

COACHING FOR RESULTS

How Executive Coaching
Can Develop Leaders
and Boost Your Bottom Line



BRIMSTONE
Brimstone Consulting Group, LLC

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With financial markets and other stakeholders continuing their push for bottom-line growth despite a marked drop in demand, most companies have had to learn how to leverage dwindling resources to hit ever-increasing targets. And regardless of when the external conditions rebound, prevailing wisdom suggests that it may be awhile before there is a significant bounce in hiring. Doing more with less has become the new normal.

So how does a leader get more productivity, more performance and more innovation out of his leaner organization? In our discussions with executives around the world, the answer we hear most often is investing in key people—because the connection between individual performance and business performance has never been clearer.

This burgeoning demand to boost the effectiveness of key individuals led Brimstone to launch an Executive Coaching practice in 2010. This white paper aims to explain our core beliefs about executive coaching—and provide a framework for understanding when and how it can help drive improved performance.

What Effective Executive Coaching Looks Like

At Brimstone, three basic tenets underpin our approach to executive coaching. First, people lead organizations. People drive business results—they create, deliver and improve those products and services that ring the cash register. Second, people can change. Every leader can improve his performance (and thereby contribute to the improved performance of the organization). While no one can excel at everything, we do believe that anyone can improve in almost any field. Finally, people have more success changing when they have a good coach. In business as in sports, people can accelerate their development when they receive encouragement, guidance, new ideas and concrete best practices from an experienced advisor.

These three long-held beliefs lead to Brimstone's definition of executive coaching: *a skilled professional using a disciplined process to provide observations, recommendations and tools to a business leader in order to improve that leader's skills, capabilities and performance.* While our coaching engagements often deal with personal development, they are always structured to have a direct impact on business performance.

At Brimstone, we believe that executive coaching, when done well, is like holding up a mirror to the client. The coach reflects back to the client how he is carrying out his responsibilities. The coach helps the client to see how he acts—and how those actions impact his performance and his relationships with others. The coach highlights observable behaviors, habits and patterns.

Framing is important, too: the coach needs to be skilled at putting issues into terms that make them understandable and addressable for the client. And coaching should be done in the right place at the right time and with the right style. Coaches must look for teachable moments, and must provide the feedback with the right balance of directness and empathy.

An effective coach also gives the client an opportunity to receive feedback from others in the organization. This is the primary aim of any 360-degree feedback tool—enabling the client to see how he is perceived by his peers, subordinates and supervisors. Those additional perspectives enable coach and client to identify specific strengths and gaps.

Finally, for coaching to be effective, it's not enough to hold up a mirror: above all, the client must be willing to look in the mirror and accept what he sees at face value, with eyes wide open. The person being coached must want to be coached—and must commit to making changes based on the coaching. This openness to receive coaching is the litmus test for any engagement with a Brimstone executive coach—without it, we won't take on the client.

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Bringing Discipline to the Coaching Process

While all this feedback and reflection provide the foundation for effective coaching, even the most motivated clients will find that change is difficult. That's human nature. We find that what really drives results is a clear, consistent coaching process—and a well-drawn roadmap with simple tools can provide the structure necessary to keep the client on track.

Every Brimstone executive coaching engagement begins with a straightforward conversation about the goals of the engagement and a formal agreement on the desired outcomes. This dialogue is a chance not only to ensure that the client is willing to be coached, but also to be explicit about what the coaching should help the client accomplish. Once the goals are clear, Brimstone facilitates a process for contracting—between the coach, client and (in most cases) the client's supervisor. In fact, when a Brimstone coach begins an engagement, we usually have both the client and coach sign a written contract that stipulates the ground rules for their interactions as well as the goals for the process. This initial dialogue ensures that the coaching engagement begins, as Stephen Covey might say, “with the end in mind.”

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Coming out of this goal-setting meeting, it's important to help the client define particular opportunities for improvement—business-focused objectives that the coach and the client can “push against”. Each focus area should have clear, measurable targets and a set of specific activities to take in order to hit those marks. Without these clearly articulated action steps, coaching can quickly devolve from a targeted effort to improve business performance into a fuzzy exercise in self-actualization.

