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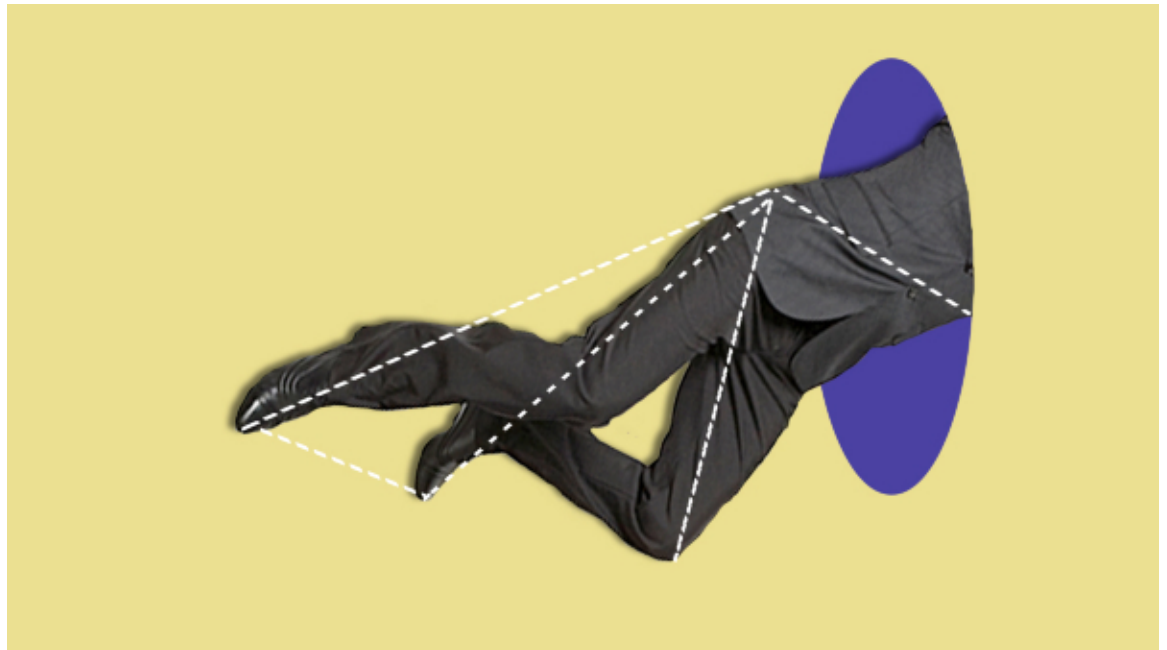
4 Signs an Executive Isn't Ready for Coaching

by Matt Brubaker and Chris Mitchell

COACHING

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The stigma of asking for or being assigned an executive coach is vanishing quickly. The growth of the industry tells us so. In the U.S. alone, \$1 billion was spent on business, personal and relationship coaches last year, [according to IbisWorld](#), up about 20% from five years earlier. And the number of business coaches worldwide has zoomed more than 60% since 2007, [according](#) to one coaching association. But while executive coaches have improved the performance of many already-good managers and sanded the rough edges off many less effective ones, they aren't a miracle cure. In fact, we have seen many companies waste considerable sums by assigning coaches to managers who just aren't ready to be coached, no matter how effective the coaches may be.

So how do those who control the coaching purse strings — HR, talent managers, and other buyers — avoid throwing money away on uncoachable executives? Considering that a year’s engagement with a top executive coach can cost more than \$100,000, it’s an important question.

From nearly 35 years of coaching hundreds of executives, our firm has noticed a pattern of red flags that indicate when a coaching investment will be wasted. Here are four things to watch out for:

1. They blame external factors for their problems.

When things go wrong, does this person always have an excuse? Maybe they point a finger at the quality of their team, a lack of resources, or even their boss.

When leaders argue about the validity of your reasons for offering coaching, or offer excuses or defenses for poor results, it can be a sign that they lack self-awareness. Before any coaching can be effective, they need to wake up to the ways their actions affect others.

One CEO we worked with was known for his smart turnarounds of a large media company. But he was struggling to get along with his executive team. Finally, several board directors suggested he should seek out a coach. After multiple sessions, he had shared little information about himself, and we were no closer to figuring out the root of the problem. Stymied, we suggested that we observe the next executive team meeting.

Suddenly, all was clear. We were shocked by how he controlled the conversation in the room. He simply spoke over other people with a volume of words that was unfathomable. When he left the room to take a call, his team members erupted with frustration. It was obvious that this CEO was completely out of touch — something that became even more apparent later on, when he asked us to tell the board how positively he was responding to coaching.

Leaders like this often ignore criticism if it doesn’t jibe with their view of themselves — and such feedback is easy to ignore if it’s buried in a performance review or mentioned briefly in a larger conversation. Conducting a non-judgmental, just-the-facts 360-degree review could help them see the reality of their situation. Until they can see what others see and why it matters, they won’t examine their behavior, and coaching will be useless.

