# CONTENTS

# THE IMPORTANCE OF EXECUTIVE COACHING
# FOR ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATORS

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Being successful as an administrator in a college or university is a key goal for both the individuals involved and the institution. At a personal level, being successful carries multiple levels of meaning, such as competence, achievement, career development, and so forth. From an institutional perspective, success reflects equally broad meanings, including effective personnel selection, effective operations, and achievement of mission, among many others. These positive outcomes further indicate that from either perspective there has been a good return on investment, whether from the standpoint of toil or from financial or other institutional resources. Thus, ensuring success would appear to be in both the person's and the institution's best interest.

As important as success is, though, institutions do not always provide sufficient support to increase its likelihood. For example, individuals promoted into an administrative post may have limited background in budget and fiscal management, in personnel management and performance evaluation, or in conflict management. Similarly, individuals may be ill-prepared for the personal aspects of leadership positions, such as impacts on interpersonal relationships or personal considerations on one's own career path. Many institutions provide only rudimentary preparation, few ongoing professional development programs aimed with tactics targeted at administrative leadership issues, and often ignore the effects of leadership roles on the personal development side.

To address these shortcomings, institutions and individuals are increasingly turning to executive coaching as a way to support their leaders (Association of Governing Boards, 2015; Gander, Moyes, & Sabzalieva, 2014; Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Iordanou, Lech, & Barnes, 2016). Used extensively in healthcare (e.g., Rodriguez et al., 2016; Weinstock & Glasgow, 2017), executive

coaching is rapidly gaining popularity across a wide range of professions (Van Nieuwerburgh, 2016) and in corporations (Garvey, Stokes, & Megginson, 2018) as an approach of choice for personal and professional development.

As will be discussed in this paper, executive coaching provides opportunities for leaders to focus on areas for growth, which ideally result in higher performance and personal satisfaction. The remainder of this paper focuses on the role of executive coaching can play in the career development of administrators in colleges and universities.

**What Is Executive Coaching?**

Executive coaching is fundamentally a partnership between the coach and the client in which a "thought-provoking and creative process inspires them to maximize their professional and personal potential" (International Coach Federation, 2018a). This approach is distinct from consultant, mentor, therapist, and other individuals who may provide assistance to an employee. Executive coaches view the client, not themselves, as the experts in the client's life and work, and believe that every client is creative, resourceful, and whole. Executive coaches do not view the client as needing to be "fixed" or as somehow "broken" or "flawed." Executive coaches ask questions rather than supply answers. Based on this view, it becomes the coach's responsibility to:

- Discover, clarify, and align with what the client wants to achieve;
- Encourage client self-discovery;
- Elicit client-generated solutions and strategies;
- Hold the client accountable; and
- Help the client improve his/her outlook on life and work, improve leadership skills, and unlock potential.

The foundation of executive coaching is distinct from *mentoring*. In contrast, mentoring rests on a relationship between an experienced expert in the field who provides wisdom and guidance to a mentee based on the mentor's own experiences. Thus, much of mentoring involves providing specific advice on how to address challenges, and counseling on specific job-related problems (Garvey, Stokes, & Megginson, 2018). Similarly, an executive coach differs from a *therapist* or *counselor* who may assist the client in dealing with a specific mental health or behavioral concern. These and related distinctions between executive coaches and other types of individuals who may provide support are graphically distinguished by Fairly & Stout (2004) in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Distinctions between Executive Coaching and Other Service Providers


