



Coaching: What Do Coaches Say They Sell? What Do Clients Say They Buy?

Konstantin Korotov, ESMT
Andreas Bernhardt, ESMT Customized Solutions
Kate McCourt, ESMT Customized Solutions

Citation:

Konstantin Korotov, Andreas Bernhardt, and Kate McCourt; **Coaching: What Do Coaches Say They Sell? What Do Clients Say They Buy?** Business Brief No. BB-310-002; ESMT European School of Management and Technology, 2010.

Contact Author: Konstantin Korotov (ESMT), Email: Konstantin.korotov@esmt.org.

Copyright 2010 by ESMT European School of Management and Technology GmbH, Berlin, Germany, www.esmt.org.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, used in a spreadsheet, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without the permission of ESMT.

Contents

1. Executive coaching: A field full of contradictions	6
2. What do coaches say they sell?	8
2.1 Dedicated time, space, and safe environment	8
2.2 Awareness	9
2.3 Support	9
2.4 Empathy and challenge	10
2.5 A promise of a transformation opportunity	10
3. What do clients say they buy?	12
3.1 Awareness and sparring partnership	12
3.2 Dedicated time and space	13
3.3 Solutions?—Absolutely! Solutions?—No way!	13
3.4 A happy (internal) customer	13
4. What's next?	14
References	15
About ESMT	18

Foreword

This business brief has been put together to help executives, learning and development professionals, HR managers, and executive coaches to clarify further what executive coaching is and what coaches do. This publication also provides a snapshot of ideas about how clients express their expectations of coaches and coaching. If we consider executive coaching as a professional service, this brief is about what coaches sell, and what clients buy.

Although coaching has become a significant phenomenon both from the point of view of popularity and financial turnover, as well as attractiveness as a career option for mid-career professionals and executives, there is still a lot of unclarity and vagueness around what coaching is really about. What is it that coaches sell? What do clients want to buy?

This business brief presents a snapshot of answers to the above questions from the point of view of executive coaches and corporate clients. Although we do have our own research- and practice-based view about what coaching is, we decided to ask those questions to the participants of the 1st ESMT Coaching Colloquium “Tricky Coaching: Dealing with Difficult Cases in Leadership Coaching” held on the ESMT campus on December 11-12, 2009. By putting together answers from leading executive coaches from all over the world and their HR and learning and development counterparts, we wanted to offer the community interested in the coaching issues an opportunity to get engaged in further discussions of what coaching is (and is not), what coaches offer to executives and organizations, and what issues deserve further research and practice attention.

Executive summary

This business brief addresses the questions of what coaching is and what coaches do, from the perspective of executive coaching as a professional service. The findings are based on a survey of executive coaches and corporate clients at the 1st ESMT Coaching Colloquium in 2009.

When posed with the question what do you sell as a coach, executive coach responses highlighted: dedicated time, space and a safe environment, awareness, empathy and challenge, and a promise of a transformation opportunity. When corporate clients were posed with the question of what do you buy from a coach their responses highlighted: awareness and sparring partnership, dedicated time and space, and a happy internal customer. The theme of solutions was also highlighted, although views differed from that of the desire that executive coaches provide solutions, to that of the provision of a solution from an executive coach is undesirable and executive coaches should provide coachees assistance in finding own solutions.

From the answers given and despite published definitions of what coaching is, it can be surmised that much confusion remains about what coaching actually is and what it is not.

1. Executive coaching: A field full of contradictions

Executive coaching is a professional service whereby a trained professional helps an executive (or a group of executives) to clarify and distil his or her goals, find ways of meeting them, and overcome obstacles towards their realization (Kilburg, 2000; Korotov, 2008). The field, however, is full of contradictions in terms of defining coaching and understanding how it works.

Executive coaching is a relatively new phenomenon, although the practice of coaching goes back centuries.

