25 Truths about Executive Coaching

Insights from the 13th Annual Executive Coaching Conference
New York City, March 10-11, 2016

"I can't understand why people are afraid of new ideas. I'm afraid of old ones."

—composer John Cage

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Coaching today means coaching for change: changing ways of working, leading, and learning. Coaches are now in the business of building leaders who can meet chaos with collaboration, courage, and resilience. To do this, they must introduce a bit of discomfort into the learning journey. They should leverage new tools and techniques in coaching, and they should pick and choose among techniques for the answers that will fit their culture and people. Because coaching doesn't come in one size, and neither do the humans whose growth coaching is designed to facilitate.

When more than 160 practitioners and experts met to talk about executive coaching, we took notes. Here are highlights.

Change changes everything.

The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior under similar circumstances. But today's circumstances are similar to nothing. Thus past success is probably irrelevant, and the best way to cope with the world's complexities is to be flexible and try new things.

1. The world is becoming more turbulent faster than leaders are becoming more resilient.

2. Leaders must stop worrying about following best practices and start experimenting, and organizations must help leaders do this.

3. In a stable world, leaders succeeded by optimizing performance around current needs. In a turbulent world, they must take risks. That means suboptimizing present profits in favor of trying new things that may pay off down the road.

4. Data is less than helpful in chaotic times, because it points to what used to work. Pointing backward and saying, "See? These numbers prove I'm right" is meaningless when numbers change daily. Instead, look forward and say, "I'm curious about what will happen if we do something new." Experimentation, in short, means being curious rather than being right.

5. Too many leaders are waiting for someone to come in and adjust their corporate culture. The coach's job is to say to the leader, "That change agent is *you*."

Coaches help leaders to develop the qualities they need today and next year—not yesterday.

Leaders are irrelevant when the path is straight and clear. But today, when the path is winding and the visibility low, organizations need leaders who are courageous and collaborative.

6. One definition of a leader: a person who encourages people to go where they have never gone before.

7. In an increasingly nonhierarchical world, a leader's authority is based on influence rather than power or control.

8. There are many kinds of leadership qualities. One coaching consultancy defines leadership qualities in terms of character, which is usually inborn; substance, which can be cultivated; and style, which is active and iterative.

9. We may be working on character, says one coach, but what we're measuring is behaviors.

10. A coaching program assesses executives on the following behaviors: insight, attitude, motivational effort, skill, effectiveness, and timeliness.

11. A global tech company's executive compensation used to be based on semiconductor production and beating the market. Now it's based on velocity, collaboration, and courage.

12. Leaders who coach aren't just helping the people they're coaching; they're helping themselves. "I've seen a difference not only in how my leaders coach, but also in how they are every day," said an executive coach at a financial firm. "That's a huge win."

A spoonful of negative helps the sugar taste better.

A perennial paradox exists between the status quo and the difficulty inherent in improving it. This paradox has given birth to terms like "the burning platform" and "the pain continuum." In short, pain spurs growth.

13. Implementing change is harder than talking about it. A top college held a seminar on experimentation. The experts were smooth, the presentations slick and well-rehearsed. A participant asked, "Where are *you* experimenting?" Dumbstruck, the host finally offered, "Well, we've talked about bringing in some of the younger faculty . . ."

14. In the natural world, the more comfortable a creature is in its situation, the less well it will adapt to new situations. This applies to the business world as well.

15. How do coaches leverage discomfort? Gently. After a coaching session, tell your clients, "Share this with your team. In two weeks, we'll ask you what happened." That is positive social pressure. Expand the pressure by asking teams for feedback on the sharing.

16. If a leader wants to succeed, he should go where the problems are.

17. What are the keys to mastery? Mindfulness, repetition, strategic feedback and, yes, struggle. The best leaders have dealt with adversity.

18. The "DNA" of a leader for chaotic times: diversity, novelty, and adversity.

19. Good coaching can bring attitude adjustment. After six months of group coaching, participants' self-assessments converged: top leaders became less positive about their performance, while midlevel managers became more positive about theirs.

