

Hiring A Executive Coach? 3 Questions to Ask Yourself (and Your Prospective Coach) First



By [Urs Koenig](#), PhD, MBA, Principal, [Redpoint Succession and Leadership Coaching](#)

If you (1) are a coach, (2) have worked with a coach or (3) are hiring a coach (for yourself or others) ask yourself these three questions (discussed in more detail below):

1. **What does success look like and who gets to decide?**
2. **What are you paying for (or, if you are the coach, what are you getting paid for)?**
3. **What is the process?**

(Note, I believe that a lot of what I discuss here also applies to hiring and working with other consultants, not just coaches)

Let's talk about what most coaching looks like today and what we believe it should look like. Consider the below two scenarios and ask yourself:

- Which scenario is closer to my experience of coaching?
- Which scenario is preferable and why?

Scenario 1: A senior manager just finished his eight month coaching engagement with a well-known executive coach. Although the manager's boss and the Vice President of Human Resources had a good idea what the manager was working on (he needed to be more assertive and build stronger relationship across departments) they did not participate in the actual coaching process. The coaching was a somewhat mysterious process as it happened behind closed doors. Even some of the coaching client's close working colleagues did not know that he was working with a leadership coach. Over the duration of the engagement, there were two progress meetings during which the client and the coach reported their progress to his boss and the HR VP. At the end of the engagement, the coach submitted a report in which he outlined how the client progressed during the engagement. He presented primarily self-reported anecdotal evidence. The report included a (positive) self-assessment by the client. The coach believed he had earned his fee because he spent a lot of time with the client and strongly felt that the client got better.

Scenario II: A senior manager just finished his eight month coaching engagement with a well-known executive coach. The client involved her stakeholders (peers, direct reports, and bosses) from the very start in the coaching process. The client developed her coaching goals (she needed to be more assertive and build stronger relationship across departments) in collaboration her stakeholders and regularly solicited feedback on her progress from them. Halfway through and at the end of the engagement, stakeholders rated the client on her progress against her coaching goals in an anonymous online survey. The results of the first online survey were less than stellar and forced the client and her coach to make some changes. The second and final online stakeholder survey showed a significant improvement of the client's targeted leadership behaviors. The coach collected his fee because (and only because) he facilitated a process by which helped the client get better, *as assessed by the client's 3rd party stakeholders.*

Again, ask yourself:

- Which scenario is closer to my experience of coaching?
- Which scenario is preferable and why?

A lot of coaching in small business and corporate America is significantly closer to Scenario I than to Scenario II (I know because I have practiced it myself...). For those of you even vaguely familiar with our leadership coaching approach, it will come as no surprise that Lauren and I are strong proponents for moving coaching towards Scenario II.

Let me explain.

I have been coaching for more than 10 years and looking back over this period I am amazed how much the field of coaching and my practice has changed.

I started my coaching as a career coach, quickly transitioned into small business/entrepreneurial coaching and finally ended up finding my calling in leadership (executive) coaching.

I have worked with many wonderful clients (100+ of them) and I believe I have done a lot of good work and, on occasion, some great work. However, I often had the nagging feeling of uneasiness around the measurable impact of my coaching. Yes, the clients felt happy and gave me positive feedback. I did feel they were (for the most part) making good process and got things done they would not have done without our work together. Nevertheless: my outcome driven personality was not satisfied. Questions would linger: How did I really know if I made a difference? Who should be the judge? Did the results achieved justify my fee?

At about the same time I was pondering these questions, Lauren and I were certified in a methodology called Stakeholder Centered Coaching pioneered by executive coaching legend Marshall Goldsmith. In essence, the coach first identifies the client's key stakeholders (peers, direct reports, and bosses.) Stakeholders are critical to the process as they are people best in a position to: 1) identify the client's existing leadership shortcomings, 2) give specific and immediate suggestions for ways to improve and 3) assess progress towards desired change. The stakeholders, in essence, are turned into collaborative partners in the coaching process. (Scenario II describes a Stakeholder Centered Coaching engagement, which is the approach Lauren and I now use in our engagements.)

The result? A quantifiable assessment that is hard to "game" by either the coach or the client. (Another side benefit to the Stakeholder Centered approach is that it tends to greatly improve the quality of conversations across the organization, but that's the subject of another article!)

Coaching represents a big investment in time, money and effort for the client and your organization. Make sure you get a fair return on your investment by asking the questions below *before* you hire a coach. Does their process look more like Scenario I or II? Does it provide good answers to each of the questions below?

1. What does success look like and who gets to decide?

- How does the coach define success for the coaching engagement? What about the client? The boss? HR? How is failure defined?
- How will progress be measured, along the way, and at the end? Is it quantifiable?
- Who reports progress/results? Is it self-reported (client, coach) or by third parties (e.g. anonymous surveys, stakeholders)

2. What are you paying for (or, if you are the coach, what are you getting paid for)?

- Are you paying for process/activities (e.g. billable hours spent) or measurable results?
- Are you having to pay the coaching (consulting) fee no matter what the outcome of the engagement or is the coach's fee at least partly dependant on the success of the engagement?

3. What is the process?

- Is the coach able to clearly articulate the process (note: coaching is not (anymore) simply a series of conversations)?
- Does the coaching only happen in private, behind closed doors, or is the process attempting at building leverage across the organization (e.g. by including various stakeholders)?
- Is the coaching engagement clearly scoped? Does everyone agree what is being worked on and what is not being worked on? How do you prevent scope creep?

For a detail description of our coaching process, visit our website at [Redpoint Coaching](#).