

Executive Coaching: Optimizing the Potential of Healthcare Leaders

“Executive coaches are not for the meek. They’re for people who value unambiguous feedback. All coaches have one thing in common, it’s that they are ruthlessly results-oriented.”

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“Coaching is a collaborative partnership that focuses on the client’s success. A coach works with clients to increase their self awareness, identify and deepen their values, discover what compels them to make changes in their lives, look at life/work balance, develop clarity and focus, create structures for accountability and achieve desired outcomes.”

Betty Till
LifeWork Solutions

Have you ever wondered why top athletes like Tiger Woods and Michelle Kwan still use coaches, and why they would even need them? Why do they spend good money on coaches when there are very few people in the world who can match their ability and skill? There likely isn’t a coach who could golf as well as Woods or even come close to skating as well as Kwan, but these athletes rely on coaches daily. The answer is simple, according to coaching advocates: coaches are there to observe, to find the blind spots that escape their clients, and to help these great athletes work from their strengths to overcome barriers that could keep them from attaining the level of excellence they seek.

The same is being said of executive coaching, which is taking hold in corporate America. A recent survey by the Hay Group found that from 25 percent to 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies use executive coaches. In a study published last year by the consulting firm Manchester USA, executives from Fortune 1,000 companies who had experienced

executive coaching for periods of six months to one year were asked to estimate the financial payback from the experience. The average response was that executive coaching had resulted in \$100,000 in savings. This average savings was six times the average cost of the coaching. Another study conducted in late 2001 by MetrixGlobal found a 788 percent return on investment from executive, with a majority of respondents reporting gains in productivity and employee satisfaction.

Healthcare Leadership & Management Report talked with Betty Till, an executive coach who works with a range of clients in and out of health care. She has worked with physicians, hospitals and large high-tech companies. Throughout her own career, which includes positions as executive vice president and president of communication, healthcare and educational organizations, she has coached and counseled executives, managers and employees on creating impact, communicating effectively, creating alliances, balancing life and work, and personal choices. She has





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taken that experience and turned it into a private telephone-based coaching practice out of Belmont, Calif.

People often ask what the difference is between coaching and therapy, and coaching and consulting. Till says that therapy is about healing and recovery, and looking retrospectively at why something happened. Coaching on the other hand, looks at where the people are presently and where they want to go and what they want to do in the future. She says that coaching is also different from consulting. Till said a consultant is usually called in to deal with a problem, and a consultant is usually expert in dealing with a particular niche wherein the problem lies. The consultant usually studies the situation, presents a report with recommendations and then either gets started on an implementation plan or recommends that the organization hire someone else to implement the recommendations. Till said the coach, on the other hand, “provides guidance to unlock the client’s potential to solve the problem.”

Why do Organizations Hire Coaches?

In health care, consultants are often called in when there are inefficiencies or serious management problems, and heads sometimes roll as a result. For that reason, people may have the impression that executive coaching is employed only with problematic individuals. However, Till says that in her experience, executive coaches are usually called into an organization to assist executives and managers for whom senior management has respect for their leadership potential, but are

aware that they need guidance in certain areas to realize that potential.

“This is not a way of getting rid of people,” Till said. “Coaching is absolutely not for that.”

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Till has published the following description of executive coaching to her Web site, www.lifeworksolutions.com:

“Coaching is a collaborative partnership that focuses on the client’s success. A coach works with clients to increase their self awareness, identify and deepen their values, discover what compels them to make changes in their lives, look at life/work balance, develop clarity and focus, create structures for accountability and achieve desired outcomes. A coach works with clients to recognize perspectives and make informed choices.

“In each meeting, the client chooses the focus of conversation, while the coach listens and contributes observations and questions. This interaction creates clarity and moves the client into action. Coaching accelerates the client’s progress by providing greater focus and awareness of choice. Coaching concentrates on where clients are today and what they are willing to do to get where they want to be tomorrow.”

Till says that sometimes individuals request coaching, because they realize the value it can have for them, especially

in transitions. “I want to emphasize that coaching is not only for performance or for when there is a problem,” Till said. “It is often used for when people are moving to that next level, and they are a little unsure of themselves.”

Till says she is usually called into an organization by the CEO or the human resources department. “Most of the time it is because they have someone who is

intelligent and a high-performer and they want this person to succeed,” Till said. “In one case, a client called me in because they had a new physician that they really liked and wanted to hire. But they wondered if he was going to have the will to push back against their current medical staff, which was very strong and aggressive.” Till worked for more than a year with the physician to help this transition go smoothly.