In coaching, the problems are always changing—but so are the solutions.

Technological advances give coaches new ways to operate, and advances in neurobiology and psychology give them new things to learn and to teach. Here are a few tips from top practitioners.

20. Problem: Managers don't have time to be coaches. Solution 1: Don't just reward managers for playing; reward them for coaching, too. Solution 2: Reduce managers' administrative duties by a fraction and give the hours back to them as coaching time.

21. Problem: Recalcitrant clients, eager coaches. Solution: Coach less. When you don't coach is as important as when you do. In the words of a practitioner: "As I say to my kids, 'I can't want this more than you.'"

These insights represent highlights from discussions held by more than 160 senior executives who attended the *Executive Coaching* conference. The views expressed are those of the presenters and participants of the conference. **Presenters include executives from a cross-section of companies and industries:**

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David Whan
Deere & Company
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22. Problem: Along with coaching, your development program offers onsite classes—and a few people are taking them all. Solution: Offer fewer classes. Too much choice intimidates some would-be students—and tempts others to stop doing their jobs and simply go to classes all day.

23. Problem: Companies hire for change, but when a new person brings new ideas to an existing team, those ideas may not be received well. Solution: coach the team to help them manage the disruption.

24. Problem: Selling clients on the concept of coaching. Solution: Use the words that work. One coach doesn't use the term "coaching culture." Instead, she talks about a culture that's low ego, no drama, high collaboration. When one coach consults with the armed forces, she doesn't teach "meditation;" she teaches "military breathing."

25. Problem: Selling coaching to yourself on the bad days. Solution: Remember, it's not about you. It's about helping others to succeed, supporting learning, and bringing the human back.

SNAPSHOT

Taking high-potential employees on a learning journey

A global software company bases its learning and coaching program on three principles:

- Learning is learner-focused, not content-focused

- "Model muddle" is minimized in favor of simplicity

- One size fits no one

The learning journey starts in September, when high-potential employees are notified of their selection. They start with a two-day session on adaptive leadership, with a 1:6 coach-to-learner ratio. Next comes a Hogan assessment. Coaches deliver the results to learners, who then reflect on their scores and how those scores relate to their current roles. Learners are offered one-on-one time with a coach. Discussion groups and feedback sessions on specific business problems follow. Next, a facilitator-coach pays a "house call" on a learner's intact team for one full day. A one-day followup workshop continues the work of the adaptive leadership session, and the learning journey ends with a "hi po summit," a two-day immersive conference. The 289 learners who have participated rank the experience at 4.89 of 5.0. Typical feedback comment: "I have become more self-aware and emotionally intelligent."

SNAPSHOT

Coaching to reduce transition time—and save money

A global financial services and consulting firm discovered that its periods of highest employee vulnerability occur during job transitions. New workers were taking six months to get up to speed, and childbirth caused high attrition among women.

"If we can knock off two weeks of 'How do I get my email?' and replace it with two weeks of making sales calls, that would be a win," said the company's coaching leader. The company started a 50-hour training program for just-in-time coaching that could take place casually during employees' first months and during new mothers' return to work—coaching with a "small c" as opposed to "big C" formalized, contractual coaching.

Another change that netted big returns: The company had been using 100 external coaches of varying provenance and value. "Someone's cousin had been a coach, so we'd hire him," the leader said. Now they winnowed that pool down to 15 highly vetted external coaches, supplemented by the in-house coaching team. The savings? From $15 million a year down to $3 million.

Try this at home: A personal calendar for growth

Coaching comes in all shapes and sizes—even the coaching we do with ourselves. The director of executive coaching at a global company suggests that coaches, leaders, and employees start with a one-minute daily routine and work up from there.

- Daily, spend one minute asking, what new thing did I do today?

- Weekly, spend five minutes asking, what progress did I make this week?

- Monthly and quarterly, schedule slightly longer sessions with slightly broader questions.

- Annually, ask yourself, am I becoming the person I want to be?