After that planning session, the coach and client must establish a regular cadence of coaching conversations. The coach must stay close to the client throughout the process in order to ensure that progress is being made—while allowing the client ample space and time to work on his behaviors. At a minimum, we like to speak with the client every other week for at least an hour (sometimes two) and meet face-to-face at least once a month.

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Ideally, the coach also will have multiple opportunities to “shadow” the client and see how he behaves with his team, his peers and his boss. This direct observation generates valuable data and enables the coach to hold up the mirror more convincingly. Brimstone coaches typically follow up each in-person meeting with a written summary of their “observations and recommendations,” a straightforward assessment of what they witnessed and how the client might either magnify that behavior (if it’s constructive) or modify it (if it’s counter-productive).

Proven diagnostic tools add yet another level of rigor to coaching engagements, enabling the client to track progress and remain focused on the key objectives. Though we’re familiar with many different models, we prefer those that are descriptive rather than prescriptive, easy to understand, backed up by solid research and offer the option of 360-degree feedback.

Aligning the Approach to the Situation

While we believe that all successful coaching engagements have several characteristics in common—clear goals, candid observations, willingness to change, strong process—we also know that each client is unique and each coaching engagement must be tailored to that individual’s needs. Effective executive coaching cannot be boxed into a one-size-fits-all approach.

For instance, executive coaches can be internal resources—senior executives or HR professionals—or external contractors. Coaching engagements can last a few weeks, several months or a year. They can be one element of an integrated leadership development plan or one-off programs targeting specific areas for improvement. So while executive coaching can address many different organizational needs, it’s essential that it be applied in a thoughtful manner that is appropriate for each situation and each individual.

To this point, there’s one more fundamental truth we’ve learned as coaches (and coaching clients): there are different *kinds* of coaching—and providing the wrong kind of coaching can do the client more harm than good. At Brimstone, we typically think about three primary types of coaching engagements—Coaching for Performance, Coaching for Promotion, and Coaching for Perspective. Each of the three engagements addresses different client needs and therefore requires a distinctive approach.

Coaching for Performance

All executives, even the most successful and seasoned, run into rough patches in their professional lives: particularly challenging assignments, a string of poor decisions, interpersonal squabbles, political miscalculations, trouble with the Board—no one is immune. All leaders face periods of less-than-stellar performance.

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The question is: Do you recognize it when it's happening—and will you seek help once you recognize it?

It's encouraging when a leader can look in the mirror, accurately identify the problem and reach out for help. But for most Coaching for Performance clients, the idea of employing a coach is raised by the supervisor.

Regardless of who seeks out the coaching support, the coach's job is clear—help the individual identify the performance barriers, set measurable goals and develop strategies to address them. The work then is centered on trying new leadership behaviors while developing better processes and tools to drive results.

Contracting is an important element of any successful coaching relationship—but it's especially critical in a Coaching for Performance engagement. At the outset of the Brimstone coaching process, we help the client build a 90-day change agenda that specifies goals, time allocations and measurable outcomes. The client then presents this agenda to his supervisor and the coach facilitates a conversation between them to ensure alignment on the desired outcomes, the process to be employed and their check-in schedule. This kind of disciplined framework brings structure to the coaching process and ensures the boss remains an active participant. Just as importantly, it helps the client to both set the performance agenda and actively manage expectations and perceptions of his most important stakeholder.

The coach must then help the client get to the root cause of the problem—and this requires exploring all the possibilities. Individuals often view performance issues through a limited and outward-facing lens: "I'm not getting the cooperation I need from that other department," they may say. While lack of cooperation may in fact be a central issue, the key follow-on question is: "What are *you* doing that is standing in the way of cooperation?" External factors always contribute to performance issues—the coach's job is to ask the client to articulate his culpability in the situation. The coach must help the individual to see the issue holistically, because context and relationships typically contribute heavily to performance gaps.