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“Studies continually find that once a person feels their pay is fair, the next most important variable people give as a reason for staying is the quality of their manager,” Till said. “It really doesn’t matter how many benefits you provide, for the employee, it really comes down to, ‘What is the relationship that I have with the leadership in this organization.’”

Till said that in her work she deals with helping clients improve the perceptions that people have of them, some of which are false impressions that are created by the style of the person. With one physician client, who is a medical director, there was the perception among the staff that the



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physician was not following through on projects and was not taking charge. Till discovered that this was more a perception than a reality. “He was doing the right things, but he just wasn’t communicating that fact effectively to the people around him,” Till said. “So one of the things I’m working on with him is improving the perception of following through. We’re working on creating action plans and ways of continually communicating to hospital administration and his own people about what he has accomplished.”

Till said she has found that there are three universal areas that all leaders are always challenged to work on: their communication skills, their listening skills and their ability to manage through change. Executive coaching involves working intensely with the client involved, in part through gathering feedback from the people around them. As a result, communicating, listening, and adapting to change become more effective.

“As leaders and executives move up in the organization, there is less opportunity for honest, direct feedback from their colleagues and co-workers,” Till said. “So having a coach to solicit feedback is extremely important.”

This is why she believes the coaching process should begin with a baseline personal assessment of where the executive stands. This assessment is derived from the 360-degree feedback method, and from a self-assessment conducted by the client. Part of the assessment includes how the client defines success, what are some of the challenges they face in their job over the next six to 12 months, and what are some of their blind spots—things that they do not typically see that

happen in the organization. The 360 degree survey assesses the client's behavior on the job against a set of competencies required for success. The surveys are distributed and completed by people from all around the client—supervisors, peers, and direct reports. Till said the resulting

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multiple responses, including the self-assessment, provide valuable insight and feedback on how others view the client's actual performance on the job.

Till said that when the feedback from these assessments is presented to the client by their coach, a neutral party, the result is usually eye-opening in not only what the major concerns are, but in what people perceive as the client's strengths. One of the goals in coaching, Till says, is to work from the strengths of the person to find solutions.

Often there is a clash of perceptions that causes concerns, Till said. This is often the result of various personal styles and how those styles are communicated. In one case, the perception of the people around one executive was that he was far too demanding. His perception, however, was that he was decisive. The client, after taking the widely-used Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) assessment turns out to be an ENTJ—a common type among organizational leaders.

“You have to help them realize that an ENTJ personality style can often be perceived as demanding, and yet they

are very logical and intuitive, and most of the time they *do* have the right answers,” Till said. “However, it’s the way they communicate that totally shuts down everything.. It’s all about coming back and being able to communicate within your style, even though it may be different from others.”

Working with an executive coach is not for the fainthearted. Sometimes the feedback comes back with the stinging implication that the person in question is the problem. “You have to just tell them that this

is what people are saying about you: don’t follow through, you’re demanding, you miss meetings, you don’t see the seriousness of the job, the staff feels like you’re micromanaging them and that there is no career development here for them,” Till said. “The blunt honesty of that kind of feedback presented in confidence is what creates the foundation of my relationship with them. I can refer back to that feedback throughout our coaching relationship.”

She said that she also works with physicians and others who are making that often rocky transition from the clinical or frontline environment to an executive role. “The challenge here is how you move from the tactical, get-the-job-done, immediate problem-solving mode into more strategic thinking mode.” She recalled the axiom that as one moves up in an organization, it is no longer what one does that matters, but what one gets done through others. Till says this leap is a key step that benefits most leadership clients in executive coaching.

Then there is the question of whether the person is ready to move



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up in the organization or truly wants to do so. Till has worked with people who have made that step and then found out that it was not where they wanted to be. She has also worked with clients who are getting ready to take on a promotion. She said situations such as these point out the difference between coaching and consulting. “It’s different from consulting,” she said, “because in the coaching process I’m asking thought-provoking questions of people about whether they really want this, what will their life be like, and what will they get out of moving up. I want them to think about what their underlying reason is for moving up and have them be very clear on that before they do it, so that they can have a more fulfilling role. And if they have already made a choice that they now regret, we work on what they do about that.”

Part of this process includes satisfaction assessments, some of which attempt to determine the balance of personal and professional satisfaction in a person’s life, including issues such as money, professional development, fun and recreation, health and personal relationships. “Often we focus on a particular area of our lives for a while, but ultimately, unless we attend to all areas, the progress we have made in that one area creates imbalance,” Till said. “Once one thing gets out of balance, everything else tends to get out of balance.”

Till believes such balance is critical to healthcare organizations, especially because of the current stressful environment of worker shortages, increased emphasis on patient satisfaction, financial losses and other

issues. “When you’re under stress from things like that, you tend to react and maybe lash out at staff, then patients see the effects of that, you get poor scores, and it creates a circle that makes you more and more frustrated,” Till said.

