



tom brown
inside
leadership

The Case For Coaching

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To Donna Martin, the energetic, fast-moving Vice President of Human Resources for Ameren Corporation, it's clearly a matter of "challenging yourself and your own thinking." She says that having a coach "can make the difference between being a good executive — and a great one."

To Jim Hahn, who, over 20 years, has built Omni Graphics into a powerhouse small business centered on rapid delivery of high-quality printing jobs for dozens, if not hundreds, of other small businesses, it's a matter of reaching out to gain perspective. "I was totally stressed over an employee issue. I had lost perspective. I was losing days of personal productivity. With just a few words spoken to me in private, my management coach set me on a course of thinking that has governed my business life ever since."

To Larry Brotzge, who for more than three decades has worked at the top rungs of financial management and who has served as both Controller and Chief Financial Officer in Fortune 500 companies, it's being able to hear "what's it's *really* all about" when it comes to personal performance. "It means more when you get direct feedback from a coach who has no other agenda within the corporation than telling you the truth."

Executive coaching has evolved from a fad concept into an established practice that bolsters the best practices of managers in organizations large and small, in for-profit as well as not-for-profit enterprises. And while there are now many books, tapes, and articles, the case for personal coaching can be refined into three compelling arguments.

1. Coaches provide critical feedback.

Anyone in a leadership position runs a huge risk if the only information he or she operates on is self-generated. A big ego is a very bad compass. Thus, coaches are not only a sounding board for confidential discussion, they can also discreetly collect information about how others view a top manager.

After 11 years working for one of the “Big Four” accounting firms and another 16 years as a corporate controller or CFO, Larry Brotzge was used to giving feedback to others. “I used to tell members of my staff that if they were in a management role, it was part of their basic management job to give their subordinates solid and complete performance appraisals. Giving good feedback to others is an important, fundamental part of your management responsibilities!” But it did not take long for Larry to realize that *getting* good feedback is just as important as giving it.

And he realized that sometimes being a top manager can be a disadvantage if others above, beside, or below you in the organization won’t share honest opinions about how you are doing in your job and in your professional relationships. “I really believe what someone once said: that feedback is a gift. To get blunt, candid information about how you are performing or how you are relating to others — what could be better than that? It may not feel like a gift when you’re getting honest feedback, but it is invaluable.”

Larry recalls the time when a coach shared that, as a manager, he was getting too riled up in business meetings. “It’s one thing to become irritated, it’s another thing to become visibly angry,” the coach volunteered. Another time, the coach helped Larry come to grips with some 360-degree data he had received. “People were handicapping my leadership skills because they felt I was a poor listener; they felt that I didn’t care about their opinions.” Larry was startled by the feedback, so he moved quickly on it, converting it into a personal development plan.

“That feedback, from the coach and from others, helped me not only perform better at work but also at home, with my wife and children. I have worked on my listening skills and on showing how much I care — not just stressing to others what I expect

from them. I'm a much better leader today." Larry, who lives in Philadelphia, is now a successful advisor in the venture capital arena. "What's special about any coach is that they have your best interests at heart, and thus they can share whatever thoughts they have about how much better you could be doing in areas that truly count," he says.

2. Coaches help you to set high yet realistic goals.

Good managers are, quite often, ambitious, hard-working, and hard-driving people. While the best coaches are not themselves "on the playing field," they nonetheless influence who consistently wins by helping top performers to set the next level of performance.

"Let's be candid. Anyone who is already at the top of their organization or their chosen profession has already grown substantially," says Donna Martin of Ameren, the major electric utility that serves a large Midwest area and is headquartered in St. Louis.

"To be a top manager means that you are, to a great extent, a developed manager." But Donna says that there is no surer path to a career collision than becoming self-complacent. "Someone has to be there who can challenge you and your own thinking about where to go next," she says.