Once the issues are understood, the coach provides process discipline, consistent communication, candid observations and specific, concrete recommendations that highlight alternative behaviors, tools and processes that should lead to the desired outcomes. Experienced executives from inside or outside the business can make great Coaching for Performance coaches because they have wrestled with similar issues in the past and have a wealth of knowledge from which to draw. We commonly see an experienced Human Resources leader or a mentor brought in for these engagements; in the right situation and with the right leader, the client's direct supervisor may also be effective.

However, because performance issues are rarely "quick fixes," the coach must apply a fair amount of energy, focus and consistency and be available to stay close to the client throughout the process. This regularity and level of effort, in fact, precludes most executives from coaching all of their direct reports in depth. More typically,

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we find that successful executives supplement their managerial coaching efforts by assigning a dedicated internal or external coach.

Coaching for Promotion

A promotion is typically a reward for a job well done: excellence in the current position attests to a leader's readiness to take on a new role with expanded responsibilities and bigger challenges. What may get overlooked in these career transitions, however, is the fact that new jobs often require leaders to develop new skills and behaviors—and to abandon old skills and behaviors that are counter-productive. The star sales executive promoted to business operator must learn to develop and work through others. The Regional VP promoted to COO must learn to be more politically savvy when moving from the regional office, where he is the highest-ranking executive, to corporate headquarters, where he is part of an executive team that he does not control.

Sometimes leaders are able to anticipate these needs among their up-and-comers and provide targeted coaching in advance of a promotion. They say, "I see something in you that needs to be cultivated to get you to the next level." More often we find that leaders spot the need after the fact, once the individual has been in the new position for a brief time. The supervisor might say, "You're doing well in your new job, but you should approach this job differently than you handled your last one." Whether it's provided before or soon after the new responsibilities have kicked in, Coaching for Promotion can help ensure that the client has the necessary behaviors, skills and tools to thrive in his new role.

A promotion marks a big transition in a leader's career—the kind of transition that can provide a great teaching moment. Confidence is high due to the affirmation provided by the elevation in responsibility, but the leader is also inundated with new information, new structures, new people and new roles. For most newly promoted leaders, the natural instinct is to wade straight into the war using the tactics that worked in previous battles; however, we advise them to spend some measured time surveying the battlefield, purposefully exploring their approach to leadership.

The Coaching for Promotion process should focus on a disciplined exploration of which skills and behaviors to leave behind and which to carry forward—as well as which new practices must be developed to succeed in the new context. At the outset, the coach can help the transitioning executive to take stock of his leadership history and acknowledge his strengths and weaknesses as they relate to the new role. The coach can then work with the client to translate his beliefs about leadership into new approaches that will work in light of his new circumstances and responsibilities.

Executive coaching should accelerate a leader's climb up the learning curve of his new job: it should deepen his understanding of his new political realities and sharpen his focus on getting the most out of his new direct reports. For as an executive rises in any large organization, two things happen: his stakeholders become more

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powerful, so he must become more politically savvy; and his ability to achieve ever-larger results becomes less dependent on his individual effort and more dependent on his ability to maximize the talents of his team and organization. An effective coach can help the client in both of these realms, serving as a guide to the new political landscape and a developer of new managerial skills.

When seeking an appropriate coach in a promotion situation, look for someone who has had experience or exposure to the new level—someone who is familiar with the challenges the client is facing. The coach, whether internal or external, needs to be able to both hold up the mirror and provide workable ideas on how to scale the client's leadership, guiding him to develop new processes for running his business and new approaches to leading.

Coaching for Perspective

Executive leadership can be isolating: it *is*, in fact, “lonely at the top.” As executives reach the upper echelons of large organizations, they tend to find it more and more difficult to obtain direct, unfiltered feedback from inside their organizations because most employees shy away from speaking truth to power. Power truly does refract—and the mirrors held up by insiders usually present distorted images, like the mirrors in a circus funhouse.

Faced with this situation, great leaders actively seek out additional advisors to provide unvarnished perspectives and a clearer sense of reality. A Board of Directors can play this role; so, too, can peers from other companies. Most of these people, however, also come with biases and spins driven by their own agendas and experiences in the industry. For a more reliable and consistent take, many of our clients have found that it's best to turn to true outsiders for help.

