Leaders aren’t always born to lead. Many need to be coached. Executive coaches are there to help.

While executive coaching is designed for those in the middle to highest levels of an organization, the coaching given to those at the top and those aspiring to top leadership positions can help virtually anyone develop better workplace relationships and potentially advance their careers.

We can’t promise that those attending this webinar will be transformed into CEO material, but they will hear how three leading executive coaches polish the skills needed to turn executives into leaders.

Click here to register for Learning to Lead: Executive Coaching
12:30 to 1:30 p.m.
Thursday, March 5, 2015

Tomorrow’s leaders are being shaped today. Among those taking on the job are Deborah Bercume of Bercume Associates, Shrewsbury, Mass.; Richard Levin of Richard Levin & Associates, Wellesley Hills, Mass., and John Poirier of Poirier & Associates, Inc., Medfield, Mass. All three will share their advice during a Special Webinar Series panel discussion on executive coaching to be held at 12:30 p.m. on March 5, 2015. To register, click here. A preview of the webinar follows.

What is an executive coach?
There are as many definitions of what an executive coach is as there are people offering executive coaching services, according to Poirier.

Bercume defines an executive coach as “someone who partners with executive leaders to help them move forward with their development,” while Levin said executives use coaches “to develop a clarity of their vision and how to communicate that vision to their followers.”

When should an executive coach be used?
Typically, executives use a coach, Levin said, because they want to change themselves; they may want to change their leadership style, their behavior or their presentation skills, but the overall goal is to become “a motivating, inspiring leader.”

Poirier gave three primary circumstances when executive coaches are used:
• To address an identified need. The classic example is someone who is a superstar in technology or a specific function, but who has deficiencies in people skills.
• Transition management. The executive is promoted from mid-level management to a senior leadership position and needs help adjusting.
Successful Executive Coaching

Below is one of the many success stories from the executive coaches who will be participating in the Foisie School of Business webinar on executive coaching.


“I have a client who says he’s ‘the poster child for executive coaching,’ ” Levin said. “He came to me knowing that he was not a good people person. He was in a new job where he had to interact more with people and he was painfully uncomfortable with small talk. Something as simple as making eye contact and saying, ‘How was your weekend?’ was difficult for him.

“He wanted to change and he did. It started with simple things, like participating more in management meetings. Now he is almost larger than life. I have to reel him back in. He is more confident and he feels better about himself as a person.”

In another case, a medical researcher who is also a physician was accustomed to researching with a small staff, but was promoted to become vice president of medical affairs with 200 people reporting to him.

“During our first meeting, he looked exhausted,” Levin said. “He planned to meet with all 200 people on a regular basis. He said, ‘I don’t know what my options are.’ I suggested identified a few people from the 200 who might work as a middle tier of managers.

“He said, ‘I can do that?’ He had no idea he could create an organization. I scripted questions to help him interview employees and create a management team. He was thrown into a position where he didn’t know how much power he had.”

• Change management.

A senior-level executive needs a different perspective from someone who can help manage change.

The two areas where executive coaching helps most, according to Bercume, are, “Helping executives develop a ‘big picture’ view, rather than focusing on day-to-day job functions, and developing skills that help them work better with people.”

“So much comes down to communication,” Levin said. “Executives may need coaching to learn how to deal with difficult employees, how to deliver feedback or how to do a performance review successfully.”

Poirier added that an executive coach is “able to assist someone who is not able to get candid feedback from others, because the person is at the top of the organization, and it’s not politically safe to provide candid feedback.”

Career development is another role sometimes filled by the executive coach. One of Poirier’s clients, for example, was a CFO who had been through a couple of acquisitions and was considering changing careers. Poirier worked with him to explore opportunities in the non-profit sector.

What does an executive coach do?
The duties of an executive coach vary, but typically the coach begins by assessing what the individual is seeking to accomplish, Bercume said. The executive coach may give the executive an assessment, interview key stakeholders and take other steps to collect data. Next, goals are set and a plan is developed that identifies what the executive and coach seek to achieve.

Finally, the plan is implemented, but the plan itself should be flexible, according to Bercume, as it is likely to change over time.

Ideally, the coach works with the executive to define measurable changes, Levin said.

“If you can define the changes you want to make and set metrics – that’s when coaching is at its best,” he said.

What’s the value of an executive coach?
Executive coaches can help executives become better leaders, the three coaches said, and, in the process, employees can become more productive and the company can become more profitable.

The individual being coached may also gain greater job satisfaction, improve his or her performance, receive higher compensation and have greater job security.

It is often difficult to calculate the value of executive coaching, Poirier said, but as one example, he cited a case where coaching made it unnecessary for a company to hire a new CIO, savings the company about $200,000.

What is the cost?
The price can vary, depending on the client’s needs and budget.

An executive coaching engagement typically costs $15,000 to $25,000, Poirier said, but the return on investment can sometimes add up to hundreds of thousands of dollars.

That amount would buy “a complete coaching package that includes 360-degree feedback and other useful assessment tools that provide an invaluable roadmap for coaching,” Levin said. “If an individual were seeking ‘just coaching’ without the benefit of feedback, an engagement could cost as little as $5,000 to $8000.”

Bercume added that the number of hours of coaching per month can be reduced to reduce the price.

“There are many different ways to package a coaching engagement, including hourly payment,” Levin said. “My own feeling is that both the coach and the client will be clearer about the goals and intended outcomes if there is a six-month commitment with clear payment terms that are not by the hour,
but there are many financial alternatives that are negotiable."

**Is an executive coach only for executives?**

While executive coaches are typically used by top executives and mid-level managers who are advancing to senior management, others may also benefit from executive coaching. Some people use executive coaches, for example, so they can be better prepared for job interviews. Coaches also help employees who may not be moving upward, but need help to stay motivated and learn new skills.