Adapted from Fairly and Stout (2004)
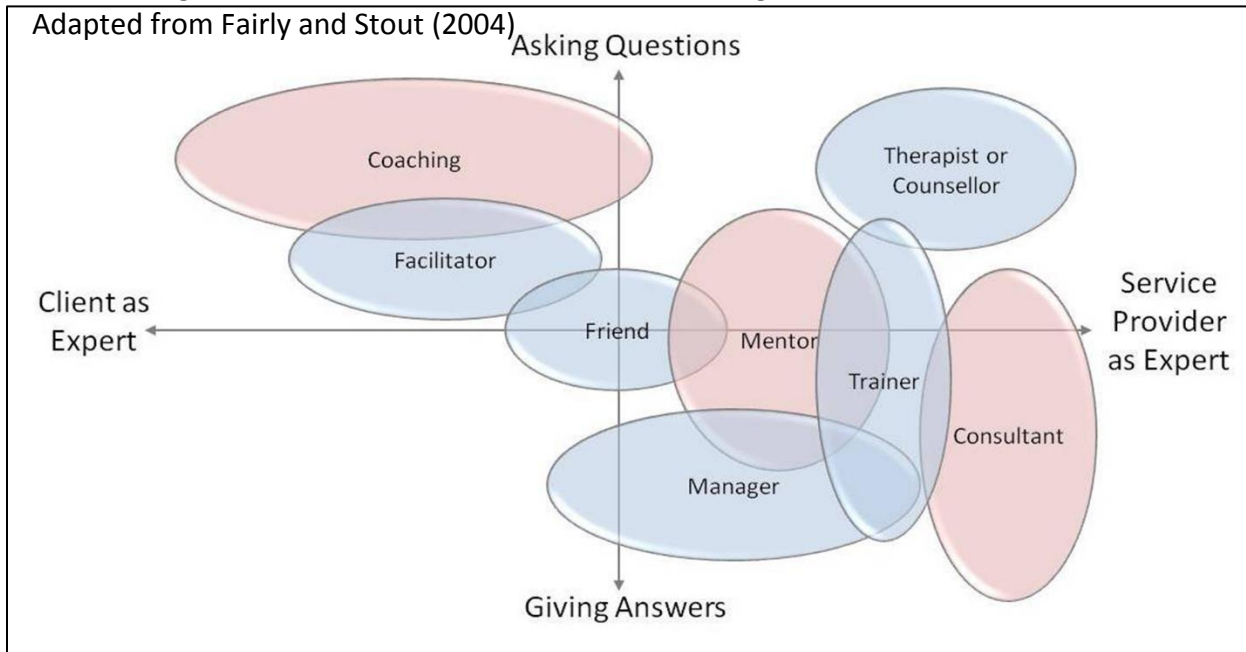
The foundational principles of executive coaching create a unique focus on the client that does not depend on the coach's deep knowledge of the client's specific professional discipline. Rather, because the client is considered the expert, the coach guides the process in terms set out by the client by asking insightful questions that require the client to thoughtfully reflect before responding. This means that the executive coach and the client co-create the experience in service to the client's needs and desires.

**Are You Ready for Executive Coaching?**

Determining whether one is ready to pursue executive coaching is typically the outcome of self-assessment and wonderings experienced by clients. Often, these self-questionings focus on a mix of work and life issues:

- Is there something urgent, compelling, or exciting at stake (e.g., challenges, stretch goals, a new opportunity perhaps)?
- Is there insight needed into one's core strengths and how to capitalize on them?
- Is there a gap in knowledge, skills, confidence, or resources and in knowing how to compensate for the gap(s)?

- Is there a desire to improve one's performance?

- Is there a lack of clarity with choices one needs to make?

- Is one's work and life out of balance, creating unwanted and uncomfortable consequences?

- Is there a need to understand one's story, purpose, and values?

Typically, these self-questionings are triggered by events or situations in one's work role. As noted at the beginning of this paper, it is too often the case that individuals encounter challenges in administrative roles due to a lack of systematic professional development in preparation to taking on new responsibilities. For example, administrators often experience challenges related to budget or fiscal management and personnel supervision in their initial administrative roles that can create personal doubt in one's competence that results in self-questioning. More experienced administrators may experience a different type of self-questioning resulting from dealing with countervailing pressures, seeming no-win scenarios, or ethical dilemmas.

It is for precisely these kinds of experiences that executive coaching can be the most opportune, effective, and satisfying process due to its focus on assisting the client in creating optional and an optimal path. Driven by the quest for personal growth and insight, individuals who choose executive coaching are willing to take the risk of delving into personal skills and gaps, to ask hard questions about their personal motivations, values, and ambition, and to sit with ambivalence, discomfort, and uncertainty as the keys to understanding the right next steps.