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“Healthcare leaders need to be constantly thinking strategically and having a bigger picture, and that’s hard to do when you are locked in your office all day long and dealing with problems right and left. It’s very difficult to be creative when you’re in that environment. For many, their creative and strategic thinking does not occur in their office. It occurs when they’re on the golf course or out on a morning run. So it’s important for me to work with them to carve out time that they consider their strategic thinking time.”

Till said that there are particular challenges for women executives and managers. “One of the top complaints about women moving up in organizations is that they’re not strategic enough,” Till said. “Women tend to roll up their sleeves and get in there and do the work. The thing that got them promoted so far was because of everything they did, and got done, and now that they’re trying to move up to the next level, that’s a hard thing to let go of. They often need to learn to delegate more effectively.” She said much the same is true for physicians—male or female—who move into leadership and need to come to the

realization that “their clinical prowess will no longer move them forward.”

As a coach, Till also values feedback on her own effectiveness. A recent assessment from a physician leader of her work tells the story of what the goal of coaching is: “When I was named medical director in a new hospital I didn’t know anyone there. Suddenly I had to start over, even though I had 20 years of experience as a medical director. I was struggling and having little success

convincing the administration to listen to my advice. My coach focused me on one task after another, and suddenly I began to succeed in every direction. She helped me apply my strengths and pointed out my weaknesses. I would rate our interaction as the most effective catalyst for professional development in my entire career.”

Till explained the situation with this medical director: “This is a seasoned physician who came into a hospital that had a lot of problems,” she said. “He came in with this ‘how I’m going to fix it’ attitude, and the truth is he was probably right about a lot of things, but he forgot to build the relationship first.” Her job was then to guide him into stepping back, improving his communication and listening, and doing simple things, such as working on eye contact and asking questions to solicit feedback. All of this helped him gain acceptance for the things he was trying to accomplish, according to Till.

Through her work, Till has found that perception problems often result from an individual’s skills in the art of communicating what they do, who they are, and what they accomplish for the organization. “Sometimes my clients will



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have a high performer that they feel needs to get more visibility,” she said. “They’re great, they’re brilliant, they’re smart, but nobody knows what they do. So how do we bring that person to the next level of visibility in the organization? Again, it comes back to communicating, listening, and sometimes even creating a presentation and delivering it. Some people believe there is such a negative connotation about promoting themselves, that they don’t even want to go there. So you have to convince them that promoting not only themselves, but their team, is a way to get themselves more visibility so they can have more impact and create better outcomes later on.”

She said that clients also need to make the people around them aware of the fact that they are working through the process. She encourages her clients to communicate effectively that they are currently working with an executive coach to resolve some of the issues that came up in the process of collecting the confidential feedback, and to ask them for their assistance in calling it to their

attention when they appear to be micromanaging, for example, or letting them know when they’re no longer doing it.

It has been said that the goal of coaching is about discovering and creating, and the role of the coach is to help clients uncover their own answers.

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Because of this, the ability to truly listen is a key skill for an executive coach, according to Till. She said the difference in having a friend, a family member or a coworker listening to the person is that the executive coach is focused entirely on the future success of the person, and is evaluating dialogue based on a myriad of questions that need to be answered in order to gain clarity in achieving that future success. “My listening is coupled with a host of questions about helping my client to develop clarity,” Till said. “Once they get clear on what it is they

want and what they want to do, they’re like a laser, and things start happening.”

Till says that people often ask whether executive coaches need to have a particular expertise in an industry in order to coach in them. Her answer is no. “The client has the content,” Till says. “In consulting you may have to be an expert in a certain field, but in coaching, it’s really about the coaching process—the artful questions, the listening, being curious, and managing the perceptions of people is what helps the client.”

Till went back to the analogy of why a star athlete needs a coach. “They have all of that innate ability,” Till said, “but what the coach provides is someone to look alongside them and say, ‘Do you notice that every time you do that, you drop your shoulder?’ And the coach asks, ‘Did you want to do that?’ And maybe they did want to drop their shoulder, but did they notice that they were doing that, and did they think about the impact that action might have on their future success?”

“My job is to help my clients help themselves,” Till said.

Betty Till is the president of LifeWork Solutions. Her clients include physician executives, managers, entrepreneurs, and other professionals. She is a Certified Professional Co-Active Coach (COPCC) She also holds a bachelor of science in nursing from the University of Texas at Austin. She is a member of the International Coach Federation (ICF), an organization which establishes industry standards to ensure the highest level of professionalism in coaching. She is also a member of the Professional Coaches and Mentoring Association and the Institute of Management Consultants.

