

Organizational Coaching and the EA Professional

Helping managers make EAP referrals and address performance problems can lead to developmental coaching activities that will benefit all employees.

by James M. Hunt, Ph.D.

Organizational based coaching has become quite common over the last two decades, reaching fad status at some companies. Many employee assistance professionals possess a skill set that might make them very competent coaches. It's only natural, then, to find some EAPs creating a coaching initiative to augment their existing offerings.

While something of a natural fit, there are some significant challenges and risks for EAPs and EA professionals in launching a coaching effort. I've had the opportunity to serve on both sides of the EAP and coaching worlds as well as conduct research into organizationally based coaching over the past decade.

In this article, I'll share some of what I've learned about organizational coaching, particularly in "best practices" companies, as a way of illustrating some of those challenges and risks but also as a way to suggest one opportunity for EA professionals as a place to begin. The observations shared here are based on research conducted at organizations such as Children's Hospital Boston and the Whirlpool Corporation and reported in *The Coaching Organization: A Strategy for Developing Leaders* (Sage Publications 2006).

ORGANIZATIONALLY SPONSORED COACHING

Organizationally sponsored coaching is, or should be, quite different from coach-

ing that is provided privately to individuals, often referred to as "life" coaching. Unfortunately, there is tremendous confusion among many organizational leaders about the nature of coaching, the options for coaching, the way to assess coaching and coaches, and related matters. As a result, there is still a great deal of what might be called "ad hoc" coaching taking place in which an external coach is called in to help an employee, often a very senior employee, with a problem.

Such "remedial" coaching is no longer visible in best practices companies, for very good reasons. First of all, it frequently doesn't work. As an EA professional, you can probably guess why—the organization has either done a poor job of hiring or let a problem fester for too long. What has become a coaching case really should have been an EAP case initially, but perhaps because of some unhelpful assumptions on the part of management, a choice was made to pursue coaching rather than an EAP referral. The problem is now in its late stages and may be beyond repair.

The danger in such organizations is that coaching may come to be seen as an intervention only for those about to be terminated. Coaching becomes stigmatized and, consequently, an important developmental tool is lost. Progressive business and human resources leaders, on the other hand, view coaching as a developmental intervention designed to help good and great employees leverage on-the-job experience in the service of learning, leading to short- and long-term personal growth that helps the company.

Formal coaching provided by external executive coaches is reserved for

those individuals, usually at the most senior levels of the organization, who are facing significant challenges such as running major change initiatives or undergoing a dramatic change in leadership responsibilities. External coaches may be chosen because of the inherently political nature of a senior leader's job and the need to create a sense of psychological safety. A coaching capability that includes formally trained internal coaches, often from the human resources or organizational development functions, may also be created to work with lower-level senior managers or even individual contributors who are nevertheless in positions requiring the accelerated development of their leadership abilities.

It goes without saying that coaching good and great employees is quite a bit different from coaching someone with a performance problem. In my earliest research on managers who coach, I was told repeatedly that the biggest mistake made by many managers interested in using coaching to help develop talent in their organizations was that they spent all their time on employees with problems rather than on good and great workers, who can help build a business. Herein lies the win-win relationship in organizationally sponsored coaching.

Best practices companies articulate these connections clearly. Coaching is provided for a purpose: to prepare a certain group of managers for succession, to help build project management skills, to help managers learn to work more effectively in a diverse world, and so on. This clear definition of purpose, which I and my colleagues call the *coaching value chain*, allows the organization to manage coaching rather than engage coaching on

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an ad hoc basis. Careful attention can be paid to issues such as who receives coaching and why, who conducts the coaching, what skill sets are required of coaches, and the length of coaching arrangements. At Whirlpool, for instance, the Whirlpool Leadership Model specifies a set of options that coaches and coachees can use to choose coaching goals, thereby ensuring that coaching is aligned with the needs of the organization as well as those of the individual.

CHALLENGES FOR EA PROFESSIONALS

This short overview of the state of organizationally sponsored coaching suggests some important issues for EA professionals to keep in mind—and to manage effectively—if they choose to add coaching to their list of offered services. These issues include the following:

The need to build coaching competencies required for working with a healthy population. EA professionals most often are called upon to assess, refer, and provide short-term counseling for individuals struggling with some type of personal problem. It is true that some of the capabilities required of an effective EA professional are similar to those required of an effective coach, but there are differences as well.

