

# Rethinking Whether EXECUTIVE COACHES Should Give Advice

BY CHRIS "MITCH" MITCHELL

The conventional wisdom in executive coaching has long been that coaches shouldn't give advice: "Never tell, always ask."

By this principle, the best coaches should only put forth provocative and expansive questions in search of the wisdom and perspective already within their clients.

This approach is based on the often-incorrect assumptions that coachees have the necessary answers inside them and have sufficient time for a lengthy "inquiry-only" coaching process. It also stems from people mistakenly equating executive coaching with fields such as life coaching and relationship coaching instead of the more goal-oriented academic and athletic coaching.

While the inquiry-only approach to coaching can be extremely effective and enormously worthwhile, it shouldn't preclude executive coaches from offering clear, well-timed advice when needed. Such direction can be critical for leaders and organizations, adding tremendous value to coaching engagements.

## EXECUTIVE COACHING IS GOAL-ORIENTED (THINK GOLF)

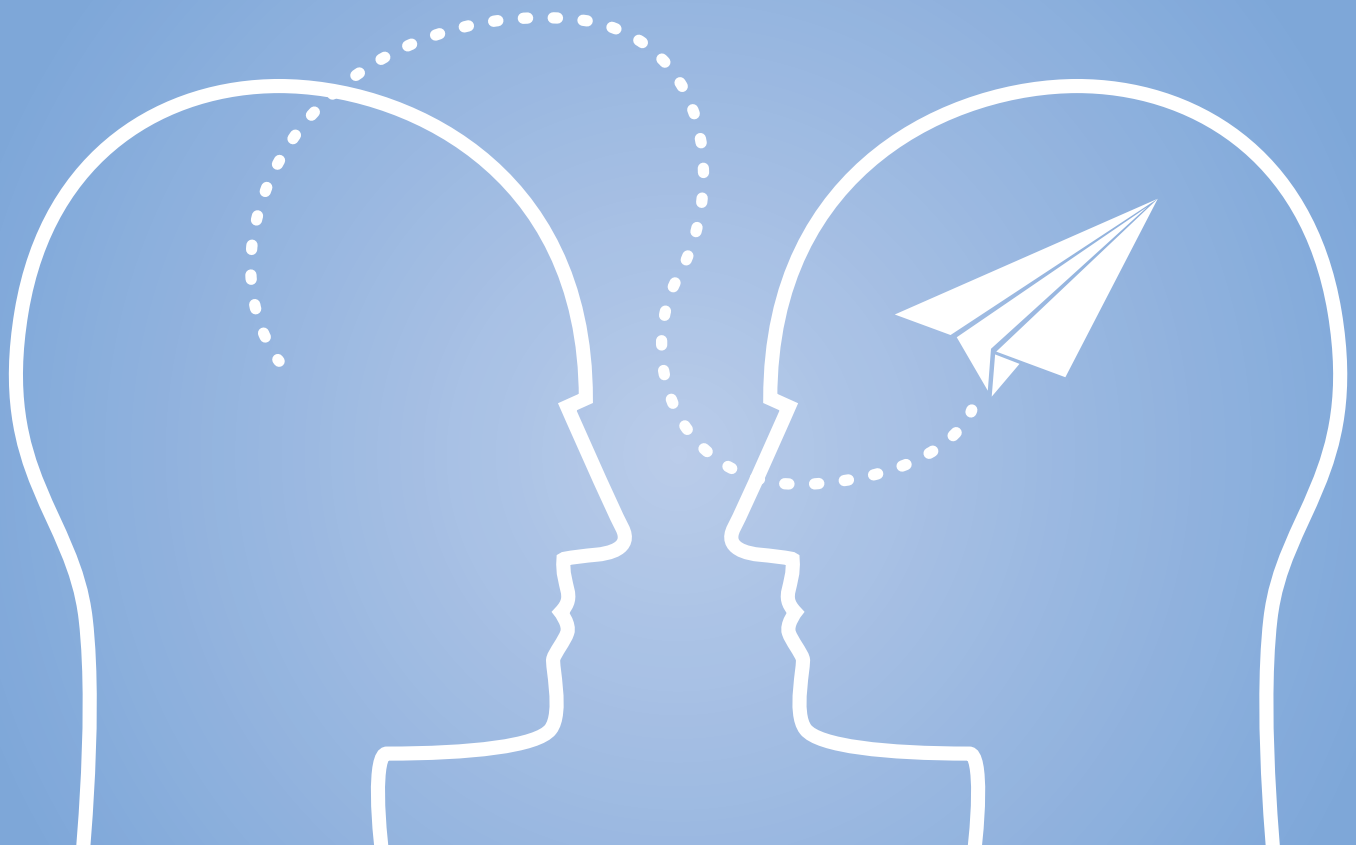
Executive coaching is designed to help individual leaders take their organizations to the next level by developing skills and awareness they might have difficulty acquiring on their own. When effective, it can be invaluable, especially among those who have just joined a complex organization and are learning the culture. It can further assist those serving in top leadership positions for a long time who have an outside