BENCHMARKS

Conference attendees were polled on the following questions:

Chart 1

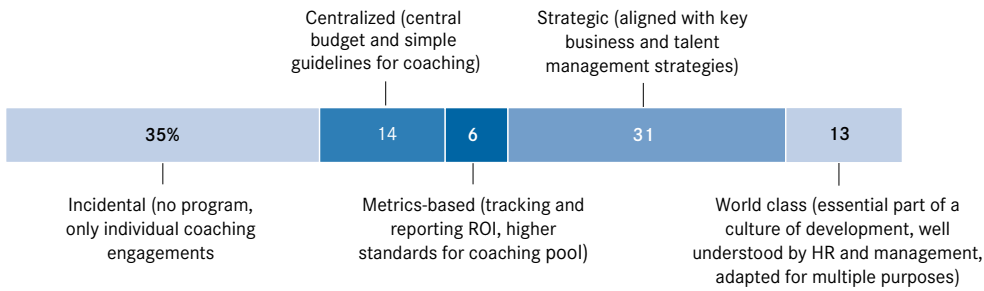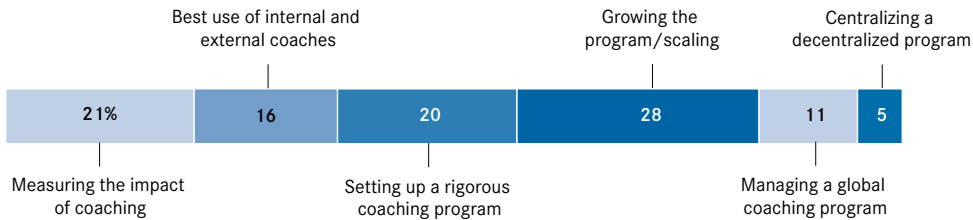### Where do you place your executive coaching program on the maturity continuum?

Centralized (central budget and simple guidelines for coaching)

Strategic (aligned with key business and talent management strategies)

35%	14	6	31	13

Incidental (no program, only individual coaching engagements

Metrics-based (tracking and reporting ROI, higher standards for coaching pool)

World class (essential part of a culture of development, well understood by HR and management, adapted for multiple purposes)

Chart 2

What are the two top challenges your coaching program faces?

Best use of internal and external coaches

Growing the program/scaling

Centralizing a decentralized program

21%	16	20	28	11	5

Measuring the impact of coaching

Setting up a rigorous coaching program

Managing a global coaching program

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

BENCHMARKS (continued)

Chart 3
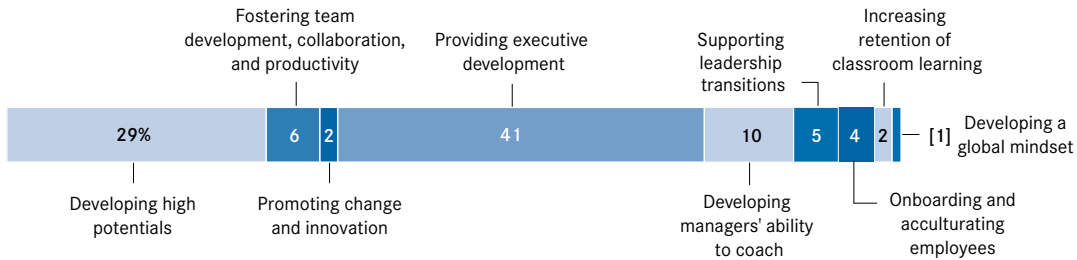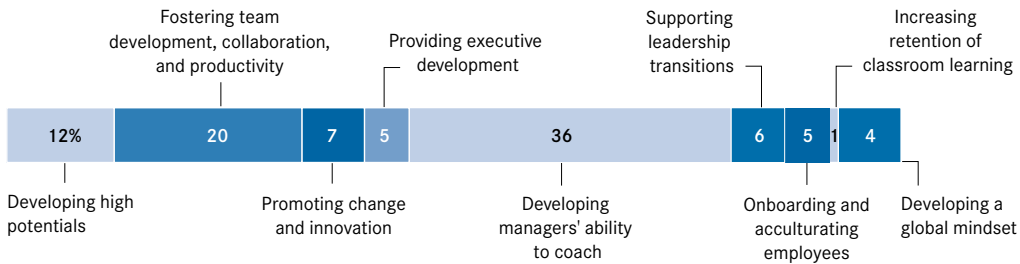
What is the major use of coaching in your organization?

