

Putting Your Coach to Work

Richard C. Harris, PhD
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Denise Truesdell walked out of Sam Lincoln's office, wishing she could slam the door. Instead, she turned and made a comment to Sam who was standing behind his desk. Both of them laughed. But as she made her way through the reception area, her smile had frozen. By the time she got to the elevators, her jaw was clenched. Something in that discussion with Sam had not gone well.

She chatted with Ernie from Accounting during the ride back to her floor, but her mind was whirling. Sam Lincoln oversaw executive succession. His influence on promotions was legendary. Denise expected the meeting with Sam to be a formality. Her boss had all but promised her that she would be getting promoted in the next cycle. Instead, Sam had told Denise that he could only support her promotion if she changed the way she worked with people outside her department. Furthermore, she would have to agree to participate in the company's leadership coaching program. That meant delaying her promotion for another year.

The walk through the cubicles to her office seemed to go on forever. What did they want out of her? Sure, she could be tough to work with if she had a goal to meet. But that's how she got to where she was. Her managers in the past had relied on her to get things done—and they hadn't minded if she left a few bruises.

By the time she reached her office door, she was thinking of all the things she wished she'd said to Sam. He knew she had participated in a 360 feedback process last year. What he probably didn't know was that she had made a major effort to improve the climate within her team. One of her trusted staff had told her that he'd seen positive changes in the past year. Now it feels like Sam's moving the goal posts. She makes progress with her direct reports, and Sam raises concerns about her relationships with peers in other departments.

She sank into her chair and unconsciously began checking her voice mail. She realized as she skipped from one message to the next that she was hoping one of the messages would be from a head hunter. No such luck. Suddenly her PDA chimed. Five minutes to get to a meeting in another part of the building.

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On her drive home that evening, Denise reflected on her options. She smiled to herself as she thought of singing "Take this job and shove it" to Sam Lincoln. That option wasn't likely to happen, but it made her feel better. Option 2, talk to head hunters, was not the option it had been in the go-go nineties, but she vowed that if a call came, she'd at least listen. That left Option 3, coaching.

Denise Truesdell and Sam Lincoln are real people. Only their names have been changed. After giving her options some thought, Denise agreed to work with a coach. Sam recommended me and arranged for an introductory meeting. Denise was skeptical in our initial meeting about whether she even needed coaching, but she said she was willing to participate because it had been defined as a precondition to a future promotion. This is not an ideal way for a coach and client to get started, but I find that the situation is not unusual. Executives are often advised to

work with a coach by their manager or someone in Sam's position. In companies that lack a well-established development planning process, the advice often comes, as Denise's did, as an unwelcome surprise. To make matters worse, the need for coaching is often wrapped in ambiguity, as in, "We think there are a few things you should work on." The "we" and the "few things" are left undefined. In these circumstances the participant is left to work through a wide array of emotions in order to get any benefit from the coaching experience.

Here are four lessons from Denise's experience that helped her get over her initial reactions and come to use coaching as the developmental tool that it is intended to be.

Lesson 1: Get Motivated

The first thing Denise decided to do was take the emotional high ground. She had every right to feel that she was being treated unfairly. Her performance was consistently rated in one of the top two boxes on the company's scale of 5. Also, she had made changes in the past year in response to her last 360 survey; yet no one in a position of authority seemed to notice. Normal people in this situation get angry. The more challenging response is to treat the situation as an opportunity to learn something. Rather than act "normally" which would have meant acting defensively, she had to act "abnormally". She had to open up when every instinct was telling her just the opposite.

Denise first convinced herself that working with a coach could be helpful. Then she had to explore the possibility that Sam may have had a point – that far from being a gate-keeping bureaucrat, Sam was probably trying to convey some insight about her potential effectiveness at the next level. This second "pill" was a little more difficult to swallow. But as trust developed between us, she began to explore her situation from other perspectives.

Lesson 2: Focus on What You Need to Learn

The world is full of people who will give you advice. Your job is to decide how to act on that advice. Sam had told Denise that she needed to improve her relationships with managers in other departments. That recommendation, even if it is well-intentioned, is too fuzzy. Should she try to work on the one or two personality conflicts she knew she had, for example? Or, should she reflect on certain decisions that she'd made in her department recently that may have had negative impacts on other groups? Could it mean that she expected too much of other parts of the organization?

