



What Is Team Coaching, and Why Use Co-Coaches?

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At the 2007 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Medical Colleges, there was a presentation titled “Who’s on Your Personal Leadership Board.” This concept was developed to emphasize that effective leaders (and all faculty) need a mosaic of advisors or a circle of colleagues to provide advice, feedback, expertise, and counsel.^{1,2} In contrast to traditional models of mentoring, this “mosaic of advisors” may include experts, political strategists, confidants, sounding boards, boosters/cheerleaders, peer colleagues, and executive coaches, among others. The notion of a personal leadership or advisory board speaks to the need for a range of personal and professional support, advice, and political acumen in dealing with the complex environment of the academic health center.

Coaching and the Personal Leadership/Advisory Board

Executive coaches are important members of a personal leadership or advisory board in career management.³ Long a part of the corporate world, coaching has begun to be embraced in academia and academic health centers because of the need to maximize an organization’s significant investment in talent, particularly critical in the current high-stakes, complex, fast-paced, and changing environment. Coaches can assist with strategic career planning, help with technical issues in the job campaign (e.g., cover letters, preparing the executive summary, interviews, negotiations), provide support during transitions in the workplace, help leaders to “hit the ground running,” develop new skills needed, and assess the changing environment and the best strategic response to it.^{4,5} Executive coaches afford a confidential, independent sounding board—the valued and dispassionate “third opinion” coined by Saj-nicole Joni.⁶

Although they may be trained as such, coaches are *not* functioning as mentors, therapists, or employment lawyers while they are engaged in the coaching relationship;

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rather, they establish the coaching relationship as a “safe place” where professional and personal issues related to advancement and success in the workplace can be safely aired and addressed. In a recent study, executive coaches noted that although they were hired 97% of the time to address professional issues, they assisted their clients with personal issues 76% of the time.³

Selecting Coaches

As suggested above, coaches come from a wide range of backgrounds and various fields of expertise. Although executive coaches typically work one-on-one with a client, it is important to note that no single individual has all the answers. Of critical importance to the success of coaching are two parameters: (1) the rapport and respect that develop between coach and coaching client, and (2) the coach’s particular expertise in relation to the client’s needs.³ Typical categories of expertise might include:

- ❖ Coaches with human resources or organizational development experience are particularly useful when an academic leader needs to assess a unit such as a division or department, decide the optimum structure and job descriptions, and manage personnel throughout the hiring, development, and accountability processes.
- ❖ Coaches with career counseling expertise may be particularly valuable when

someone wishes to make a strategic career plan, manage a career or job transition, or conduct a job campaign.

- ❖ Coaches with a clinical psychology or sociology background bring invaluable perspective and skills to leaders who may be superb at the technical aspects of their jobs, but wish to improve their interpersonal skills and relationships with bosses, peers, and direct reports.
- ❖ Coaches who come with a business background bring expertise to areas such as financial management.
- ❖ Coaches who have “been there, done that”—such as former chairs or deans—may be just the right people to coach a new chair or dean because of their direct experience and perspective.

The Co-Coaching Concept

Co-coaching offers another approach to executive coaching, and may have advantages in certain situations, essentially offering a “two-for-one” benefit for the client. Co-coaching refers to two individuals working simultaneously with a single client. Both coaches are typically present during phone or face-to-face meetings, and both review and provide input to written material, such as executive summaries, strategic plans, and the like.

Co-coaching offers several benefits:

- ❖ Multiple perspectives of the coaching team help avoid blind spots based on the limited perspective of a single coach.
- ❖ Overlapping and distinct expertise can provide a unique combination of skills that can be particularly useful in certain situations, e.g., a psychology background (for the inevitable need to increase interpersonal skills as one moves into leadership) and career counseling expertise (for the equally critical need for increased strategic focus and ability to navigate political waters).
- ❖ Coverage is greater; one of the two consultants is generally available at all times.
- ❖ Two styles of presenting may help to provide hard-to-hear feedback, which

therefore may be more likely to be “heard” by the client.

- ❖ Co-coaching helps the client understand the benefits of obtaining more than one perspective, reinforcing the concept of a personal leadership/advisory board, and lessening the likelihood of developing dependency on any one resource.³

There are additional benefits for the coach. Executive coaching can be an isolated and isolating profession. Co-coaching affords an instant consultative, collegial professional “network,” where professional opinions can be shared and strategies for the client can be discussed in a confidential environment.

Co-Coaching Case Studies

Case 1. Toxic Work Environment: A highly successful senior physician faculty member takes an executive level position at an academic medical center. Within a short period of time, there is an unanticipated change in leadership at the institution. The senior physician, newly appointed to his position, suddenly finds himself the target of mistreatment—petty harassment over budget/travel expenses, exclusion from key meetings—and he is not sure how to proceed strategically to preserve his career. Does he remain on the job, hoping that things will improve? Should he plan to transition to a new position? How does he cope with the emotional toll of trying to make these strategic career decisions while remaining “successful” in his current position?

In this example, the client needs to focus on strategies to navigate a treacherous political terrain while preserving his professional integrity, and also deal with the psychological impact of working in a toxic environment. Team coaching, with both the focus on strategic career planning and the psychological perspective, can offer support for a difficult day-to-day situation and provide help in strategizing next steps. And in complex situations like this, additions to the Personal Leadership/Advisory Board, such as employment lawyers, may be needed, as well as support from others who have experienced similar situations.

Case 2. New Leadership Position: An associate professor of medicine, who is currently serving as a division director, wants to begin to consider applying for chair positions. Although she is very accomplished and recognized for her



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expertise in her field, she has not applied for a new position in years, let alone a position at another institution. She has always been “second in command.” Additionally, she has some doubts about her ability to assume a higher level of leadership and already feels like an “imposter” in her current position—she is concerned that if she takes a chair position, even though this is her career goal, everyone will realize that she is an “imposter.” She eventually successfully obtains a chair position, which is a great fit for her, but she finds herself hesitating to jump in and assume the mantle of leadership—of being the one in charge.

In this example, the client initially needs support and assistance in the job campaign for a new leadership position, including help with technical issues such as preparing the executive summary and working with a search firm. Once she secures the desired position, she must deal with the psychological aspects of her fear of being “found out” as an imposter in order to be successful. Again, team coaching might be of help, as both aspects—the strategic as well as the interpersonal—are critical for the ultimate success of this individual.

Co-Coaching and the Leadership Continuum

The leadership continuum concept has been proposed as a way of viewing the actualization of the goals for advancement and

success in leadership.⁷ The continuum has four repeating cycles: preparing for leadership; transitioning into leadership; ensuring success; and transitioning again from one leadership position to another. Co-coaching, with focus on the combination of (1) interpersonal, (2) communication style, and (3) strategic career issues, may be particularly helpful in the following situations during the cycles of the leadership continuum (see more details in the full article on the APS Web site):

- ❖ Transition into leadership.
- ❖ Strategic risk taking.
- ❖ Becoming comfortable with power “with” as well as “over.”
- ❖ Making and traversing the decision to move on.

Conclusion

In summary, executive coaching with a single coach or a co-coaching duo can be a useful addition to the personal leadership/advisory board. This is another approach to add to one’s career consulting repertoire. In the complex environments of the academy and/or the academic health center, leaders will benefit from diverse expertise and experience with a personal and professional leadership/advisory board that is at the ready in order to assure their sustained success. ❖

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