

Demystifying professional coaching: What it is, what isn't and how to get the most out of it

Understanding common perceptions about coaching

Professional coaching has many benefits, and it also has negative connotations - particularly when coaching is recommended or mandated by an individual's employer. To realize the benefits, we need to understand both the reality of how some people view coaching and the elements that contribute to a successful coaching engagement.

While some individuals embrace coaching as a professional growth opportunity, others who are considering or about to engage in a coaching relationship perceive that coaching is:

- A corrective action for performance issues or a response to negative peer feedback
- A process to evaluate or "judge" a leader's capacity and effectiveness and inform management decisions regarding the coachee
- An unnecessary or over-reactive response to management styles that do not directly impact the business' bottom line

Similarly, coachees may feel that coaching should instead apply to other staff and not to the coachee. They may also feel skepticism regarding a coach's ability to help them and to relate to their specific field or function. Finally, coachees often express concern about:

- The signal that the coachee's coaching process may send to peers within the organization
- The level of confidentiality in the coaching relationship and engagement
- The amount of time to be taken up by the coaching engagement

These perceptions and concerns around coaching are common and, in some cases, rooted in organizations' own misconceptions around coaching. However, by clarifying the intent of the coaching and setting up parameters for the coaching relationship, coachees can reap many benefits.

The *intent* of coaching and actual experiences

According to the International Coach Federation (ICF), coaching is defined as a partnership with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential. It is a process intended to help leaders be the best leaders they can be.

Indeed, many organizational leaders who have received coaching report that coaching engagements have been instrumental to their leadership development and growth journeys:

"There is no other relationship as powerful as a coaching relationship to challenge what is going on in your head and give you the unique space to truly understand yourself and the abundance of options that are usually hiding in plain sight." - *Physician leader*

"The [coaching] opportunity opened up my eyes to a leadership mindset which is intentional, based on my values, and authentic. Until I was coached, I relied on positional authority and being in command, and now I am seen as an inclusive leader in the organization with a great foundation on how to control my thoughts, emotions, and impact on people I manage." - *Business Director in healthcare*



Transforming coaching into a positive and productive experience

While many coachees begin a coaching relationship from varying perspectives – some embrace it while others resist it – most agree that the foundational basis for a successful coaching experience consists of two elements: 1) the relationship between the coach and the coachee and 2) the coachee’s willingness to embrace and participate actively in the coaching process, whether this willingness is present from the beginning or develops throughout the engagement. To achieve this strong foundation, several parameters are necessary:

Ensuring the right fit between the coach and the coachee.

According to coachees, effective coaches ask the right questions, listen at a deep level, and hold coachees accountable for their commitments to the coaching and self-development processes.

“The coach’s ability to push me without my feeling overly pushed was the catalyst for my growth. I didn’t feel pressured but worked hard to improve for all of the right reasons.” - *Business Director in healthcare*

Establishing trust between the coach and the coachee. By

ensuring confidentiality and nurturing a safe space, coaches should promote an open and non-judgmental relationship that enables the coachee to open up, focus on development objectives and consider new perspectives and ideas.

Approaching coaching as an opportunity for self-exploration and being open to the possibility of shifting one’s mindset.

Aligning with both the coach and the organization about the coachee’s objectives for coaching.

Organizations that prompt employees to engage in coaching should be clear on the purpose of the coaching and endeavor to use coaching as an opportunity to improve and maximize leaders’ potential.

When the above conditions are met, coachees are better able to relieve their concerns, realign their perceptions and activate a mindset that will enable them to shape and benefit from the coaching engagement. Even when coachees start a coaching relationship with different conceptions and perspectives, their coaching journeys converge as they experience a shift in mindset regarding their own abilities and leadership potential.

“After a couple of sessions, there was a shift for me. I was able to develop trust in the coach and process and started to explore my thought process. The questions that were asked for me to explore were like none that I have ever experienced. I realized that I was running a pattern of thoughts and behaviors with no reflection on the impact they made on others. My focus was on results, by any means necessary. Coaching conversations now had me questioning this mindset and exploring other options.” - *Finance Director in healthcare*

Embark on a coaching journey by asking key questions of...

...a potential coach

- How do you approach a coaching relationship?
- What is your policy regarding confidentiality? What ethical guidelines do you abide by? How and what will you report back to my organization?
- How will we determine the goals or objectives of this engagement?
- What does a typical coaching session look like? How long will the engagement last? What will it consist of?
- How will you determine if the engagement is effective?
- What do you expect of coachees during and outside of the coaching sessions?

...yourself, as a coachee

- Do I recognize that this journey is an opportunity to expand my success, knowing that the effort will include a good deal of self-reflection and honesty and as a result the reward will be growth and greater success?
- What are my specific development objectives? What outcomes am I seeking?
- How much time and energy can I dedicate to this process?
- What are my supervisor's or organization's expectations regarding this engagement?

"Whether you are seeking coaching out of your own desire, or a supervisor has requested that you engage with a coach, see this as an investment in your future. You have the wonderful opportunity to work with someone who can help you learn things you never knew before, be supportive of you and your career (or personal!) journey, and help you prevent and address challenges that arise. You will find new insights into your own style and abilities. If you go into it with an open mind, you will reap the benefits."

- Hospital Department Chair

About Organizational Performance Group (OPG)

OPG is an organizational development consulting firm that believes people and their ability to work together are critical to the success of all organizations. Organizations that inspire and empower their employees have a competitive advantage. Simply put, we believe an organization's success depends on its people. For over 25 years, OPG has provided coaching to executives and managers to address topics such as sharpening and maturing leadership skills, ensuring successful transitions of newly promoted managers and leaders, improving communication between leaders and teams, and equipping technically proficient staff with management and leadership skills. OPG's approach to coaching is based on providing the feedback and skill-building tools to improve leaders' capabilities through four coaching principles – an abundance mindset, expertise, empowerment, and ethics. OPG would be honored to support you in your coaching journey. For more information, please visit <https://organizationalperformancegroup.com/coaching/>.