At Brimstone, we call this Coaching for Perspective—and it is the kind of coaching that must be provided by someone from outside the client's organization. By standing on the sidelines, off the field of play, an external coach can be more objective, more truthful in providing critical viewpoints to the leader. Those who Coach for Perspective often serve as sounding boards (to evaluate client ideas) and counselors (to offer career-related advice). “Fit,” or chemistry, is especially important in these coaching relationships because the coaching tends to be more conversational—more focused on advice than tools and practices.

When we Coach for Perspective with clients, the agenda typically covers three areas—internal perspectives, external perspectives and long-term perspectives.

A core goal of Coaching for Perspective is to help the senior-level executive understand the realities inside his organization. Given the power that comes with the leader's position, it can be challenging to accurately assess people, politics and the implementation of important initiatives. Employees often put the best possible spin on a topic when presenting to senior leaders, which makes it difficult to determine

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what is real and what is wishful thinking. An external advisor who has exposure and access to the organization can provide a very valuable perspective—and can help the leader to think through various strategies that would be difficult to discuss with someone inside the business.

The coach also can help the leader gain a strong external perspective on what’s taking place outside the company. With huge responsibilities in running an enterprise, leaders often find themselves cut off from larger trends and “the big picture.” Executive coaches who work at this level must be able to provide their clients a well-rounded external worldview. Brimstone coaches, like most global consultants, are exposed to many cultures, companies and industries. We use that experience to provide our clients with outlooks on customers, the competitive landscape, Wall Street and the world economy.

Finally, in the midst of tremendous day-to-day and quarter-to-quarter pressures, it is important for a leader to be able to put his job and career into long-term perspective. Brimstone coaches often help leaders get explicit with themselves about their lifelong ambitions, the legacy they want to leave behind—and how their current job plays into both. We challenge leaders to make time to review their goals, plot a

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Summary: Three Types of Executive Coaching

	Coaching for Performance	Coaching for Promotion	Coaching for Perspective
Typical Client	An executive who is facing a “rough patch” in his career, delivering sub-optimal results	An executive who will soon take on, or has recently accepted, a new role in the organization	A senior-level executive (often a CEO or other C-suite leader) who wants an additional perspective on the internal and external realities he’s facing
Objective of the Engagement	Improve the client’s job performance by identifying and addressing the sources of the poor results	Prepare the client for the new role, with a focus on skills/behaviors to emphasize, skills/behaviors to leave behind and new skills/behaviors to acquire	Provide a sounding board for the client when he wants to check new ideas and/or share an alternative set of viewpoints on what’s occurring inside and outside the organization
Critical First Step	Agree with the client and client’s supervisor on the area(s) for improvement and specific desired outcomes	Inventory the client’s current skills and leadership behaviors and compare with those that will drive performance in the new role	Determine how insulated the client is from market and organizational realities by those around him

career strategy, and carefully manage the big transitions like taking over as CEO or preparing the organization (and themselves) for retirement.

Final Thoughts on Executive Coaching

While the goals, roles and process associated with the three types of executive coaching are fairly distinct, they do not preclude “hybrid” approaches. Each client has unique needs and aspirations, so each executive coaching engagement must be adapted to the situation. Many Coaching for Performance engagements include elements of Coaching for Promotion; a Coaching for Promotion relationship may transition to Coaching for Perspective after the leader has “settled into” a new job. Further, the coaching relationship may evolve as the leader progresses: a Coaching for Performance client may thrive in response to that engagement, undertake Coaching for Promotion the following year, and eventually seek help with Coaching for Perspective.

No matter the particulars of the approach, we have found that all successful executive coaching engagements have a few common characteristics: a clear set of objectives; a disciplined process that pushes the client to do the hard work that leads to meaningful changes; a coach who understands the client’s situation, observes carefully, asks tough questions and gives direct recommendations; and a client who is open to being coached and committed to making change. When these elements are present, it has been our experience that leaders can change and develop—and the progress can be seen in both their personal effectiveness and the bottom-line results of their business.

