality conversation with the coach up front so that the coach is as well equipped as possible to help the client. What do I mean by a "good quality" conversation? One in which the coach uses his/her questioning skills to probe and challenge the sponsor's thinking and to get beneath the surface of what the client needs to do. One in which coach and sponsor go away with a clear, shared picture of what the coaching is intended to do and how the link between the coach and the organisation will be managed.

In this article, I want to demonstrate how moving the coaching relationship from a duet between the client and the coach, to a broader harmony where a third voice is heard, can make for more effective coaching work and can lead to superior business results. An engaged sponsor can add real value to the coaching work by:

- Helping the coach to understand the client's current context
- Clarifying with the client and coach how the coaching contract is to be managed so that it meets the organisation's needs as well as those of the client
- Painting a picture of the coaching outcomes that the organisation wants to see, so that client and coach know where they are heading.

I will explore each of these areas more fully below.

Understanding the client's current context

Of the three areas to which a coaching sponsor can add value, this is the one which is most familiar to those coaches who are working with clients on work-related issues. The vast majority of coaches are adept at asking the sponsor questions around the client's rôle in the organisation; how that rôle fits in to the rest of wider team; and how it fits into the organisation as a whole. However, I have learnt from experience that a good sponsor – if asked the right questions - can take a coach's understanding of the client's context to a higher level.



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The coaching sponsor is uniquely placed to help the coach understand what success is all about in the client's rôle. This is subtly different to asking the sponsor what the client needs to do better. It is an opportunity for the coach to explore:

- What the client would need to be doing and achieving in this rôle for him/her to be seen as successful
- How success in this rôle is rewarded
- The extent to which the reward system actually encourages the behaviour and performance that the organisation claims it wants
- Whose opinion – other than that of the sponsor – determines whether or not the client is seen as successful.

All of this information helps the client and coach to set coaching goals that pay attention to what the organisation values. It gives the coach a broader perspective on what success means in this organisation than he/she will ever get by talking solely to the client. I am not suggesting here that the client must accept unquestioningly the description of success that the sponsor gives. The client always has the option of substituting his/her own view of success. However, I believe that it is more useful for the client to be equipped to make that choice knowingly, rather than being in ignorance of any disparity between his/her picture of success and the expectations of the client held by key influencers in the organisation.

If the coaching sponsor is also the client's line manager, he/she can add to the picture of the client's context further. In any work situation, our immediate line manager has a significant influence on our ability to perform, to grow and develop, and to enjoy what we do. Many of my coaching clients will want at some stage in the coaching programme to examine their relationship with their line manager and the impact it has on them. As a coach, I am much better placed to challenge my client's perceptions and help him/her to generate workable alternative paths of action if I have an insight into who the line manager is and how he/she likes to manage. To this end, I have started asking those sponsors that are also the client's line manager questions about their management style:

- "What are you like to work for?"
- "What would your direct reports say they most like about working for you?"
- "What would they say that they find most difficult?"
- "How do you like your people to communicate with you?"
- "What's the worst thing that a direct report can do?"

And how do sponsors respond? Positively. Sometimes with surprise; often with a wry smile; but always positively. There's nothing difficult about what I am suggesting here. After all, competent coaches ask their clients this kind of question all the time. All I am suggesting is that we recalibrate our view of the coaching sponsor and question him/her in the same way that we would question a client. If we treat the sponsor as the valuable mine of information that he/she is, our picture of the client's coaching context and the opportunities and challenges that it holds will be all the richer for it.



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Managing the coaching process

When taking a coaching brief from a sponsor, there are a number of practical matters that it makes sense to clarify up front. The most obvious is to identify what involvement the sponsor wants in the coaching programme and whether there is anyone else who would sensibly also expect to have some involvement. This is a particularly important question in matrix organisations where the coaching client may have two or three line managers. It is also important where the HR team or the Talent Development team play an active part in developing employees through coaching.

Pragmatically, every coach also needs to know who is hiring the coach. Is it the sponsor or is it someone else? This will influence who is invoiced and how, as well as how much information to put on the invoice. In some organisations, having a coach is seen as a sign that the coaching client is failing in some way. No client in that kind of organisation culture will want to advertise the fact that he/she is being coached and this often means making sure that a more generic description goes on the invoice.

In my experience, there is also enormous value to be gained from asking the sponsor what experience he/she has had of coaching and whether he/she has ever been coached. This helps the coach to gauge a number of things:

- How realistic, or otherwise, is the sponsor's understanding of coaching and what it might be able to deliver in a given timeframe
- The extent to which the sponsor understands his/her rôle in supporting the client to make changes back in the workplace
- What understanding the sponsor has about confidentiality in the coaching relationship and what he/she can expect to hear from the coach
- The sponsor's readiness to meet the client and coach halfway through the programme to discuss progress and check that the coaching is still on track.