Although the activities akin to what today's executive coaches do have been in existence for centuries (counselors, priests, confidants, therapists and psychoanalysts, etc. all having been involved in helping people guide their professional or personal lives and, hopefully, achieving their life or professional goals), the profession of an executive coach was virtually nonexistent until very recently. While it is still being formed and shaped, it has become a noticeable phenomenon both in terms of visibility and financial turnover (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009). Executive coaching is a professional activity that is normally undertaken after the person pursuing it has already experimented with or achieved success in some other profession (e.g., business and management, education, psychology, art, sports, etc.). It can be seen as an attractive occupation allowing incumbents (coaches or coaches-to-be) to regroup their previously obtained knowledge and developed competencies and use them in a new, creative way. At the time of putting together this business brief, coaching was also a non-regulated professional activity without any formal requirements or licenses to practice.

Nevertheless, judging by the acceptance of coaching services by individual executives and organizations at large, as well as by recently published research

on coaching (e.g., Kets de Vries, Korotov, & Florent-Treacy, 2007; Kets de Vries, Korotov, 2010; Guillen-Ramo, Korotov, & Florent-Treacy, forthcoming 2010;), coaches can play a powerful role in development of executives and creating successful organizations. Importantly, most of the executive coaches receive their fees from the organizations (there are still rather few cases when executives choose to pay coaching fees out of their own pocket), and the relationships between the coach, the organization, and a specific recipient of coaching services are managed by HR or Learning and Development professionals. The view on what coaching is, and how it can benefit the organization or the executive concerned, may, however, differ between various players involved.

Coutou & Kauffman (2009) stress that the field of coaching is full of contradictions, and that the active players in this field (coaches and observers of coaching as a profession) agree to disagree: there is no consensus on how the field can further progress to maturation. Still, somehow the magic of coaching is accepted. Coaches and those who have used coaching often simply say that "it works".

2. What do coaches say they sell?

This section presents a summary of statements about what coaches sell provided by participants of the 1st ESMT Coaching Colloquium (December 2009). We have explicitly asked coaches taking part in our Colloquium to put down a very short answer to the question “What Do You Sell As a Coach?” We have obtained 25 response cards from the coaches participating in our Colloquium. In most cases there were several answers on the cards returned to us.

Coaches say that they offer dedicated time, space, and a safe environment for their coachees. They say that they help develop awareness, and that they provide support to executives. They also say that they empathize with their coachees, and they challenge them. All that, the coaches believe, helps an executive become a more effective version of him- or herself.

2.1

Dedicated time, space, and safe environment

Many coaches in our sample have underlined that they sell an opportunity for the coachee to reflect on his or her professional and/or personal situation, to look at what they are doing, how they are doing it, and how they feel about it. For example, the coaches said that they offer to their clients:

- time for reflection through challenging questions;
- time for listening, asking, self, and reflection;
- an atmosphere of trust and respect;
- a space in which the coachee can gain insight and clarity into him/herself so he/she can move forward whenever he/she wants to move;

- a forum to share what is important and what will help the coachee become a more effective leader;
- “holding environment”; protected space; safe space; anxiety container
- confidence space.

Coaches claim to provide an “identity laboratory” (Korotov, 2005) - an environment that is demarcated spatially, temporarily, and psychologically to allow individuals move ahead in their professional and/or personal lives. For busy executives, coaches seem to offer a structured opportunity to look at the issues that require attention, time, and, very often, courage.

2.2 Awareness

A strong theme observed in the responses obtained from the coaches was their involvement in helping clients develop awareness.

Awareness can be seen as the executive’s ability to “read” oneself and others, assess the world (or elements thereof) around them, understand one’s place in the relations with others, and to see where one stands in relationships to ideals, goals, interests, etc.

The coaches, for example, have provided us with the following statements about what they “sell”:

- self awareness about personal drives and values;
- an external view/ the picture of how others see the coachee;
- assistance in orientation;
- becoming aware of business related topics and personal identity;
- creating insight and possibility for change;
- feedback.

