



## **Professional Development**

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### **Executive Coaching: A Personal Transformational Evolution**

*Author's Note:* Several "buzz" words are used, sometimes interchangeably, to refer to coaching in the corporate environment. A "coach" is one who facilitates change and personal development, while working one-on-one or with a group of individuals. An "executive coach" works one-on-one with upper-level managers and executives to improve leadership potential and performance. A "corporate coach" works with all levels of employees within a corporation to address such issues as personal performance, team cohesiveness, communication, interpersonal relations, and more.

Since the emergence of executive coaching in the 1980s, it has evolved from what *Forbes* magazine described as a controversial hybrid of management consulting and psychotherapy to a personal transformational evolution.

In their article, *How the Top 20 Companies Grow Great Leaders*, Efron, Salob, and Greenslade (2005) found that companies with strong leadership practices outperformed their industry peers in a long-term measure of financial growth and return. One practice the authors found that separated top companies from the others was the use of executive coaching. Their study found that 47 percent of top corporations regularly assigned coaches to their high potential employees. Meanwhile, just 10 percent of the remaining 300 firms surveyed made a similar claim. This evidence clearly supports executive coaching is a powerful tool to accelerate the performance of successful executives, and in turn, their companies.

So, how did executive coaching evolve from a misinterpreted technique to one of corporate America's top choices for executive training and development?

In the late 1960s and 1970s, top agency directors drove government and organizational planning. Upper management made the decisions and middle managers saw to it that decisions were carried out. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, corporations found they needed more flexibility if they were to thrive, and the hierarchical control of employees began giving way to trust and collaboration.

Corporations soon found that widespread training was needed to help every worker think and behave like a leader. The training emphasis, at the time, was on business performance, as in total quality management (TQM). Then came the seminar culture with programs on teamwork and empowerment, which made the focal point more personal, but training was still focused on immediate corporate issues.

The use of consultants added to the movement toward executive coaching since they worked with key corporate figures and system interventions. Nevertheless, these approaches to change had one common flaw: they did not last. It occurred to many people that if organizations were going to create lasting change, the individuals working in them had to change first. Stephen Covey, author of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, was a major figure in the shift from corporate talk to training highly effective employees.

In the late 1980s, the professional field of executive coaching was born, a field promoting continuous resilience and performance in people and organizations. The main emphasis was to assist employees and corporate entities formulate scenarios for the future, given the complexities and speed of change in the world.

The idea was for coaches to work with both individuals and integrated corporate systems over time. Managers looked upon coaches as “*knights in shining armor*” to get the job done and make a lasting impression. Some of the new emphasis that coaches contributed was visionary leadership training, executive and renewal coaching, and transitional management assistance.

The major thrusts that assisted in the evolution and shaping of executive coaching came from the field of leadership, particularly entrepreneurial leadership. This movement was energized by the need for an empathizing and bold approach during the corporate shakeups and out-placement of the 1980s.

Today, coaching as a profession is a burgeoning field, especially executive coaching. The International Coach Federation lists their coaching membership to be close to 30,000.

With today’s lean corporate climate, organizations choosing to be among the top performers in their industry will find it a necessity to embrace executive coaching as a “must have” management training and development tool.

REFERENCE: Efron, M., Salob, M., & Greenslade, S. (2005). *How the top 20 companies grow great leaders*. Lincolnshire, IL: Hewitt Associates.

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