"Once you're in the executive ranks, it's often very hard to find others to help you set a course for your own future as well as the future of the enterprise. People in the organization either fear that you don't want to hear their ideas, or they aren't fully aware of all the possibilities that you are willing to entertain."

Thus, says Donna, having an executive coach is the ultimate in self-growth and self-development. "A coach helps you set the bar higher," she says, "if that truly makes sense for you and for the people you are leading."

3. Coaches keep you in balance.

"It was ten years ago or more, and I was totally stressed over some very challenging problems with an employee," Hahn says. The details of the situation aren't nearly as important as how he was coping with the situation. Hahn recalls that it was

hard for him to focus on the total state of his Louisville-based business or the total morale of his work team because he was transfixed on a single workplace crisis. He wanted to “fix” his employee problem and to make sure it never, ever, happened again.

“My view of management at the time was framed by three imperatives,” Hahn says: “Get it right. Keep it right. And don’t mess up. And that frame of mind is exactly what limited my options at the time; I had a limited point of view of what the job of top manager was really all about.”

Hahn says he learned a lot when a coach he trusted shared just three words. “Instead of getting it right all the time, I had to master how to manage *change*. Instead of keeping a fragile status quo fixed for all time, I had to *learn* about new horizons. And instead of living life as if each mistake was going to be fatal, I had to *grow*, to improve myself and my business by building on both what’s working well now and what’s not working at all.”

Hahn says that it might sound odd to someone who’s never worked with a trusted confidant, but the “three simple words” offered by his coach during a workplace crisis actually gave him a new sense of balance that he now employs both on-the-job — and off. “Change, learn, grow,” Hahn says, “is how I try to run my life in both a business *and* personal sense. I feel better about things in general because these three words have been my personal compass ever since.”

The Case — *From A Coach*

One other perspective that should be covered here is how a top executive coach actually views the work he or she does. To Jerry Tucker, formerly Chief Learning Officer for GTE worldwide and now a master coach, it’s a matter of helping high performers achieve the next level of performance. “Take any Olympic athlete,” he says. “They might be the best in their field. There’s literally no one better, anywhere. Yet, there, on the sidelines, is a coach urging and caring and guiding that athlete to strive to be even better.”

“In my GTE days, I was considered a top manager by many others, but I relished those moments when I could bounce ideas

off others and learn, honestly, whether my latest thinking was good thinking,” says Tucker. “As I watched coaching grow into a respected profession,” he adds, “I realized that much of the reason for its success is that it helps a manager to become aware of who they are and what others think of them.”

Tucker also notes that, in this way, coaches help managers improve relationships with peers as well as with others up and down the organizational ladder. “Know thyself” is classic wisdom, but today it takes more than your own knowledge to understand your own strengths and shortfalls. The guiding hand of a coach is thus indispensable. Which may explain why, when Tucker retired from almost four decades of service to GTE, he co-founded Global Coaching, based in Tucson, Arizona, in order to help set the standards for solid professional coaching.

The best coaches thus bolster a manager’s sense of self-esteem by helping managers to balance their appreciation for their workers — and their families, to balance their understanding of their own business — and what’s happening in the larger marketplace, to balance their appreciation for their career — and for the rest of their personal life.

And while many managers pride themselves on being “self-made” success stories, such statements are often just that: fictional stories. The best executives learn early on that success is more likely to come when the struggle to succeed isn’t engaged alone. By having an experienced coach to give feedback, to set sights on achievable challenges, and to keep one’s balance while pursuing each career prospect, top managers can actually get to the top — and be healthier and happier while getting there.

Tom Brown is a champion of vanguard thinking about leadership. The author of hundreds of articles, he also wrote the first online book on leadership: *The Anatomy Of Fire: Sparking A New Spirit Of Enterprise*, which explores the look and feel of leadership in the 21st Century. To learn more about Tom, including his major role in *Business: The Ultimate Resource*, the largest handbook/database ever on managerial leadership, go to www.tombrown.us.