2. You can’t get on their calendar.

Some leaders claim to be receptive to coaching but just can’t find the time. They may cancel sessions at the last minute, constantly reschedule, or, when they do show up, be visibly distracted. They lack space for coaching both in their calendar, and in their mind.

Unlike the oblivious leader, the too-busy leader is often quite likable. They will apologize for being hard to pin down, and be very direct about how busy they are. Don’t be surprised if they’re flattered

to be offered coaching. But coaching can't be crammed into the schedule of a leader who wears their busy-ness as a badge of honor. Their inability to prioritize is a sign they need coaching, but their unwillingness to make room for it suggests they won't be a good coaching investment.

A brilliant engineer we know had been promoted three times in four years, and by the time he was nearly 30 he was a group president at a U.S. manufacturing company. Diligent, humble, and smart, he could hold a room spellbound with only a marker and a whiteboard as he worked out solutions to highly technical problems. However, as adept as he was at the technical aspects of his job, he now had 20 people reporting to him whom he had no idea how to manage.

After three months of coaching, his superiors could see it was going nowhere. The executive often rescheduled his sessions, telling his coach he didn't have the time. He believed he couldn't set aside the time to improve himself. That made him uncoachable.

HR managers should do some reality testing to ensure the too-busy leader is willing to make room for coaching. To benefit from coaching, too-busy leaders must make the space to be fully present, both during the coaching sessions and after, doing the difficult work of developing new mindsets, skills, and habits. Ask this person what tasks or responsibilities they'd be willing to give up or delegate, even temporarily, to make time for coaching. If they struggle to think of any, give them a gentle but firm ultimatum as part of a career planning conversation: that they have plateaued at the company and won't go to the next level until they make time for self-development.

3. They focus too much on tips and tactics.

Some leaders eagerly agree to coaching, but then avoid the deeper inquiries required for meaningful transformation. They're willing to modify behaviors, but not beliefs. They view coaching as medicine that, if taken regularly, will help them get ahead.

The quick-fix leader becomes frustrated when their coach asks questions that require self-reflection. They want answers, not questions. "You're the expert, you tell me," they'll say in response to questions from the coach, or "What if I did this?" Everything comes back to tactics. (A related warning sign is if a leader asks how quickly the coaching can be finished — especially if they demand that the cycle be compressed.)

Although coaches sometimes offer suggestions, their real job is to help executives uncover the assumptions driving their behavior. Only then can a coach help them challenge self-limiting beliefs that block their development. However, the quick-fix leader has little interest in this process.

One CEO we worked with was leading a family business that had recently been sold to a large company. He was told by a leader in the new parent company (who himself had benefitted from coaching) that coaching would help him make the transition. The CEO gladly accepted, wanting to be seen as a peer.

However, it wasn't long into the first coaching session that he showed his entire focus was on "doing whatever other successful people did." The coach worked tirelessly to shift the conversation to the CEO's purpose and goals. Each time, however, he shifted the discussion back to the "secrets of success" of other organizational leaders he wanted to emulate. Ultimately, he was passed over for a permanent role on the parent company's leadership team, and left the organization.

To prompt this kind of leader to be open to self-reflection, remind them of all the other times they vowed to change but were unsuccessful. They then might realize they need to work on more than just changing their game plan. Or, introduce them into a preliminary mentoring conversation with one of the leaders they admire. Tell the mentor to share their experience of struggling to develop.

4. They delay getting started with a coach to "do more research" or "find the right person."

To be sure, it's important to have a good fit between a leader and his coach. But a continual rejection of qualified coaches should give you pause. A related red flag is if the person is acting confused, and asking repeatedly why coaching has been suggested. Assuming you've clearly explained why coaching is necessary, this could be a defense mechanism and a signal that the person is not ready to confront their shortcomings. It usually stems from insecurity.

Being coached can be daunting, and not everyone is ready to take it on. We remember a physician leader who was hired to turn around a business unit of a large medical center. When his staff challenged him, he became emotional. Told by his boss that he needed a coach to help him control his emotions, he was hurt and angrily asked "Why?" — failing again to control his emotions. He was too full of hidden fears for the coaching to be useful. His boss eventually reassigned him, and ultimately he left the organization.

Reframe coaching as an investment the organization is making in their development rather than a personal fix. Tell them your firm provides this resource for high-potential, top performers to accelerate their success. If this leader can view coaching as something positive to help them achieve their goals, they may warm up to the process.

When Going Coach-Less Is Not Viable

After hearing us say that a certain leader is not a good candidate for coaching, an executive who brought us in will often say a variant of this: "Well, he must be coached. We can't let him continue to manage others the way he has, but we can't fire him easily either because we need his skills badly." But imposing coaching on someone who just can't handle it at the moment isn't going to help anyone. Companies are better off directing their people development investments elsewhere — skills training or academic programs are often better options.

Invest your coaching budget in people who have shown the willingness and the capacity to change, and you'll get a much better return on your investment.

Matt Brubaker, Ed.D., is CEO at [FMG Leading](#), a human capital strategy firm.

Chris Mitchell is principal, coaching, at FMG Leading.
