

# PRACTICAL ADVICE ON USING AN EXECUTIVE COACH

## How do you know that you need a coach?

1. You want to up your leadership game: you've been promoted to a new level with an expanded scale and scope of responsibilities; you manage larger teams than in the past; you aim to expand your impact and influence.
2. There has been a significant change in your circumstances: you moved to a new organization (department, location, ...) and need to work with a new team, establish or manage relationships with new stakeholders, and/or navigate a new culture; your organization is going through a merger that affects most if not all aspects of your leadership.
3. You received developmental feedback on behavioral changes that are needed for your continued success or for your team's ability to contribute to the organization.
4. You want an external trusted confidante to be a thinking partner to navigate complex organizational dynamics.
5. You have a feeling of "hitting a wall," or a sense of loss in motivation, meaning, and drive.
6. You struggle with "impostor syndrome" - having a feeling that you are not quite up for the job you have and fear that others might notice your failings.
7. You feel that the dynamics in your organization (department, team...) are making it no longer fun to come to work or are hampering your results.
8. You feel insecure about the level of backing you have from your superiors, board, team, etc. to pursue your goals or to meet organizational demands.

## What would a coaching engagement look like?

Coaching engagements can take many forms depending on your individual needs, the needs of the organization, budget constraints, your level of seniority, or your organization's familiarity with coaching. Here are a few particulars of coaching engagements:

1. The duration of a coaching engagement can range from a targeted intervention with a limited number of coaching hours focusing on a particular issue, to a longer-term coaching relationship to support you in your work as it evolves over time.
2. Until recently, coaching sessions were typically in person with the coach visiting the client in their work environment. However, since the pandemic, virtual coaching has become much more common.
3. The coaching engagement is not necessarily limited to conversations between the client and the coach. It can also involve your team, your boss, or other stakeholders, depending on your organization's expectations.
4. The coaching engagement can remain focused on work-specific challenges or include broader aspects of your professional and/or personal experience. It is up to you to determine in conversation with your coach the scope of what will be brought into the coaching space.
5. No matter what happens, your relationship with your coach should be a safe space where you can be fully seen, where there is no judgement, and where you receive unconditional support.

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6. Confidentiality is critical to ensure your relationship with your coach is a safe space— with the caveat that the ethical guidelines for coaching include a reporting requirement when clients are engaged in criminal activities or may be a danger to themselves or others.
7. The coach can offer the client a wide range of tools, activities, inputs, sources of information that include (but are not limited to) self-assessments, stakeholder feedback, one-on-one coaching conversations, private time to reflect and experiment in between coaching sessions, meetings with teams and/or supervisors, books, articles or blogs...

## What can I expect from my coach?

1. **Sounding Board:** someone with whom you can test out your ideas and explore aloud ways to approach specific situations.
2. **Tough Questioner:** challenge your ideas and help you to clarify your thinking. Depending on your role, others may be reluctant to do this for you.
3. **Witness:** observe you with neutrality and curiosity as you go about your work. This will help you gain a perspective on progress made and areas for further development.
4. **Advisor:** offer perspectives on challenges based upon how others in your position have handled similar situations. Expect questions as well as suggestions. The coach can be a thought partner who can stimulate new insights so you can better determine how you plan to get from point a to point b.

5. **Teacher:** able to teach you models for thinking about or handling particular situations. Other times s/he may provide articles, books, or frameworks that can illuminate the situation
6. **Resource Broker:** may provide referrals to other sources in response to specific concerns, needs, and goals that emerge.
7. **Cheerleader:** help you notice and acknowledge progress, celebrate successes, both large and small, and encourage you to move toward being the kind of leader/manager you want to be.

## What should I do to get the most out of my coaching engagement?

1. Be clear about the expectations of all parties: What do you want to get out of the coaching engagement, and/or what does the organization expect from investing in you?
2. Focus on learning and self-improvement: Learn about yourself, others, systems, interpersonal dynamics, communication, (business) strategies, building the support you need, leadership, and so much more.
3. Allow yourself to “let your hair down”:  
Coaching is not a space where you need to look good. On the contrary, it is a safe space where you can be vulnerable and explore areas of your experience that you may not feel comfortable exploring anywhere else.

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4. Meet at least once every two or three weeks for longer term engagements to get the momentum of coaching going and to assure there is an active and healthy exchange. If the coaching engagement only covers a few sessions, make sure you have ample time to practice new behaviors in between sessions.
5. Track what you want to cover in your meetings with your coach (e.g. use a coaching journal or folder in which to drop reminders of topics to cover, things you learned, your observations about your own experiences, the evolution/growth in your thinking and behavior, etc. ). Review your notes before your meeting with the coach and create your own agenda of topics to cover.
6. Everything is grist for the coaching mill: Topics may include strategic goals, business challenges, or performance management issues as well as feelings, failures, surprises, and personal challenges. Candor is key.
7. Expect to be both supported and challenged by your coach.
8. If the coach offers an idea that seems wrong or strange to you, first express curiosity, then challenge it. Don't accept or reject ideas too quickly.
9. Do your homework. Your coach is likely to ask you to read an article, observe yourself doing something, or practice some skill between meetings. Think of this as an important period of exploration and experimentation that contributes to your ability to succeed.
10. Occasionally ask your coach to describe his/her experience in working with you. The way you manage your coach may provide hints as to how you manage others.
11. Use coaching to acknowledge progress and celebrate successes, especially on tough issues in which you took risks.
12. At the end of each meeting, tell your coach what was specifically helpful or not about that meeting.
13. In advance of the anticipated end date, work with your coach to decide when to end the coaching engagement and how to sustain the gains from your work beyond coaching.