

Hiring a Coach: Is it Right for You?

By Nicki Roth, Co-founder, Saroga: The Nonprofit Leadership Forum

Hiring an executive coach can help you grow as a leader in ways that few other resources can provide.

In a 2011 Compasspoint report titled *Daring to Lead*, over 3,000 nonprofit executives were surveyed about the challenges they face. Among their top three recommendations for supporting their development as leaders was expanding the use of executive coaches. Respondents in the study overwhelmingly cited coaching as one of the most effective developmental resources especially when coupled with peer networks. That said, a small percentage of leaders actually had a coach. This begs several questions. What is coaching? When do you need it? How can you make the most of it? And why aren't more executive directors engaging a coach?

What Is Coaching?

Since coaching as a profession is unregulated and no one has to pass exams or get licensed, let me start with a good working definition. A coach is someone who facilitates your professional growth so that you become a more effective leader. An experienced coach has deep knowledge of human behavior, leadership, and your particular sector or field, in this case, familiarity with nonprofit organizations. In some cases the coach has been an executive and brings that insight to bear. A coach is not a friend or a mentor or a therapist. Coaching is a formal arrangement with only professional objectives in mind.

The process of coaching is a series of regular meetings where you have the opportunity to privately raise challenging dilemmas, gain insight through meaningful discussions, and rehearse and refine new behaviors. Two or three goals are determined at the beginning and it is expected that, within several months, you will receive positive feedback for improved leadership actions. As much as possible, the coach draws out your best thinking and supports your efforts to try new things. When you get stuck or limited in your thinking, the coach will offer additional perspectives and solutions.

When Do You Need a Coach?

The simple answer is whenever you desire to grow as a leader. You or your board will know when you have stalled in your trajectory, when you have been doing well but see untapped potential to unleash, or when organizational demands require new skills. You also may feel like you missed some formal leadership training, and coaching seems to be a good way to make up for lost training opportunities. As I mentioned in my last article on [360s](#), coaching also is a good way to digest feedback and to enact a professional growth plan. It is especially effective during your first year as a newly appointed executive director. At its most powerful, coaching is done when you're doing a good job but would be even more effective with some additional growth as a leader.

How Can Coaching Make A Difference?

When working with a coach, you need to bring your issues, doubts, questions, and receptivity to feedback to get the most from the experience. If you call upon a coach after a poor performance review or tough 360 feedback process, the outcomes are more uneven. If you're struggling but are eager to learn how to do a better job, a coach can be ideal. The coach is a safe person to offer an intensive tutorial in leadership and executive presence. But if you are not a good organizational fit or mistrusted or unreceptive to feedback or introspection, then coaching will not fix that.

Consider this example. When Victor was hired to become the next executive director of a spiritually based nonprofit, the board chair and recruiter baked into the transition plan the cost of a coach. They felt strongly that any new person walking into this organization would face some unique challenges and they wanted to ensure Victor's success.

After the preliminary introductions and credential sharing, Victor and I, as his coach, got right to the heart of his concerns. He had been on the executive team for three years already and knew that some dramatic changes needed to be made to create a financially and culturally healthier environment. These modifications would significantly improve the attendees' experience and Victor had the board's support to do what was necessary in his new position.

Victor had years of successful management and leadership experiences, so our work focused on which of those skills would be most useful in this new position and what new approaches would be needed. Our conversations centered on leading a culture change with a very entrenched staff. Our conversations over the course of a year were rich, multidimensional, and practical. Victor tried many tactics, vented his irritation, asked tough and poignant questions, tried more new actions, and reflected on what worked and what didn't. Slowly but surely the culture began to

change, the board was thrilled, and Victor began to feel positive momentum for the organization and more satisfied in his role.

Over the months that we worked together we paused to assess our progress and the usefulness of the coaching. Victor remarked, “I can’t talk about these things anywhere else. As great as my board chair and my team members are, I can’t say these things out loud to them. I need the privacy of this relationship to say all the frustrating things. I need to bring positive energy, solutions, and confidence to them. These conversations help me clear my head, test my thinking, simmer down, and have a plan for leading the organization in new directions.”

Why Aren’t Executive Coaches Used More Frequently?

Coaches can be very beneficial to a nonprofit leader’s professional growth, but historically nonprofits and funders alike have been reluctant to spend time and money on leadership development. Funding is routinely earmarked for programs, so there is little thought or resources devoted to talent development. In conversation and in theory, foundations, boards, and leaders all declare the importance of effective leadership, but when tough financial choices are being made, this issue drops off the list.

Here is a place where nonprofits could take a valuable lesson from the for-profit world. Although the methodologies and programs have changed over the years, leadership development is a line item on the annual budget. It gets bigger or smaller depending on financial performance, but it rarely gets deleted. Corporations understand that great leadership is a differentiator that can make the difference between decent or amazing results. And coaching is an especially effective development tool for senior leaders because it is private, intensive, customized, and leads to observable behavior changes. Nonprofits need to think this way, too.

Conclusion

Numerous studies have shown that an investment in [high-impact leadership development](#) has a multiplying effect on achieving or exceeding organizational goals.

Coaching, in particular, is a unique opportunity to meet regularly with someone whose only purpose is to help you be wildly successful. The coach brings insights, new ideas, recommendations, and stories about other leaders who have traveled the same path. What you need to bring to the conversation is your willingness to learn and experiment with new behaviors. Describe tough issues that cause you to stumble and strengths that work well. You need to go beyond venting about a frustrating situation and be open to new perspectives and new actions in an effort to best develop yourself and to add value to your organization.

In other words, you need to challenge yourself to share your vulnerabilities and try some new behaviors that will feel awkward at first. If you are earnest in your efforts you will experience moments of greater effectiveness that will motivate you to keep learning. Once you see how a few changes can make a big difference you will be hooked. That's when the fun and accelerated learning kicks in.

Guidelines For Selecting A Coach

1. **Get recommendations from colleagues who have had success with a coach.** Get several referrals and set up interviews with each one. It's like finding a doctor; you can find one on Google but it's better to hear about someone's experiences with a practitioner.
2. **During the interview, ask probing questions.** What is your measure of success? What can I expect during our conversations? Tell me how you helped someone else. What if this doesn't work? Are you going to talk with my board chair? How would you address my specific issue?
3. **Connecting with a coach is critical but not especially scientific.** Does this person listen? Do you believe she or he can help with your particular situation? Can you see yourself trusting this person? Will you be comfortable exposing your vulnerabilities? Ultimately the decision is more intuitive. Do you click with this person? Is the chemistry right for you?
4. **Explore knowledge and logistics.** Most coaches spend their time in for-profit organizations. Be sure that your coach is well versed in the nuances of the nonprofit world. Inquire about scheduling flexibility because things can change on a dime in your routine. Ask about phone, email, and Skype access. Discuss fees and negotiate, if necessary. Get clarification on frequency of meetings and contract terms. Common practice for many coaches is to meet once or twice a month for 1.5-2 hours over the course of 6-9 months. Most coaches will have standard practices in all these areas but are open to fit your needs.



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