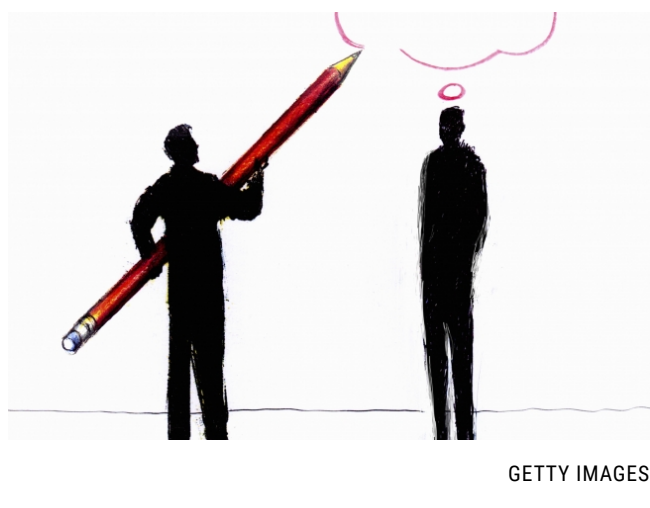


Who Needs an Executive Coach? Time for Some Myth-Busting

By Joan Garry



Who needs a professional coach? Certainly not a new executive director. Right? Wrong.

It's time to have a real conversation about the value of professional coaching for leaders who are stepping onto the field to repair our broken world.

Feeding the hungry, advocating for others, offering a bed and a hot meal to the homeless, researching cures for an illness, supporting a team working on a suicide hotline, or fighting to

ANSWERS TO YOUR QUESTIONS

Many of you commented on this article, and asked follow-up questions. Read Joan's responses [here](#).

protect our rights in today's climate: This is some of the hardest work there is.

New leaders at organizations confronting these challenges must also master the complexities of leading an organization. These leaders need support: Their clients deserve it, and organizations must provide it if they want to maximize their impact.

Let's tackle some common coaching myths.

MYTH 1: Rock-star leaders don't need coaches. Think about Roger Federer. He's is one of the best tennis players in the world. At 37, he continues to win big tournaments, and anyone who knows tennis sees him as the gold standard. Classy and gracious, gritty and determined. And dashing to

boot.

Why in the world does someone like Roger Federer have a coach? What doesn't he know? What hasn't he learned?

Federer would never dream of walking onto center court without his coach in the family box. From that vantage point, his coach can be a strategist, an advocate, or a motivating kick in the pants: whatever Federer needs in order to be the best.

Now what about the CEO of a teen-suicide-prevention hotline? This leader is new to the nonprofit world but has every instinct and attribute to succeed. She oversees dozens of volunteers who respond to texts, answer phones, and literally save lives. She and her staff remind kids that people love them, that there is so much to live for. She does this work. Every. Single. Day.

Her work is life and death. I dare you to tell me she doesn't need a coach in her family box.

MYTH 2: Long-tenured CEOs have seen it all and don't need a coach. Atul Gawande, an accomplished surgeon who felt he was losing his edge, wrote a terrific article in *The New Yorker* entitled "Personal Best." He felt he was still a very good surgeon, but because people put their lives in his hands every day, he knew they deserved a great surgeon. He hired a retired surgeon as a coach to watch him in the operating room. The coach could see what Gawande couldn't and recommended minor adjustments — like where he placed his arms — that mattered. A lot.

MORE FROM JOAN GARRY

Read how to ignite your board members' passion and why executive coaches are useful for new leaders.

Gawande saw improvements. He was able to bring his A-game to the operating room again, and this renewed his passion for his work.

A coach can reinvigorate leaders, help sharpen their skills or help reinvent their jobs. When I ask CEOs with long tenures about the key to their longevity, they all say the same things: "My job has continued to change and evolve." "I keep learning." "I started out strong, but I'm so much better today."

