EXECUTIVE COACHING SERVICES IN ORGANIZATIONS

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SEVEN CRITICAL FACTORS FOR SETTING UP SUCCESSFUL EXECUTIVE COACHING SERVICES IN ORGANIZATIONS

The guidelines described below are based on qualitative data obtained from interviews with 6 experts in the field. All respondents were senior executives who were either the initiators of the coaching services in their organizations and/or were in charge of the management of internal "coachpools". These coachpools differed in size (ranging from 8 to 400 coaches), as did the organizations (2000 – 30.000 employees). The respondents came from different sectors (governmental institutes (x2), healthcare (x2), banking and travel-industry). The data was collected using a combination of semi-structured and structured interviews (on- and offline).

In the interviews, we asked the respondents to reflect on success factors, pitfalls and lessons learned in managing executive coaching services. Our intention with this data was to provide some guidelines and inspiration for other organizations aspiring to initiate or consolidate their own coaching services.

When asked about the success factors, seven themes clearly emerged from the data.

1. **Commitment from key decision-makers in the organization**

2. **Commitment to quality and ongoing development of the coaches**

3. **Streamlining the coaching process and lowering the threshold for entering coaching**

4. **Creating a supportive culture and context**

5. **Attention to integrity and ethical issues**

6. **Coach-coachee matching**

7. **Being mindful about coaching topics and boundaries of coaching**

I will shortly describe them below based on our own translation (the interviews were conducted in Dutch) and interpretation of the responses.

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Commitment from key decision-makers in the organization

Hardly surprising for those acquainted with the literature on (the failure of) organizational change, 5 out of 6 interviewees mentioned the importance of support from key decision makers and influencers in the organization.

For example, one respondent mentioned the importance of board-members being present at a kick-off meeting. Another one mentioned of high-level leaders openly supporting coaching as an intervention and openly engaging in executive coaching themselves. It was also mentioned that (the management of) coaching services should be working closely with other relevant departments in an organization, most notably HR.

Commitment to quality and ongoing development of the coaches

This factor was mentioned by all respondents: the quality of the coaching services and working with qualified coaches is crucial for the success of coaching services. One obvious subtheme that was mentioned were was having clear quality-criteria for the selection of coaches.

That said, the respondents also emphasized the importance of ongoing commitment to the quality of coaching by supporting coaches in their development. For example, by requiring coaches to engage in developmental activities such as peer-consultation, supervision and additional training on relevant topics. Finally, all respondents emphasized the importance of evaluating coaching services both in a formative (focused on learning from the process) and evaluative matter (does it work from the perspective of the coachees, does it make sense financially etc.)

Streamlining the coaching process and lowering the threshold for entering coaching

4 out of 6 respondents mentioned aspects related to the coaching process. For example, two respondents mentioned that the visibility/accessibility of coaching services should be high. For example, by communicating the existence of coaching services frequently (e.g., in the process of onboarding new employees) and by streamlining the process of signing up for coaching.

It was also mentioned that the financial aspects and processes around the use of coaching services should be clear. For example, by deciding on whether 1) employees pay for coaching out of their personal budget 2) each department in an organization "pays per use" out of its own HRD budget or 3) whether the costs are covered by an overall HRD budget for the whole organization.

The respondents are not implying that there is a silver-bullet solution (and there obviously more options than the 3 options mentioned above), but rather they mentioned that the processes and structures should fit the organization and should be clear to all stakeholders.

Creating a supportive culture and context

This factor was mentioned by 3 out of 6 respondents. Hopefully, coaching helps people to change aspects of their attitudes and behaviors that help them to perform more effectively within the organization. If the changes that people make as a result of coaching (e.g., displaying more courageous authenticity) are undermined by an unsupportive environment (e.g., negative reactions to the new behavior) the effects of coaching are unlikely to last. As such, it is important to keep the surrounding culture in mind when implementing coaching services.

They also mentioned the opposite however: when coaching becomes a normal and accepted activity within and organization it has the potential to 'ripple out' into a broader and richer learning culture. Another statement that can also be placed under this category, is that the goals that people work on in coaching are not solely based on their personal needs but also align with the goals of the team/organization. In sum, the respondents emphasized that organizations should approach the implementation of coaching services from a systems-perspective.

Attention to integrity and ethical issues

4 out of 6 respondents mention that it should be very transparent what information is shared with whom. This is especially important if coaches also are (perceived to be) members of the internal organization. Ideally, there should be full confidentiality between a coach and a leader. However, as coaches become increasingly integrated into an organizational system, situations might occur where a coach interacts with multiple team-members from the same team.

This can be challenging, for example when one of the coachees shares sensitive information about another coachee that could (unconsciously) influence the perceptions of the coach. Clear policies surrounding integrity and ethical concerns should be an explicit part of the agenda for organizations setting up their own coaching services.

Coach-coachee matching

In the interview, I explicitly asked respondents whether coaching should be offered to all ("from housekeeping to the CEO") and whether there would be certain topics that would be especially fit or unfit for internal coaching services. Regarding the first question, the respondents seemed to be in agreement that coaching should be as inclusive as possible and offered to all "layers" in the organization.

That said, a few of them also indicated that this is not always feasible from a cost perspective. Further, they also mentioned that they noticed that the highest echelons often prefer an external coach to an internal one, as they sometimes feel that coaches that work in the organization might not feel free in sharing their feedback because of the hierarchical relationship.

More generally, they also mention that strong hierarchical relationships (in any direction) between coaches (if they also work as leaders in the organization for example) and coachees should be avoided if possible. In this sense, the coach-coachee matching process is really important.

Being mindful about coaching topics and boundaries of coaching

Regarding the topics that are suited for "internal coaches" (meaning, coaches that are perceived to be a part of the organization), the respondents mentioned that internal coaches can be especially helpful because they know the context and culture of the organization. This may help them in understanding the nuances of the challenges that their coachees face on a daily basis. On the other hand, they also mention that internal coaches could share the blind-spots with their coachees because they have been equally exposed to the organization's (implicit) culture and context.

A few of the respondents also mention other boundaries regarding the coaching topics. For example, two respondents describe that coaching should not become "therapy". One respondent mentions that questions about career changes (outside of the current organizations) might put the coaches into a difficult position with regards to where their loyalty lies. The same goes for topic that around internal conflict, issues of misconduct etc.

All in all, this could be considered a sub-topic of the ethical issues mentioned above and clear guidelines and policies (e.g., internal ethical codes for coaches) should be established.