Denise concluded that "improving relationships" with people in other functions was more than being attentive to what they had to say in meetings. She acknowledged that she could be

Lesson 3: Manage Your Coach

impatient with others and we worked together on behaviors ranging from stress reduction to questioning skills. But she went a step further and embarked on a “Get Smart” program of learning more about each function that she needed to work with. This sent a strong message of respect to her peers.

The important point is that you need to decide what kind of learning will make you more effective. Your manager will have a point of view. Your coach will have a point of view. But, in the end, it should be your decision.

If you get the opportunity to participate in your company’s coaching program, don’t be passive. First, decide whether you can work with the person who has been nominated as your coach. Use an initial interview to determine whether the coach can help you apply the first two lessons. That is, in your initial interactions with the coach, do you feel motivated to learn? Second, do you feel that the coach can help you focus on what you truly need to learn? Most coaches come with enough life experience and business perspective to be able to advise you about your work. But the real test is whether they can help you learn.

In addition to the “chemistry” test, another important tool for managing the coaching relationship is the coaching plan. Face it. In the course of putting in a 200-hour month, you’ll probably spend only 1-2% of that time with the coach. To get the greatest value for that small amount of time, you’ll need a plan that both you and your coach can focus on.

Denise’s plan had four components:

- Objectives
- Intended Results
- How Coaching Can Help
- Review Dates

Each *Objective* identified specific behaviors for her to work on. In some cases she had to learn new behaviors; in other cases, she only needed to discipline herself to do what she already knew how to do. The *Results* section defined the benefits that she expected to see from meeting her objectives. One of those results was clearly stated: Promotion. The *How Coaching Can Help* section defined the role that the coach would play during the engagement. Words like “sounding board”, “practice sessions” and “new ideas” appeared in this section. Finally, the *Review Dates* section contained specific interim dates, so that Denise could track her progress.

Denise's plan changed over the year as new opportunities arose, but it served as a constant reminder that coaching was to focus on the results that *she* wanted to achieve.

Lesson 4: Know When You're Done

Knowing that you're coming to a close in the coaching relationship can be awkward. Does the person who initiates the discussion offend the other person? Is person A "firing" person B? The plan helped both sides manage through this period. The milestones in the plan established the need to take an objective look at what had been accomplished. As Denise and I reviewed her accomplishments, we discovered together that it was time to redefine our relationship. We've continued to exchange emails, but the intensive period of shared objectives that we worked toward over a 12-month period drew to a close.

Conclusion

Companies are increasingly offering coaching as a part of their leadership development and talent management programs. However, if the coaching opportunity is introduced in an ambiguous or even threatening manner, the participant ends up with a mixed message: *we're investing in you* is one message; *you're not good enough* is the other.

No other executive development opportunity seems to be nuanced in quite this way. University-based executive development programs are generally viewed as an exclusive perk for the participant. The in-company program, open to anyone at a certain level, offers no commentary, positive or negative, on the attendees. Only coaching has the potential to mix both sponsorship and threat.

As companies become more adept at integrating succession planning with a number of different development options, we can anticipate that the "mixed message" factor for coaching is likely to diminish. For now, however, it will be up to the participant and the coach to rise above the noise that gets created if the message is mixed.

To rise above the noise and get true value from working with a coach, the participant needs to take charge of the coaching experience. This means:

- Viewing coaching as a learning opportunity that will be good for your performance and your career.
- Focusing on one or two areas that you genuinely believe will make you more effective in your job.

- Managing the coach and the coaching process, making sure that there is a mutual selection process and a clear plan for the results that you expect to achieve.
- Reviewing progress carefully and making a considered decision about when it is time to end or redefine the coaching relationship.

By actively managing these four aspects of the coaching experience, you take charge of your own learning and gain the benefit of the outside perspective that a coach can bring.

Postscript

In reflecting on working with a coach, Denise identified three significant outcomes. First, by learning how to work better with her peers in other departments, she found that she is getting more done with less resistance. Before, she felt she spent too much time making sure people would do what they said they would do; now there is more ownership all around.

Second, she likes her job more. In part, she likes it because there are fewer hassles. But also, she likes it because she knows more about where she fits in the overall company strategy. By taking time to understand the priorities of other departments, she has a much better sense of the value that her group brings.

Finally, Denise did get the promotion. She's still not sure that she shouldn't have had it a year earlier. But she's happy to have it and she recognizes that what she's learned in the interim is sure to make her better qualified in her new role.