The sponsor's answers to these questions will allow the coach to deal with any gaps in the sponsor's experience or understanding before the coaching programme gets underway.

Finally, it is now part of my practice when taking a brief from a sponsor to ask what he/she expects from me. Sometimes I get practical responses around the progress meeting and confidentiality. Occasionally I get even more valuable responses around the balance of support and challenge that the sponsor hopes I will give to my client and/or the rôle that the sponsor hopes I will play.

Some of what I have described above is bread and butter to any coach working in an organisational setting. Much of it focuses on minimising the opportunity for misunderstanding between the coach and sponsor as the coaching work progresses. However, some of the questions explored above take the conversation more deeply into what the sponsor understands coaching to be and why he/she has chosen coaching for this client rather than taking another development path. If the coach understands this, he/she is much better equipped to serve the client.



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Coaching outcomes

Typically, an organisation commissions a coach because it wants the coaching client to do something different or better in the workplace. Inevitably, this can lead to an overemphasis in the coaching work on those things that are not working well for the client. The coaching then spends more time on the negative than it does on the positive. Recognising that it is as valuable for a client to work with what already works well for him/her as it is for him/her to address shortcomings, the coach should ask the sponsor not just “what is it that you need the client to do differently?” but also to explore what are the key strengths that got the client to where he/she is today, and which of those strengths are most relevant to the client’s expected future career path. In this context, it is important to understand from the sponsor whether the coaching work is about developing the client for his/her current rôle or whether the focus is on the next rôle to come. The answer will have important implications for the client’s ability to find opportunities to demonstrate how he/she is making progress.

I have learnt from many years of designing and delivering performance appraisal training workshops that very few line managers, even the most senior and experienced, are skilled at giving unequivocal and useful feedback. Given that, I know I can not assume that a client has been given good quality feedback about what he/she is expected to achieve by working with a coach. This means that a coach should always test with the sponsor what feedback the client has been given about the changes that the organisation is asking him/her to make. It is also valuable to know how the client responded to the feedback and whether he/she understood it and accepted it. Finally, it is important to clarify with the sponsor whether there is anything that he/she has said in the briefing session with the coach that has not already been shared with the client. If there is, both sponsor and coach need to agree what they will do with that information.

I believe strongly that it is the coach’s rôle to pin down the sponsor to describe clearly and specifically the change that he/she wants the client to make. Again, not every sponsor is good at this. However, coaches are equipped with great questioning skills and are adept at helping clients to describe a vision of the future. Exactly the same skills can be used to help a sponsor to articulate what he/she wants to see from the client as a result of his/her work with a coach. Having done this, the coach can then get a feel for the priorities for change by asking a number of questions along the following lines:

- “Looking forward, what are the key changes and challenges you see coming up for your team and for this individual’s rôle in the next six months to a year?”
- “If you could change just one thing about him/her, what would it be?”
- “How long has he/she got to make this change?”
- “What is the change that he/she will find most challenging to make?”
- “How will you know he/she’s heading in the right direction?”



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That question “how long has the client got to make this change?” is a particularly important one. Sometimes it is clear from the meeting with the sponsor that the organisation is changing faster than the client and that the pressure is on for the client to change quickly. Sometimes the message is clear that the organisation is becoming impatient and is looking at the coaching programme as a last chance for the client to move forward before the organisation takes some kind of alternative action. In an ideal world, all coaching would be purely developmental and would be about growing and enhancing talent for the future. However, the reality is that organisations have a whole range of motives for investing in coaching, and some are less positive than others. An engaged sponsor can help the coach to understand what has prompted the organisation to invest in coaching this client. That knowledge is an important part of the client’s situation and will help coach and client to shape the coaching programme.

Summary/conclusion

In summary, the coaching sponsor represents a tremendously valuable source of information and alternative perspectives. Some sponsors resist any attempt by the client or coach to involve them in the coaching programme at all. I think we have no choice but to accept that as a lost opportunity. Others are more than happy to support the client’s development by contributing their thoughts and understanding to the coaching work. The coach who invests time and coaching skills in having a good quality conversation with the coaching sponsor will have a much better understanding of the client’s work context and the challenges and expectations that surround that client. Many sponsors are inexperienced at being coaching sponsors. It is down to the coach to make it easy for the sponsor to play a positive and useful rôle in the coaching triangle of client, sponsor and coach. When that happens, the coaching work has the best chance possible of meeting the needs of the client, the sponsor and the organisation.