Fostering team development, collaboration, and productivity

Providing executive development

Supporting leadership transitions

Increasing retention of classroom learning

29%	6	2	41	10	5	4	2	[1]

Developing a global mindset

Developing high potentials

Promoting change and innovation

Developing managers' ability to coach

Onboarding and acculturating employees

Chart 4

In what one area would you like your organization to increase the use coaching?

Fostering team development, collaboration, and productivity

Providing executive development

Supporting leadership transitions

Increasing retention of classroom learning

12%	20	7	5	36	6	5	1	4

Developing high potentials

Promoting change and innovation

Developing managers' ability to coach

Onboarding and acculturating employees

Developing a global mindset

ACTIONS TO TAKE

What actions will participants take after the conference? These answers to a postconference "action survey" highlight a range of objectives.

Grow the programs

- Develop a business case for coaching.

- Develop a framework for leadership development with coaching.

- Formalize an internal coaching program; formalize a team coaching service.

- Separate operations from team coaching.

- Begin coaching all new executive hires and all new team members as well.

- Outline the structure to further define external coaching policy and integrate with a proposal for an internal coaching program.

Employ new tools and techniques

- Investigate the Hogan Assessment.

- See how we can acquire software to assist with internal versus external coaching cost comparisons.

- In individual coaching, include a timeline for reflection.

- Explore ideas on involving participants in virtual programs.

- Think about fresh ways of breaking the internal coaching model.

Related Resources from The Conference Board

PUBLICATIONS

DNA of Engagement: How Organizations Build and Sustain Highly Engaging Leaders
15 March, 2016 | Key Business Issues

Promoting a culture of engagement is not easy; it requires the organization to develop highly engaging leaders—the quality of leadership makes a critical difference in fostering an engaging culture.

Assessing the Engagement Effectiveness of Leaders: A Guide
15 March, 2016 | Key Business Issues

This tool is designed to help your organization assess the engagement effectiveness of leaders at all levels and support them in becoming "highly engaged" leaders.

The 2014 Executive Coaching Survey
Research Report, December 2014

This report examines how coaching functions are evolving to anticipate tomorrow's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous business landscape. Looming skills shortages are creating a growing need to develop employees and their skill sets. Coaching is one solution, and survey results show that many companies already understand this need and are using both external and internal coaching to develop critical skills.

With oversight from The Conference Board Executive Coaching Council, this report focuses on practices from both types of coaches. Findings allow for benchmarking against the more than 140 respondents to this year's survey.

The 2016 Executive Coaching Survey
Research Report (upcoming this year)

Co-Creating Transformation: The Power of Coaching in Organizational Change
26 October, 2015 | Executive Action Report

Every organization is different, but all need to be able to continually respond to an ever-changing environment. Well-managed coaching interventions at key points in the change management process can strengthen an organization's ability to achieve real transformation. When coaching is truly integrated, companies are able to "co-create" transformation through greater self-awareness and purposeful action by individual leaders and teams throughout the organization. This report explores coaching as a strategic tool and includes profiles of three organizations developing this core capability: Boeing, PepsiCo, and Cargill. Each has established a strategic framework for coaching that has had a powerful long-term effect.

COUNCILS

Council on Executive Coaching

Councils of Talent Management Executives I & II

Council on Learning, Development and Organizational Performance

Leadership Development Council

WEBCASTS

How Does Your Coaching Practice Compare? 2014 Survey Results Conference KeyNotes,
August 2014

Developing Gold Medal Leadership Characteristics Parts I, II, III Special Webcasts,
February-April 2014

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