MYTH 3: Departing leaders do not need coaches. When founders or "long and strong" are planning to step down, it should not be a solo sport. But board members are not the best partners in this exercise because they may be driven by self-preservation and feel intense stress.

Planning for a successor requires a strategic plan. In my work with leaders facing this transition, I push them to think about how they want to leave their organization: Do they want their successor to be saddled with sweeping up the "dust bunnies" before they leave?

We talk about how to make hard decisions in the twilight of one's career at an organization, so the new executive director can start from a place of strength. A new CEO shouldn't find a mess left by a retiring leader who didn't have the energy to address problems.

Veteran leaders may have built the organization or know all there is to know about it, but they need help handing it over responsibly because they can't always be objective on their own.

MYTH 4: We spent all that money on a search firm. We shouldn't spend more money on a coach for our new executive director. Consider this scenario. The search committee lands on Cindy as the new leader. Everyone is over-the-moon about her skills and experience; the search firm did a great job. Contract negotiations begin, and the board is more than a little surprised that the "rock star" wants coaching as part of her compensation. The search committee calls the search firm and says something like, "We are so confused. You said Cindy was a rock star, but now she is asking for a coach. Is there something you didn't tell us?"

Well, yes. Cindy is savvy; she knows how high the expectations are. She anticipates that change-management support is critical after a leader's departure.

Board members often think a request for a coach signals a deficiency. They're wrong: It's just plain smart.

MYTH 5: A good coach alone can save a weak or faltering CEO. A "coachable" leader is self-aware and able to acknowledge strengths as well as areas needing improvement. However, the decision to hire a coach must rest with the person to be coached. The fit has to be right, so the client can absorb and embrace the guidance.

Too many organizations hire a coach when a leader gets into hot water. Often boards aren't really looking to provide support – they're looking for cover, or someone to tell them whether their CEO can cut it.

Here's some truth-telling: Coaching alone can't save a leader. CEOs (and trustees) have to want it to work and believe that the leader can make it. Coaching often bleeds into change management and crisis coaching, so a particular kind of coach might save an organization. But if you really are concerned about a leader's approach, it may be time for a performance improvement plan instead of a coach.

MYTH 6: If you can't afford a coach, you're on your own. If your organization simply can't stretch its budget for a coach, the CEO and trustees should explore other options together. Encourage staff leaders to seek out lower-cost opportunities. There are countless resources to help executive directors find a sense of community and a network of support.

For example, nonprofit leaders in some cities (or in particular sectors) have started independent groups for executive directors, sharing best practices, learning from one another, and creating a sense of community to address the loneliness that many leaders feel. State organizations and the national offices of chapter-based organizations, like the Association of Fundraising Professionals, offer resources and conferences. So if your organization simply can't stretch its budget for a coach, work together to explore options.

The surgeon Atul Gawande has a popular Ted Talk. It's called "Wanna Be Great at Something? Get a Coach!" In it, he says something that should stick with every board member who hires an executive director and every organization striving for greater impact:

The very best coaches are passionate truth tellers. And the very best leaders can hear that truth and make the adjustments necessary to improve their skills as leaders and managers.

Nonprofits that bust these myths will be better for it. I have hundreds of examples of groups that embraced coaching and saw impressive results. For example, I worked with a client whose goal was self-care: yoga once a week, more quality time with three young kids. In truth however, this goal was about much more. We worked together to address deficiencies and opportunities such as delegating to staff members, hiring well, trusting deputies, engaging volunteers, and building a stronger board to raise the organization's profile. If you are interested in learning more, read the full story.

Until Roger Federer retires, he is not done. Every day he can make an adjustment, shift his mind-set, and continue to improve, even though he is one of the best sports figures of our time.

I see the above six statements as myths. Do you? If you don't, tell me why. What are your obstacles to professional development? Do you worry how to justify the expense? Share your questions or comments below or email me at chronicle@joangarry.com.

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