“It’s important to let people be OK with the idea that upward mobility is not the only way to grow,” Poirier said. “Executive coaching can help them be in touch with what it is that excites them at work.”

There is only so much room at the top, but there are other ways for individuals to advance their careers. In some cases, a transfer to another area of the company or new responsibilities can help refresh a person, and make the employee happier and more productive.

**How can technicians who are looking to make a transition into management benefit from executive coaching?**

People with technical skills often need to develop the people skills necessary to succeed as a manager, the coaches agreed.

“A lot of companies are putting engineers in supervisory positions that require people management,” Bercume said. “They may be brilliant at technical jobs, but performing technical duties and working with people requires two separate skill sets. Sometimes, depending on the engineer’s people skills, there are hiccups along the way.”

She will often use a style assessment to gain an understanding of “what makes people tick and how they interact with people.”

Assessments are data-driven and logical, so technically oriented people respond well to them, according to Bercume. The DISC (Dominance/Influence/Steadiness/Conscientiousness) assessment can help executives learn more about themselves, recognize the styles of others, and learn to adapt and be flexible.

**What are the limitations of using an executive coach?**

Executive coaching typically doesn’t work when the person who needs coaching resists it, according to Levin.

“The biggest problem is when a situation is remedial,” he said. “When I get a call from the chairman, who says, ‘I’m having a problem with my CEO and I want you to change her or him.’ I almost automatically know it’s not going to work.”

Bercume agreed and said, “If the manager doesn’t buy into it, it doesn’t work.” Much of that “buy in” is determined by whether the executive and coach can develop a good relationship and if they believe it is important to their success.

It’s also important for the coach to be sensitive to any differences he or she may have with the executive, Poirier said, including age, gender and race. Sometimes differences can provide an advantage, though, because they will create differences in perspective.

Mutual credibility and trust are crucial, according to Poirier, who said that if a potential client appears to be manipulating information or if it doesn’t appear that they will be able to develop a good relationship, he will walk away from the engagement.

Bercume added that the coach needs to “align” with the business. For executive coaching to succeed, the coach needs to step back and “look at the landscape.”

**Once coaching is completed, what keeps executives from slipping into their old habits?**

The longer the engagement, the more likely the executive will be to make permanent changes.

Behavioral changes often begin after a three-month engagement, Bercume said, but the executive will be more likely to retain the change long-term if a coach is retained for six months or even a year.
How might graduate management programs help develop skills needed to succeed in an organization?

“It depends on what you’re preparing students for,” Levin said, “but for students who see themselves preparing for management, it’s about understanding the people side, not just the financial and management side.”

He recalled a training session at a Fortune 500 company where he asked attendees, “What do you manage?” Those attending talked about the products they managed, “but not one said, ‘I manage people.’ It takes an awareness, in addition to fundamental management skills.”

“A lot of people who finish MBA programs are not aware of the options they have,” according to Poirier. Graduate management programs can help by training students to take a broad perspective and recognize the range of opportunities available to them.

What can people do on their own if they can’t afford to hire an executive coach?

Colleagues can peer-coach each other, if they support and hold each other accountable, Bercume said. University career services offices can also help with career-related coaching. Additional help may be available through a Small Business Development Center (SBDC) or SCORE (formerly known as the Service Corps of Retired Executives). Some coaching is also offered as an option at conferences, she said.

Levin said his company posts a half-dozen tweets daily with links to the latest periodicals, blogs and articles relating to executive coaching.

An online search can also guide those who are interested to information about the type of behavioral or leadership changes they are seeking, he added, “but it’s not as personal, effective, or feedback-oriented as coaching.”

How can a person determine how good his or her executive coach is? What should a person look for?

“I think the best rule-of-thumb,” Levin said, “is to select a coach with whom you have outstanding chemistry, who gets what you are trying to achieve, and who comes recommended by a person, or people, you respect.”

Organizations such as the International Coach Federation and the Institute on Coaching provide excellent training, he added, but credentials shouldn’t be the only criterion, as some certified coaches have been coaching for a relatively short time, while some coaches who are not certified have been coaching for 25 years or longer.

Bercume recommended checking references and the coach’s background, including any credentials.

“Find someone who knows the coach and has had a positive experience,” she suggested. “Meet with the potential executive coach either virtually or in person to ask questions about successes, values, process and style to determine if it matches what you are looking for.”

Successful Executive Coaching


A client in the pharmaceutical industry had expertise in costing out whether a product was viable. He did his job so well, when there was an opening for a general manager, he asked for and received the promotion.

But his new job required different skills. To become a successful manager of people running clinical trials, he needed to “understand that those people knew more about their jobs than he did.” Poirier had to train him to accept other people’s work.

To succeed, executive coaches often need to get their clients to think differently. Poirier had an information technology manager move into the role of chief information officer, but he was worried, because he needed to find someone to fill his previous position.

Poirier suggested that he consider restructuring the department and reshuffling areas of responsibility. The CIO hadn’t thought of that option, but ended up following it, reshuffling responsibilities and hiring a junior-level employee.

He also coached a woman in her mid- to late-40s who wanted to change careers from consumer goods to a business-to-business position, but she was concerned that, “If I went over there, everyone would be so much younger than me.”

He talked to her about playing a mentoring role.

“Eventually, she did and kind of enjoyed it,” he said.

The Robert A. Foisie School of Business is rooted in WPI’s strengths in technology, engineering, and science, and is known for developing innovative and entrepreneurial leaders for a global technological world. The part-time MBA program at the Foisie School of Business has been ranked number one in the northeast by Businessweek since 2007. The undergraduate programs for entrepreneurship and information systems were ranked number one in the country, and the operations management program was ranked number four by Businessweek in 2013.

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