**How Does Executive Coaching Work?**

There is no mystery about the process; it starts with agreeing to work—on oneself. It is a developmental process that has both structured and unstructured aspects and can be represented as an upwardly-directed spiral. The unstructured aspects reflect the fundamental principle that the client determines the issues and direction of the coaching sessions while the coach asks probing and clarifying questions. The structured aspect reflects the use of certain assessment instruments that provide descriptions of various personal attributes (e.g., skills assessments, interpersonal style assessments, etc.). The notion of an upward spiral reflects the progress that clients make (the upward trajectory) and the fact that certain issues or concerns recur over time but that are confronted with progressively higher levels of understanding and skills (the spiral looping back at a higher level).

Executive coaching typically is a three-part process: an initial *personal interview* followed by *assessments*, followed by an iterative process of *coaching sessions* (that may be supplemented with additional resources). The personal interview is the initial substantive contact between client and coach, and focuses on identifying the priorities and specific anticipated outcomes of coaching as established by the client (and clarified by the coach). This interview works best when it is done face-to-face in the same space, face-to-face via real-time videoconference, or by telephone. The key is to ensure that there is real-time opportunity for engagement and negotiation.

The assessment aspects of executive coaching are tailored to the specific goals and outcomes identified in the personal interview. For example, in many executive coaching situations with administrators in colleges and universities, assessments tend to include both individual assessments (such as Clifton Strengths assessment, Hogan Leadership and Insights assessments, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®, etc.) and workplace assessments (such as Center for Creative Leadership's 360 assessments as well as other providers). Results of these assessments provide deeper insight into the client's strengths as well as how they are perceived by key others (subordinates, peers, supervisors) in the workplace. Assessment results are provided to the client in confidential sessions to ensure one-on-one feedback and that the interpretation of the results are appropriate. From the assessment results come insights that inform the development of the subsequent goals and outcomes of the executive coaching sessions.

The assessments are chosen to provide objective information that enhances self-awareness of one's skills and gaps, awareness of others and their perceptions, and provide options for actionable strategies as personal growth occurs. Additionally, assessments can be used to create benchmarks for creating coaching goals, and as indicators to chart progress.

Coaching sessions are conducted in the real-time communication mode agreed upon by the client and coach. Sessions commence with agreement on the specific goals for the session, but otherwise may head in whatever direction via whatever mode the client desires most. From time to time, the coach or client may provide additional resources, such as articles, books, additional assessments, and so forth as aids in focusing sessions or clarifying developmental issues.

Three core questions guide effective coaching sessions: (a) What do you want? (b) What holds you back? and (c) What is yours to do? These questions clearly reflect the principle that the client is in charge, and that the coach, through insightful questions, helps the client discover the path for growth. These questions continue to guide the conversation and through an iterative process will continue to be addressed and reflected upon.

Although the framing questions transcend individual coaching sessions, how they are answered changes as part of the co-creative process (Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 2011). For example, early in a coaching relationship, the client may believe she must be responsible for outcomes of her staff well beyond those over which she actually has control. Over time, she comes to realize this overextension, and eventually understands that what is hers to do is to actually delegate responsibility and establish an appropriate accountability system that is based on trust in the staff to perform well.

Through the three components (personal interview, assessments, coaching sessions), the executive coach forms a relationship with the client that becomes the force underlying the developmental spiral. Table 1 provides examples of this relationship in terms of the behaviors exhibited.

**Table 1** – Typical Behaviors Exhibited in the Executive Coach-Client Relationship

| Coach | Client |
|---|---|
| Listens carefully and uses inquiry techniques in exploring constructs, while noticing for new possibilities, different perspectives, and ways of implementing thoughtful planning and decision making | Creates the coaching agenda based on personally meaningful coaching goals. These include desires, priorities, challenges, and areas of focus and importance that are significant to the client |
| Provides objective assessments and observations that foster the individual's or team's self-awareness of others and their potential | Uses assessment data and observations to enhance self-awareness and awareness of others, and takes the tools, concepts, models, and principles provided by the coach and engages in effective actions |
| Challenges blind spots, illuminates new possibilities, and supports the co-creation of alternative scenarios | Acts in alignment with personal goals, values, and aspirations |
| Champions creativity and opportunities, encourages stretch goals, and affirms actions that use client's personal strengths and encourages aspirational growth | Envisions personal and/or organizational success and assumes full responsibility for decisions, actions, and outcomes |

One thing that is clear from the table is that in order for them to be truly effective, coaching sessions must be *partnerships* with negotiations between the coach and client. A coach cannot simply ask good questions if the client is unwilling to provide thoughtful answers, or cannot be a sounding board if there is no input from the client to respond to. Without the relationship, executive coaching devolves into a series of monologues, with each person making idiosyncratic statements

and talking at and past each other. With a relationship, executive coaching becomes a transformative opportunity for both the coach and client.

