

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Who's Coachable? ▶ 07/17/08

On a recent conference call, a division president and vice-president were considering whether coaching would help a senior employee named Martin who repeatedly mangled his internal and external relationships. Because Martin had significant revenue generating responsibilities, they were heavily invested in his success.

For twenty minutes the executives related the various strategies they'd used to try to improve Martin's performance. After each anecdote they'd add a comment like, "But he just doesn't get it" or "He's heard this a thousand times" or "It doesn't seem to matter what we do, he never changes."

After a while I asked, "If he's gotten all this help and pressure and feedback and still hasn't changed, what makes you think coaching is going to get the results you want?"

The president answered, "Well, we were hoping that since you're an expert in growth and development you might be able to accomplish what we haven't."

"That's flattering," I said, "but it's not really about me and my expertise. It's about him and whether he's a good coaching candidate. And from what you've been describing, he's not."

The VP, Martin's boss, chimed in. "But it's really important that he succeed."

"I understand," I said. "But he may not be able to."

"If you met him, how long would it take you to figure out whether coaching would do any good?" asked the president.

"We might be able to figure it out right now on the phone," I replied.

"Really?" said the president. "Do you have some sort of formula?"

"Not exactly," I said. I explained that many years ago I was part of a consortium of coaches brought together by Dr. Lois Frankel to found a unique coaching firm called Corporate Coaching



International. In our formative stage, we defined eight criteria that we felt were essential for every coaching candidate. No individual would ever have all eight attributes, but, we agreed, if an employee didn't have at least two or three of them, we would decline the engagement because the coaching most likely wouldn't succeed.

In my subsequent sixteen years of coaching, these eight factors have continued to be a reliable gauge of success. If you're thinking about giving coaching to one of your people, look for some combination of these qualities before investing your resources.

1 Desire

Does the employee want to do the work that's involved in creating and maintaining new behavior? Being "sent" for coaching may or may not influence desire. Probe diligently. I regularly ask my coaching clients this: "Why do you want to change? Creating change is hard work for us grown ups. Why on earth would you want to do this?" Their answers are a good indicator of their desire.

2 Insight

Good coaching demands good feedback. Is the employee able to process feedback about herself in a reasonable way? Is she capable of examining her part in the results she's getting? Is she able to understand that people's perceptions of her are valid?

3 Candor

Is the employee willing to report about himself in a way that is balanced with strengths and development areas? Is the employee able to objectively discuss his behaviors without constant defensiveness? Can he report his interactions with others fairly accurately? Too self-condemning can be as inhibiting to growth as too self-infatuated.

4 Openness

What new thoughts has this person had in the past year? Is the employee able and willing to shift her view of the world? Coaching often demands big changes in attitudes, beliefs and thoughts. Can this person shoulder those demands?

5 Willingness to Risk

Throughout the coaching process, the employee will be asked to do things in new and different ways. The unfamiliarity will create discomfort. Can the employee tolerate feeling uncomfortable and persist even though the new behavior feels risky?



6 A Learning Attitude

Is the employee a life-long learner? Aside from any immediate, practical application, does he enjoy learning for learning's sake?

7 Humility

Look for a belief in the employee that says everyone is human with room to grow. The employee will need to accept the ways she falls short of her imagined ideal self. She'll need to be able to forgive herself, too.

8 Emotional Health

The employee must be able to manage himself. Coaching is not therapy. (This important distinction will be addressed in a later Coaching Tip.) The employee must also be free from—or in treatment for—addictive behaviors or chemical imbalances.

On the conference call, there was consensus that, no, Martin did not display any of these attributes. But their desire to save him was so strong they decided to proceed with a six-month coaching engagement. After just four meetings with Martin, I spoke again with the division president and told him I felt they were wasting their money. We jointly agreed to stop the coaching.

Developing your people is a crucial part of your job as a leader. Whether you plan to coach an employee yourself or engage a professional, assessing the presence or absence of these attributes can help you set realistic expectations. You can even use these factors to determine how easily you'll achieve the growth goals you've set for yourself!

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