Best Practice: Managing the Coaching Engagement

Typically the decision to hire an executive coach—and which executive coach to hire—is made by the client’s supervisor or an HR executive. Here’s some advice from a former head of Human Resources at a Fortune 200 company on what to look for when choosing a coach, and how to get the most out of the coaching engagement.

- When selecting a coach for an executive, look for two qualities. First, find a coach who has been in the chair the client is sitting in, or has coached other clients in similar roles. Such a coach can, from firsthand experience, quickly identify with the challenges the client is facing. Second, identify a coach who has worked for or in a variety of different companies—someone who brings to the table a diverse set of experiences and best practices. There are a lot of “coaches” who offer coaching certificates as credentials—and lack the experience that would allow them to relate to someone in a top job. Coaching senior-level executives is a unique skill.
- While coach-client confidentiality is critical, don’t use a coach unless you can get consistent progress reports from him on how the client is responding. Speaking with the coach once a month is a good benchmark. Don’t seek specifics, but find out if the client is easy to work with, if he’s engaged in the process and how the coach is feeling about the progress. Most of this feedback should be shared verbally—from an HR perspective, the less written, the better. Some coaches feel a need to document everything and provide lengthy written reports; however, make it clear up front that this is unnecessary.
- Make sure to talk to the client soon after talking to the coach—and ask a lot of the same questions. Confirm that the executive is maintaining a good connection with the coach and feels he is moving forward. If anything begins to break down in the coach-client relationship, the check-in calls create a great early warning system for problems that may escape both parties.
- It’s important to check in with the client’s boss, too, in order to determine how he feels the coaching engagement is progressing: Is he seeing any improvements or deterioration in performance? Any new behaviors? In this way, you can stay in the loop and head off problems before they become a big issue. Some coaches are not comfortable working in this manner, so it’s critical to explain this operating mechanism when the engagement begins.

Five Keys to Effective Executive Coaching

1. **Client Commitment.** The best leaders embrace the opportunity to improve their performance. Throughout the coaching engagement, they remain willing to look in the mirror, accept feedback and try new ways of modifying their behavior. Coaching clients who lack this commitment, or lose it along the way, rarely achieve the desired results.
2. **Up-front Contracting.** All executive coaching engagements should begin with a frank dialogue about why coaching is being undertaken, leading to an explicit contract that spells out the desired outcomes and the responsibilities of both client and coach. This clear, concrete agreement can reduce the risk of the coaching engagement getting off-track.
3. **Alignment with Supervisor.** The initial contracting process often includes a third party—the client’s boss—and it’s imperative that this person stay aligned with the coach and client from start to finish. A good executive coach will ensure that the supervisor stays informed and engaged throughout the coaching effort, so that the supervisor can contribute to the process, recognize successes—and avoid surprises along the way.
4. **Disciplined Process.** Like any well-designed organizational improvement initiative, effective executive coaching requires specific measures and targets, tangible data, proven tools and consistent effort. Good coaches do not engage in talk therapy so that truths reveal themselves over time; rather they challenge clients to face facts, set business-focused targets and do the hard work necessary to change. A disciplined process can ensure steady progress.
5. **Coach-Client “Fit”.** While concrete deliverables and proven diagnostic tools can contribute to an effective coaching relationship, coach-client “chemistry” is essential, too. Look for a coach with a compatible interpersonal style—and the appropriate background: A coach should bring the right résumé and/or experiences to the engagement so that he can understand the context in which the executive finds himself. It is hard to ask good questions and provide wise counsel at the C-Suite level, for example, if the coach has not been exposed to those complexities before.

Brimstone in 30 Seconds

At Brimstone Consulting Group, we enable our clients to achieve and sustain transformative change that delivers breakthrough results, develops leaders and aligns organizations.

We believe that successful change requires both purposeful leaders and disciplined process.

Our ultimate goal is to transfer skills and knowledge into each client organization so that its own leaders can drive future change efforts without external support.

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