

# Actuaries and executive coaching

Stuart McAdam puts executive coaching in an actuarial context.

**T**he actuarial profession is faced by an increasing range of challenges. Some are familiar, others require new tactics and strategies. However, despite the level of change and uncertainty, the use of executive coaching is still seen as somewhat unusual. Maybe we should not be too surprised that all actuaries are not embracing the concept and practice of executive coaching with open arms. After all, the actuarial profession has an established role in the way many aspects of business life are managed, underpinned by extremely rigorous selection criteria and an entirely proper concern over continuing professional education.

The world of executive coaching, on the other hand, no doubt appears to some as less transparent, with a bewildering array of qualifications and, thus far, an absence of any formalised regulation. There is also a degree of misunderstanding about the intent and scope of executive coaching. In particular, there are concerns that it is a remedial activity that is done *to* you. There may be a concern that a participant can somehow 'fail' at being coached. The reality is that the process presents an opportunity to take stock and then move forward. Rather than pass or fail, it represents an opportunity for a win in terms of increased awareness and commitment to take action.

The range of reasons cited by those purchasing executive coaching for themselves or for someone in their organisation is varied. However, the following macro factors are undoubtedly key drivers of the decision:

- ◆ organisations are becoming more complex and moving faster;
- ◆ boundaries and roles lack the clarity they once were perceived to possess;
- ◆ the management of workplace performance and assessment is non-negotiable;
- ◆ organisations are increasingly aware that pressure on results is potentially detrimental to the innovation and creativity necessary for future success;
- ◆ the particular pressures in partnership firms regarding the identification of potential partners and the transparency of the processes used;
- ◆ the need to keep talented people motivated.

There is also a range of challenges and opportunities facing individuals:

- ◆ the need to hit the ground running when moving into a new role and the critical importance of tuning in to the real agenda

as quickly as possible;

- ◆ an increasing number of high-potential individuals questioning what they really want from their career in terms of work-life balance.

## The coaching process

To allay some fears and misapprehensions here is a working definition of the executive coaching process:

- The process by which the coach uses appropriate listening and questioning skills to work with the participant to enable them to review and ultimately own solutions to issues upon which they seek resolution.

A participant observed that:

- ◆ 'It enabled me to hold up the mirror and look into it...the apparent lack of direction was a little disconcerting at the start; I had anticipated someone telling me what to do'.

Executive coaching cannot work through imposition, instead the coaching process provides a playground where it is ok to explore what works and what does not, free of the concerns that many senior professionals have about acknowledging any fallibility. This is of particular relevance to professional groups such as actuaries where historically technical excellence was the entry ticket to advancement. In recent years the need for technical excellence has been shown to be of even more importance, but so has the importance of those softer skills that need to be deployed to maximum effect to manage a team, business, or even an appearance on *Panorama!*

One author has likened it to 'guided self-exploration', and herein lies another issue: executive coaching is not a quick fix and neither is the process particularly visible to anyone but the participant – at least in the early stages. Indeed a key issue for the coach, the participant and their organisation is absolute clarity about what gets reported on by whom and to whom. It is equally important to scope out what 'success' may look like after six or more coaching sessions spread over a number of months. The 80/20 rule applies here: while the key feature of any executive coaching programme is the coaching sessions themselves, if the purpose of the intervention is not clear, disappointment is inevitable. Furthermore executive coaching may not be the appropriate response. So please avoid the 'Bermuda triangle' into which good intentions sink by ensuring that coach, participant, and sponsor do sit down together to explore the purpose and likely outcomes.



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Unlike consultancy, which an organisation may commission on behalf of the business, executive coaching just will not work without the active commitment of the participant. The tools used are conversation and reflection with a pause between each coaching session to practise and reflect on the difference a new approach may have produced. Other useful ways of getting feedback – on how you are rather than how you seem – are 360-degree feedback and psychometrics.

This 'pause' is critically important. The power of the executive coaching sessions is invariably shown as an individual puts a toe in the water and starts to do some of the things they committed to at their last session.

### The coach

A good coach will have a repertoire of approaches to help the participant review their situation. Additionally, they need:

- ◆ to know themselves, their strengths, and their limitations;
- ◆ to have completed a professional training programme;
- ◆ to understand the organisational context in which executive coaching takes place;
- ◆ to be passionate about learning from their work along with an innate sense of curiosity.

The latter point is particularly important, since the intuition a coach brings to a coaching session and the questions this may produce can help a participant look at their situation in a new light.

### Consider the benefits

What are the themes that are likely to provoke an actuary to consider the benefits of working with an executive coach?

■ *A confidant(e) with whom to share thoughts, concerns, and aspirations during the first three months in a new role.* Many individuals comment on the fact that a new role 'was not quite what I expected when I accepted the job'. The comment is often made by individuals moving up within their own organisation. The first hundred days can be lonely as well as exciting; executive coaching can help ensure a sense of perspective is present.

■ *An international assignee wanting the opportunity to reflect on the challenges a new location and culture can present.* Unfortunately much of the effort into moving key people and their families from one unit to another focuses on tax advice, logistics, and schools. Clearly these are important; however, so is recognising that the individual is likely to have a wide range of issues that they cannot review with their old boss and may not be ready to surface with their new boss.

Taking work issues home to a family that is also settling in is also a challenge.

■ *A neutral sparring partner with whom to test out ways of managing a team when one's primary experience has been technical management.* Despite the vast amount of literature on competencies, many managers do not get too much practical help in how to manage people. Neither do they always get feedback in a way that helps them to see how they come across to others as managers. Executive coaching can provide a great opportunity to open a window on oneself in an entirely safe environment and work on achieving a greater understanding of the behaviours required to shift one's own performance and that of the team.

■ *A little used opportunity is in the area of project management.* As the scale and impact of project working increases, so does the cost of failure or late delivery. And despite increasingly sophisticated reporting frameworks it remains all too easy for the feelings of a project team about the barriers to success to go unresolved. As one manager noted:

◆ 'Would a coach have helped... it's difficult to know for sure, but more openness about what we didn't know would have made a tremendous difference at the start... so would coaching to ensure we clearly understood our roles. Our sponsor clearly thought their role was simply to give a regular pep talk rather than constructively challenge our planning assumptions.'

There are undoubtedly many other reasons. Some of the most strident and credible advocates of executive coaching are people who have benefited from the process personally. It may well be that the profession has yet to achieve a critical mass of such people and the ensuing awareness that will increase understanding. This is important, since in the experience of the author, actuaries do need to fully satisfy themselves of the way the executive coaching process works; the approach likely to be adopted; and what it's done for other participants. Having done this, they then commit wholeheartedly to the process. There's nothing wrong with this – it's certainly preferable to someone deciding that they need an executive coach 'because other people at my level have them!' Furthermore even the most plausible advocate will admit that explaining what executive coaching can and cannot do is certainly not as straightforward as turning up at a beauty parade to pitch for actuarial work! □

**Figure 1** The 80/20 of executive coaching

