



## ***EXECUTIVE COACHING FOR BUSINESS SUCCESS – Case Study***

Dennis Preston – HDA Senior Coach

There are times when coaching doesn't work. Executive Coaching must be linked to the business strategy, goals and outcomes of the organisation. If this doesn't happen and the coaching assignment is built only on the executive's personal goals - or just helping them feel good about themselves - coaching will have failed. Why? Companies quite rightly expect a solid return on their investment in executive coaching – the days are gone when coaching can be seen as just another executive perk. So it follows that the executive being coached must be able to articulate clear business goals for themselves and their team. With this as a starting point, the coach can help build a clear plan of action that is business-driven.

A good executive coach will start a business relationship with a careful analysis of the company's business strategy. Then they will help the executive articulate the most important current business goals that they need to focus on in the coming period. The next step is to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the executive, what they want to get out of coaching – personal goals – and jointly agree a plan of action. The personal goals must follow the business goals for coaching to provide an effective pay back to the business.

### ***EXAMPLE***

A newly appointed Head of Marketing for a large manufacturing company was assigned an executive coach as part of the company scheme. The last thing he wanted was 'to have his head filled with big ideas'. 'I have goals to meet and I need help with two things' he said. 'First, we need to achieve 7% market growth in 2005. Second, my team needs to increase its productivity by 15%.' The coach used that clear statement of business goals to explore the change in behaviours and performance that would help the executive achieve them.

It was at this stage that an interesting issue emerged. The executive wanted to improve his communication skills, particularly to his team. He spent so much of his time

preparing for team meetings and sending out long and rambling notes to team members, often too late for them to respond to. His team were frustrated with him and he had to spend even more time recovering from situations caused by his poor communication skills. Inadvertently, he was helping undermine the team's performance and achievement of business targets. He felt that improving his communication skills would be a good personal goal for the time spent with his executive coach. His coach disagreed!

After an analysis of team strengths and further exploration into the executive's strengths and job responsibilities, it became clear that a smart option was to persuade the executive to delegate the task of team communications to his deputy, who was especially skilled in this area. This was not easy for the executive to accept. In fact he did not want to let go of his communication responsibilities. The coach had to be blunt and put the situation into the business context. 'The team will not reach its 15% productivity targets if you keep sending unclear messages before and after important meetings' the coach said. 'You are good at setting the goals and team targets but it would save you a lot of time and grief if you let someone else deal with the communications' By accepting this, the executive recognised he had true strengths that were important and needed to be built on. But most importantly, he could afford to delegate a part of his job that he knew was a weakness and move on rapidly to achieving his business goals.

In three months – half way through the coaching assignment – the executive and his team were almost hitting their new productivity target and by concentrating his efforts on the customers and market – rather than on team communications – the executive was more than half way to the annual 7% market growth target.

An effective executive coach will have three qualities. First, they will be skilled at the key interpersonal skills of listening, influencing and delivering feedback. Second, they will be trustworthy and able to navigate the often tricky boundaries of confidentiality. Third, they must have a sufficient understanding and experience of business at a level at least the same as the executives they are coaching. To really help executives and business grow they will operate at the edge of executive tolerance, judging how far to push to achieve change. Coaching is about helping people achieve change and change is sometimes uncomfortable.

An executive coach measures success by seeing a change in the executive's performance that contributes to the success of the organisation. Those are the times when coaching does work!

---

## More on Dennis Preston



Dennis Preston is Senior Consultant with HDA, with a focus on developing HDA's business coaching and organisational change capabilities - and a special emphasis on thought-leadership - and the development of new consultancy solutions in these areas.

Preston has been involved in business for more than 30 years and most of his roles have included some responsibility for change, including accountability for both the commercial/strategic and people elements of change. He has worked at director-level for a range of large multinationals, in roles ranging from Head of Training and Development, to Director of Strategy and Planning, and Director of Management Services. He has held key roles in the London Stock Exchange, Bank of England, Abbey National, Orn Capital, Stiell plc, FT Knowledge Ltd, William M Mercer, Dresdner Kleinwort Benson and Marsh Insurance Services - and has delivered human capital projects in the UK, Japan, Hong Kong and the USA.

He is a member of MENSA and is non-executive director on a number of Boards.

---