2.3 Support

Coaches claim that they offer the recipients of their services support in finding solutions to the critical questions the latter face. In particular, our respondents pointed out that they:

- offer coachee support, when required;
- help individuals, groups, teams, or even whole organizations who need or want to perform differently, but are stuck in their attempt to do so;
- help the coachee stay on track with their commitments;
- change reinforcement.

The respondents seem to suggest that they help participants when the latter need psychological support in putting their ideas or intent forward

2.4

Empathy and challenge

The respondents indicated that they offer the coachee a non-judgmental person to talk to, someone with whom it is ok to share concerns, questions, dreams, and fears. But they do not just offer a shoulder to cry on, but rather challenge their coachees. Thus, our respondents have indicated that they offer:

- non-judgmental perception, listening, conversation;
- time, ear, hope, courage, loyalty, and trust;
- empathy;
- challenging questions;
- conversations that are personal.

2.5

A promise of a transformation opportunity

The coaches underline that they offer all of the above in order to help executives achieve a transformation, become more effective at work and beyond, and feel better about themselves. Thus, our respondents have mentioned that they offer:

- authenticity development;
- assistance in orientation;
- approaches to dealing with everyday professional and personal issues for individuals and groups;
- individual development;
- reaching personal business related goals;
- realizing identity-related business dreams;
- increased productivity;

- improved team-work;
- increased happiness.

3.

What do clients say they buy?

This section presents a summary of statements about what coaching clients buy. The answers were provided by participants of the 1st ESMT Coaching Colloquium (December 2009) who did not identify themselves as coaches. We have explicitly asked those Colloquium participants who use coaches (e.g., buy coaching services for their organizations) to put down a very short answer to the question “What Do You Buy from a Coach?” We have obtained 18 response cards from those who buy coaching services. In most cases there were several answers on the cards returned to us.

3.1

Awareness and sparring partnership

We have realized that many of those who buy coaching services for their organizations (and/or for themselves) would like to use a coach in order to help executives become aware of the issues related to their working environment and consequences of their actions. We have also noticed that a coach is very often expected to act as a sparring partner to discuss issues that are important for the coachee.

Awareness can be seen as the executive's ability to “read” oneself and others, assess the world (or elements thereof) around them, understand one's place in the relations with others, and to see where one stands in relationships to ideals, goals, interests, etc.

3.2

Dedicated time and space

As reflected in the responses of the buyers of coaching services, they also expect that a coaching engagement can provide them with the protected and dedicated time where they can take the luxury of thinking about important issues for which there is not enough time and/or energy under “normal” circumstances.

3.3

Solutions?—Absolutely! Solutions?—No way!

We have also noticed that some of the participants on the “buying” side of coaching were strongly advocating for buying coaching that brings solutions, while others adamantly denied such an expectation. Thus, apparently, some buyers expect that coaches would either provide solutions or help clients find their own, while others do not want the coach to “tell” the coachee what should be done, but rather prefer that they concentrate on getting the coachee to find his or her own ways to resolve issues at hand.

3.4

A happy (internal) customer

Reflecting the position of HR and learning and development professional as internal service providers, some of the responses suggested that at the end of the day the buyers of the coaching services want to keep their customers happy.

4. What's next?

In this section we call for further dialogue between the providers of coaching services and those who buy and/or use them

The sample of responses from the participants of the 1st ESMT Coaching Colloquium suggests that there is a variety of ways in which coaches describe what they do. There is also substantial variability among those who buy or use coaching services. Moreover, despite quite a lot of published definitions of what coaching is, the descriptions of what coaches sell and organizations or individuals buy suggest that there is still a lot of confusion about what coaching actually is (and what it is not).

We have put together this document as food for thought for further discussions in the coaching and HR and learning and development community. We would welcome your comments, thoughts, ideas, examples, stories, or research findings. Please contact us at coaching@esmt.org to engage in further discussions.

