

# Who **benefits** from executive coaching?

Recent research reveals that a systemic approach to executive coaching has a double benefit.

*By Barbara Walsh*

**T**here is some debate as to whom the coach is primarily responsible in executive coaching relationships. Is it the coachee or the organisation, which pays the bill? Who precisely is the client?

Internationally renowned author and consultant, Peter Block, proposes that the whole system is the client and that all parts of it need to be supported, to learn and to be fully informed.

Many executive coaches place the emphasis on the coachee and the outcomes he or she wishes to achieve. Some sponsors of coaching support this approach and do not require any feedback from the process. Other sponsors feel that, as they are paying, they have a right to information.

Marc Kahn, Head of Human Resources and Organisation Development at Investec Bank, is clear that, in his opinion, “it is unacceptable, possibly even unethical, for business to pay for coaching which is failing to deliver business outcomes and for which there is no clear intention for a return on investment.”

Certainly, confidentiality is important to the success of coaching, and ethical coaching practice demands this. At the same time, it is certainly useful for the sponsors (usually the line manager, and often also an Executive or HR lead) to have a way of measuring progress as a result of coaching. Furthermore, coaching provides a unique opportunity for the organisation itself to learn and develop. For these benefits to be realised, certain information regarding the coaching will have to be fed back to the organisation.

The best results will therefore be achieved when a skilled executive coach is able to simultaneously uphold the interests of the coachee, the sponsors, and the organisation as a whole in an ethically responsible way.

Surveys conducted in countries where coaching is well established reveal that purposefully integrating coaching with HR or OD people development strategies results in system-wide learning and measurable benefit for the organisation.\*

Sandi Edwards of the American Management Association states, “Organisations need to avoid situations where knowledge is hoarded, activities are

compartmentalised, silos are the norm, and people are competitive and motivated only by self-interest.”

Proficient executive coaches should be able to consult effectively to the organisation. They should be carefully selected for their appropriate expertise and qualifications, as well as for their fit with the organisation and its requirements. Effective contracting processes at the organisational level and as a part of each coaching programme, together with managed confidentiality including clearly defined boundaries for effective communication between stakeholders, simultaneously minimises risk and delivers value to all concerned. Ethical responsibility must be taken into account. When all stakeholders embrace a systemic approach to executive coaching, the effectiveness of key employees is enhanced, the relationship between them and their organisations improved, and this can ultimately enable beneficial culture change in the organisation. Each of these aspects will be considered in more detail in future articles in this series.

As the field of coaching progresses, providers and users of coaching services are becoming more knowledgeable. Although progress is being made in South Africa, the credibility of coaching is not as widely appreciated as it is in more established markets, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and Australia. Even where executive coaching is utilised and valued, the systemic and integrated use of executive coaching in South Africa, as part of Leadership Development Strategy, lags that of these more established markets. Generally speaking, in these countries the purpose and use of coaching in the organisation is well defined and, as a result, coaching is considered a highly desired developmental benefit.

This series of articles over the next few months will be significant for HR, OD as well as L and D professionals who would like to develop coaching as part of the leadership strategy in their organisations. They will also be useful for executive coaches who will increasingly need to ensure that their skills continue to be relevant. ■

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\* Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2011; Human Capital Institute, 2012