Assessment activities differ. An organizationally sponsored coach needs to build competence in working with tools such as the DISC psychological inventories or the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator as well as multi-rater or 360-degree assessment activities and instruments. The data required to help an individual build leadership effectiveness, and the manner in which the data are fed back to the client, are very different from the process one might follow in assessing for the presence of substance abuse.

The confidentiality of a coaching relationship is not the same as that found in an EAP relationship. While what is said in a coaching session may have limited confidentiality, coaching in an organization can be quite public. For instance, the coach and client may agree to have the coach observe a presentation or conduct 360-degree interviews. These

actions need to be explained and reconciled with other EAP activities.

The coaching process does involve many activities with which EA professionals should be familiar, such as building an effective working relationship, contracting, setting goals, listening and asking useful questions. However, the learning process itself may vary. The client may be encouraged to act and learn from experience, to generate (not attenuate) anxiety. The developmental coach will be working with healthy people who can do far more than meet you halfway.

One significant business need that may create an opportunity for a coaching initiative is that of “getting managers to coach.”

Even more significant challenges, however, are associated with **managing the identity or brand required of a developmental coaching effort.** EA professionals have spent decades trying to eliminate the stigma associated with substance abuse and mental health problems, with some success. Coaching, perhaps because it looks like counseling, has also had to wage such a battle. Many organizations have found that problem-focused coaching for poor performers has left their entire workforce leery of coaching. The EA professional should carefully review previous attempts at coaching within the host organization and assess the challenges associated with such efforts.

A well-respected EAP may be able to avoid this problem, particularly if it has been providing broad-brush services for a wide range of clients and if the staff have adequate coaching competencies. The next challenge is to **link with a definable business need.** Just as EA professionals have long linked their

efforts to needs such as reducing absenteeism and minimizing errors, EAPs interested in providing coaching should seek out partners in human resources, learning and development or other areas with whom they can collaborate in the creation of a win/win for both potential coachees and the business.

A MAJOR OPPORTUNITY

One significant business need that may create an opportunity for a coaching initiative is that of “getting managers to coach.” Best practices companies are serious about engaging their managers in talent development. Research now clearly substantiates the fact that the most effective managers use coaching tactics as part of their overall leadership effort, but most managers aren’t particularly good at doing so.

Coaching workshops alone often don’t result in sustainable behavior change, probably because they don’t provide managers with enough on-the-job practice in the actual use of coaching techniques. (Coaching is a terrific means for helping individuals actually apply what they’ve learned in those expensive corporate classrooms.) What can help managers learn to coach? A good coaching experience is one response.

EA professionals have been coaching managers for years on how to deal with performance problems and make EAP referrals. As every seasoned EA professional knows, however, such conversations often go well beyond the specifics of an individual case. Managers and supervisors will frequently talk about the problems they have in confronting people and the challenges of providing useful feedback to employees. Our supervisory consultations can be viewed not just as instrumental activities designed to help with an EAP referral, but as developmental coaching activities that also help managers learn various coaching-related skills.

In my view, these activities are quite consistent with the mission of an EAP. While some might argue they could further dilute the overall brand of EAPs within an organization, I would argue just the opposite. Effective coaching managers are not only better at helping

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their "healthy" employees, they are also better at spotting and referring employees experiencing severe performance problems that may be mental health- or substance abuse-related.

Such coaching activities can serve as models of coaching behavior that managers can utilize in a variety of situations (if supervisory consultations are conducted with such an end in mind). The use of a developmental coaching model by the EAP, one that includes both dialogue and advice rather than just advice, is a good start. Making the use of such a developmental coaching model explicit can be helpful as well.

When managers have to deal with employee performance problems, they are confronted with a significant challenge, one with a great deal of learning potential. They are also, in most cases, relatively good candidates for coaching. They are competent employees themselves (in most cases!) and are feeling a need to working outside their comfort zone.

Let's say a manager is working with an employee whose behavior is erratic.

She may not know the personal issues underlying the behavior, yet still have taken actions to manage the situation. She may have tried a variety of typical responses, ranging from denying that the problem exists to trying to intrude on the personal life of the employee. As a consultant, you can respond with advice and perhaps a judgmental attitude about her failure to manage performance, or you can help her reflect on what she has tried and explore a range of alternatives.

Coaching by EA professionals can help managers and supervisors be more effective at coaching their own people (notice the articulation of the business need.) The next step, though, is equally important—working with colleagues in the organization's learning and development functions to assess how your expertise can be leveraged to support existing activities to build a coaching capability within the managerial ranks. Such a coaching initiative would be linked with clear business needs and also be more consistent with traditional EAP values. ■

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