

# Coaching for Results

Expert guidance to help leaders set priorities, make the right decisions and improve results

By Kathryn J. McDonagh, R.N.

When a sports team has an outstanding game, people often examine the coach's role in setting expectations for performance and helping the team effectively coalesce to achieve its goal. And, just as sports teams benefit from coaching, health care teams can boost their performance and impact with structured, focused guidance from an executive coach.

## Coaching defined

A coach assists individuals or teams to perform successfully and produce excellent results. Executive coaches have a more challenging task because the people or teams they are assisting are already high-performing leaders. In health care, the challenge is even greater because these high-performing leaders are also working in a complex field that is transforming rapidly. Given these dynamic challenges, the executive coaching process has to be efficient, effective and create positive, sustainable changes [see, for example, *The Way to Coach Executives*, second ed., by Andrew Neitlich, ATN Associates LLC]. An executive coach should be an objective, trusted adviser who has the ability to engage leaders candidly about strengths and sensitive is-

ssues, and produce results.

The breakneck speed of change, ongoing volatility and need to achieve greater results with fewer resources in an environment of extensive regulation can certainly put a strain on health care executives. A coach can help the leader to see the bigger picture and sort through competing priorities to focus on what matters. Both

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executives and boards can benefit from the objectivity and expertise of an executive coach to ensure that work processes and politics don't interfere with results.

## Purposes of coaching

Many leadership development academies in health care now use executive coaches to provide support, confidence-building, growth strategies and greater productivity for emerging leaders. Since the process is confidential, a coach can candidly help leaders to understand their blind spots and provide necessary feedback in ways colleagues

cannot. A coach intently listens and asks questions that bring out the leader's best thinking. Effective coaches challenge leaders, encourage wise decisions and hold leaders accountable for following through on goals. This strengthened culture of accountability leads to more trusting teamwork and a focus on results.

Executive coaching also helps to develop key executives for succession planning. The board is responsible for ensuring that the organization has a meaningful succession plan in place.

Supporting candidates with personalized executive coaching aligned with the organization's goals can help to create a strong pipeline of future leaders.

Executive coaching also can be beneficial for board development and board process improvement. Boards face monumental decisions that affect community health; and board members govern part-time and typically have busy lives. Governance processes must support board members to function as a high-performing team. An executive coach can work individually with board members and

leaders to leverage their strengths and improve performance. A coach also can assess the full board's effectiveness by observing meetings, reviewing governance decisions and processes, and identifying opportunities to strengthen performance.

## Results from coaching

Many major corporations have implemented coaching programs to develop leaders and improve results, with significant success. One global survey by PricewaterhouseCoopers and the Association Resource Center showed the mean return on investment in coaching to be seven times the initial investment, with more than a quarter of respondents reporting returns rang-



Center Voices comes from the American Hospital Association's Center for Healthcare Governance.

ing from 10 to 49 times their initial investment [see Matt Symonds' article "Executive coaching — another set of clothes for the emperor?" — [www.Forbes.com](http://www.Forbes.com), Jan. 11, 2011]. Clients typically report about 90 percent satisfaction with executive coaching, according to Hilary Armstrong and others writing for the Institute of Executive Coaching Short Report, "Return on Investment (ROI) and Executive Coaching," 2007.

Despite these positive results, some argue that return on investment may not be the best measurement of success from coaching. The primary goal of executive coaching is to improve a company's results by strengthening the relationship between individual leader development and company outcomes. Executive coaching at its best is strategic, focusing on business and individual results. The purpose of the coaching engagement should drive the metrics used to measure

its success. Examples might include improved revenues, reduced costs, improved corporate culture, retained executives and improved team relationships. The following questions can help boards and executive teams to assess the value of executive coaching for their organizations:

What leadership skills and competencies need to be developed further?

What is our philosophy regarding talent development? Do we primarily seek to acquire needed skills from outside the organization or develop them from within?

If we focus on developing talent within our organization, what processes do we have in place and how successful have we been in achieving our goals?

When we acquire talent from outside, how do we acclimate them to our culture and expectations and support them to be successful?

What percentage of our organiza-

tion's managers and executives are ready today to step into higher-level leadership positions?

### **Supporting transformation**

Executive coaching for health care executives and board leaders is one of many strategies that can play an impactful role in assisting organizations to deal with a field in transformation. Executive leaders can benefit from having a trusted, objective adviser to help them navigate shifting expectations arising from fundamental, continuous change. Boards can benefit from learning together about the most effective ways to guide the organization into the future. **T**

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