References

- Bernhardt, A. (2009) Leadership Coaching in Executive Education Programmen. In *Praxis der Wirtschaftspsychologie*, eds.T. Brandenburg and M. T. Thielsch, 251-266. Münster: MV-Verlag.
- Bono, J. E., Purvanova, R. K., Towler, A. J., and Peterson, D. B. (2009). A Survey Of Executive Coaching Practices. *Personnel Psychology* 62(2): 361-404.
- Coutu, D., and Kauffman, C. (2009). What Can Coaches Do for You? *Harvard Business Review* 87(1): 91-97.
- Kets de Vries, M., Korotov, K., and Florent-Treacy, E. (eds.) (2007). *Coach and Couch: The Psychology of Making Better Leaders*. Houndmills and New York: Palgrave.
- Kets de Vries, M., Guillen-Ramo, L., Korotov, K., and Florent-Treacy, E. (ed.) (Forthcoming). *The Coaching Kaleidoscope: Insights from the Inside*. Houndmills: Palgrave.
- Kilburg, R. R. (2000). *Executive Coaching: Developing Managerial Wisdom in a World of Chaos*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Korotov, K. (2010). Executive Coaches in Organizations: Insiders from Outside *Talent Management of Knowledge Workers*, ed.V. Vaiman, 180-196. Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan.

The authors

Prof. Konstantin Korotov, PhD is an associate professor of Organizational Behavior and Leadership at ESMT. He conducts research on leadership development, leadership transitions, identity, and executive coaching. He is an author, co-author, or editor of many academic and practitioner articles, books, special issues of journals, and book chapters dedicated to leadership development. With over 15 years of leadership development experience, he teaches, coaches, and consults worldwide.

Andreas Bernhardt is a program director and an executive coach at ESMT CS and is managing ESMT's pool of executive coaches. His research and consulting interests focus on leadership development, executive coaching and leading teams. He has roughly 20 years of practical leadership development and coaching experience and teaches and coaches in the area of Leadership and Organizational Behavior in executive programs with participants from more than 40 countries around the world.

Kate McCourt is a senior program manager at ESMT CS, specialized in the management and delivery of executive and leadership development programs, including executive coaching formats, for international senior executives. Additionally, she is Program Manager for the ESMT Annual Forum and directs the program series "Doing Business in Germany."

About ESMT

ESMT European School of Management and Technology was founded in October 2002 by 25 leading global companies and institutions. The international business school offers full-time MBA and executive MBA programs, executive education in the form of open enrollment and customized programs. The school also features in-house research-oriented consulting services. Members of ESMT's faculty come from a wide variety of international, academic, and professional backgrounds. ESMT's campus is located in the historical center of Berlin, with an additional location in Schloss Gracht near Cologne.

ESMT subsidiaries

ESMT Competition Analysis is working on central topics in the field of competition policy and regulation. These include case-related work on European competition matters, e.g., merger, antitrust, or state aid cases, economic analysis within regulatory procedures, and studies for international organizations on competition policy issues. ESMT CA applies rigorous economic thinking with a unique combination of creativity and robustness, in order to meet the highest quality standards of international clients. www.esmt.org/competition_analysis

ESMT Customized Solutions stands for designing and delivering customized programs that foster the development of a particular organization. For this purpose it pooled experts combining academic knowledge with capabilities to teach and consult. In addition, ESMT CS pursues an industry-focused rather than a functional approach, using forefront research with discipline-based knowledge and real-world implementation. www.esmt.org/customized_solutions

More Information:

ESMT European School of Management and Technology

Schlossplatz 1, 10178 Berlin, Germany

Phone: +49 (0) 30 212 31-0

Fax: +49 (0) 30 212 31-9

www.esmt.org



ESMT
European School of Management
and Technology GmbH

Schlossplatz 1
10178 Berlin
+49 (0) 30 212 31-0
+49 (0) 30 212 31-1279

www.esmt.org