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## HOW TO PARTICIPATE IN YOUR EMPLOYEE'S COACHING

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Once upon a time, executive coaching was viewed as a remedial intervention for executives and managers who needed to be “fixed” in some way. Managers were not expected to be particularly involved in the coachee’s exploration or journey. Coaching was even sometimes viewed as “outsourcing” the management of a difficult employee.

But today, executive coaching is often viewed as a strategic investment in human capital – a perk reserved for employees with high potential — and managers have realized that they need to participate in the process. If you are a manager with a direct report who is working with an external coach, there are several things you can do at the beginning of a coaching engagement to help make it successful:

**Set broad objectives and frame them positively.** At the outset, the more specific you can be about how you define success for the participant, the better. But when you do so, be sure to emphasize professional development goals. So, for example, your objective might be that the individual should “advocate more persuasively for resources, information, and support” by “navigating organizational politics and priorities more effectively” instead of telling your staffer that he or she “needs to fix contentious relationships” with others. Or you might suggest that he or she “manage workload, expectations, and deadlines more effectively” instead of telling them they need to stop over-promising and under-delivering.

**Provide data.** Coaching is most effective when the participant and the coach have multiple sources of information, which might include past reviews, personality assessment reports, or online or interview-based 360 degree feedback. While the employee may already have this information, it’s often helpful for you to share what you have in your files directly with the coach. If the coach will be conducting 360 degree feedback interviews, you can make sure that he or she speaks with a representative sample of colleagues for the participant, who can provide a broad, not biased, perspective.

**Be specific about concrete action steps the employee can take.** A good coaching engagement can go to waste if the manager, the coach, and the employee haven’t clearly articulated specific things the employee can do differently or better.

For instance, the head of a division in a pharmaceutical company had a staff member with a reputation for being brilliant but over-committed. When the coach sat down with the manager to define goals for the coaching, the manager was able to articulate two clear prescriptions for the direct report who was working with the coach: 1) Respond to everyone within 24 hours, even if the response was just a simple reply to set expectations about when a full answer to the voicemail or email would be forthcoming and 2) Create a “not to do” list of tasks that the participant would either not take on or would delegate to others. These two prescriptions, which the coaching participant put into practice, helped him satisfy his stakeholders while simultaneously prioritizing more effectively and focusing on his highest value-adding activities.

**Define clear parameters on confidentiality.** A coach is not acting as a psychologist, and different confidentiality rules apply. On the one hand, there should be confidential aspects of the process, such as the feedback the coach collects on behalf of the participant (otherwise, feedback providers might hold back in their comments due to concerns that their input may have implications for how higher-ups, or Human Resources, evaluate the employee). You can also understand that your direct report might not want to share all of his or her personality assessment reports, or the 360-degree interview feedback that is collected, with you.

On the other hand, coaching is an investment by you and the organization in the development of your subordinate, so there needs to be accountability built in to the process. Therefore, while assessment data should remain confidential, the development plan based on the data should be shared with you, and possibly also with your Human Resource Business Partner or Leadership Development counterpart.

**Be blunt with the coach – blunter than you would be with the coachee.** While a coach should not become a messenger between you and your staff member, there is an opportunity in the context of executive coaching for you to provide more specific and candid feedback to the coach than you might feel comfortable delivering face-to-face with your employee.

For example, the manager of a talented investor relations executive at a financial services organization told the employee's coach that he hadn't been promoted in the last cycle because the executive was viewed as too self-promotional and political. The manager had been reluctant to share her perspective directly with the executive because she was concerned that he wouldn't find the feedback credible, coming only from her. However, since other feedback providers in the 360 process shared that same observation, and the coach was viewed by the participant as a neutral and supportive outsider, the coaching participant was able to hear the feedback in a way he wouldn't have had it been provided directly by his manager. The participant got the message when positively communicated by the coach, became more collaborative and supportive of his colleagues, put the firm's interests above his own, and was promoted the following year. This happy ending was only possible because the manager had been an active sponsor of, and participant in, the coaching – and had been honest with his coach.

By carefully considering your role in the executive coaching of your direct reports, you can help retain talented members of your team while helping them learn and grow as managers, leaders and teammates, and supporting them as they take their performance up to the next level. Your direct reports will progress further and better on their coaching path if you help show them where it is and where it leads, and then provide direction and support along the way.

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