This relationship itself depends critically on the active listening practiced by both coach and client, and the willingness to be creative in identifying and exploring new ways of being. In a sense, executive coaching may often be akin to learning to navigate rough whitewater—a skilled kayaking coach helps the student learn the skills necessary to read the water and find the smoother path through the rocks and turbulence that, to the inexperienced eye, does not exist. How might this work in practice in higher education?

**Executive Coaching in Higher Education**

Within the higher education sector, executive coaching has been limited yet largely offered to senior leaders and generally as part of the professional development option provided by the institution. In some cases, executive coaching services are being sought privately depending on the nature and the desires of the client. More recently, there has been a growing awareness of good management practices typically found within the private sector and encouraged by many external boards of trustees to provide key leadership and administrators with executive coaching in an effort to promote continuous performance improvement (Association of Governing Boards, 2015; Davis, 2015).

What brings academic administrators to executive coaching might revolve around issues such as: (1) developing their teams, (2) dealing with a difficult collegial relationship, (3) feeling professionally stuck, (4) aligning their values with the department/division/institutions, and (5) assessing their own strengths and areas for performance improvement just to name a few.  Each of these areas present the administrator/client with opportunities to understand their own strengths as well as developing effective strategies to overcome blind-spots or gaps in their knowledge. Some tactics might include engaging others in communications, identifying the real issues behind the situation at hand, understanding the current environment, culture, and conditions that surround the issue, becoming aware of gaps of information and assumptions, and always looking for possibilities that can be created to move the situation forward.

Take the case of team building, which can be done in two distinct ways. First, a coach could have each member of the team complete individual assessments followed by individual coaching to identify and address strengths and derailers, and define performance metrics for improvement. A second approach would be to have the team conduct group sessions in which they all may take a

standard assessment (such as the MBTI or other team assessments inventories) with the intent to have collaborative sessions discussing the team's strengths and areas for improvement. This can be centered around the strategic plan for the institution, a set of goals for a division/department, or even to resolve issues around a dysfunctional team. Of course, the two approaches can be done together depending on the group dynamics and the needs of the team.

In some cases, dealing with difficult collegial relationship can bring academic administrators to executive coaching. When there is conflict, misunderstandings, or cultural barriers that are interfering with performance, tension and to some extent "burnt bridges" can result. Executive coaching can offer options to create awareness and identify possibilities and creative approaches to resolving these issues.

As part of many professional development and leadership workshops, the use of assessments, mentors, and executive coaches helps current administrators as well as those considering the administrative career path to identify their career aspirations. When discerning pathways to leadership and administrative posts, identifying what is important in terms of personal alignment with institutional mission, vision, and values helps people discern the steps they need to make. This can include working on how to best "tell their story" and create an effective presentation of their current skills, knowledge, and abilities, identify ways to gain new skills, acknowledge and deal with their derailers, and, if appropriate, guide them through the search process. Part of any coaching experience is to gain a better understanding of personal strengths, values, perceptions, potential, and aspirations and to be able to concisely articulate the values one can bring to a position. Coaching also involves gaining insight into what internal barriers people construct that block career progress, and how to deal with them effectively.

In conclusion, using various professional development tools and especially focusing on the benefits provided by mentors and coaches can offer academics and administrators new opportunities to explore possibilities, overcome fears and mis-conceptions, and reaffirm the value they can offer to the academy and the university. Most importantly is the understanding that coaching is more than "fixing" the person.  Just like any coach of a sports team, the unique options and the various strategies that coaching can provide will bring out the best in each person.

**Acknowledgment**

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## Other Resources

Center for Applications of Psychological Type (https://www.capt.org)

Center for Creative Leadership (https://www.ccl.org/)

Clifton Strength Finders (https://www.gallupstrengthscenter.com/)

Coach Training Institute (http://www.coactive.com/)

Hogan Assessments (https://www.hoganassessments.com/)

International Coach Federation (https://coachfederation.org/)