influence on the direction and culture of an organization but are isolated from its inner workings as a result of their high-level responsibilities. Because of their power, they're also less likely to be informed of hard truths regarding such issues as their management abilities and blind spots.

In this respect, executive coaching carries extremely high stakes. It represents a singular means of facilitating such opportunities as onboarding and piercing the bubble often surrounding those in the loneliest top jobs. What's more, its success can impact shareholder value, employment prospects, and the long-term viability of organizations. It's designed to foster a specific kind of outcome: effective, efficient leadership, strategy and operations, and positive, sustainable growth.

The goal-oriented nature of executive coaching makes it comparable to academic coaching (tutoring) and athletic coaching. In these fields, an experienced guide is tasked with helping a coachee reach a specific outcome—for example, an exemplary grade on an exam or an improved golf game. There are clear and measurable markers of success and failure.

And yet, executive coaching is often equated with other forms of coaching, such as life coaching and relationship coaching—fields in which experienced professionals help individuals who might otherwise feel stuck identify their goals and develop actionable plans forward. What's notable



about these types of coaching is that the problem being solved for has no right answer. If a person is determined to leave a lucrative job for the teaching field, his or her life coach is tasked with helping formulate a plan to accomplish this goal. The same can't be said for academic, athletic, or executive coaches.

Being equated with less outcome-oriented forms of coaching has led to the conventional wisdom that executive coaches shouldn't give advice, but rather ask the "right" questions that allow coachees to discover their own answers. This inquiry-only model guides the practice of life coaching and relationship coaching, and it can yield great success. Yet it significantly limits the value of executive coaching, just as it would limit the value of athletic or academic coaching, because sometimes it's most effective to simply show someone how to correctly swing the golf club.

### **ASSUMPTIONS DON'T ALWAYS PROVE TRUE**

The inquiry-only model is championed by many executive coaching professionals because of prevailing assumptions that are only sometimes true.

The first assumption behind the "never tell, always ask" conviction is that the coachee already has all the answers within him or her. In other words, it's the job of an effective coach to bring out the individual's untapped wisdom, perspective, and inner knowledge by asking the right questions.

This approach can indeed be helpful. A series of deep and expansive questions can guide executives to see themselves

and their situations differently. Prompted effectively, they can begin to think outside many of the boxes in which they've long been stuck.

The problem is that sometimes the coachee simply doesn't have the answer, either because of limited knowledge, experience, or self-awareness or other factors impeding his or her perspective. Even the most provocative questions won't help this executive overcome his or her blind spots, which can have enormous consequences for an organization, its investors, and its employees.

The second assumption is that there is always enough time to apply the "never tell, always ask" approach, which can be a lengthy process. It can even impede an organization's progress if an executive's so-called inner knowledge points him or her down a self-defeating path or one that will create unnecessary pain and dysfunction within a company. With time exceedingly precious, this route is best avoided by providing clear, direct guidance.

Let's review two case studies that exemplify how these assumptions don't always prove true and show the effectiveness of clear, well-timed direction and advice.

### **ACHIEVING GROWTH BY EMPOWERING OTHERS**

When I first met Ryan, CEO of a private, midsize healthcare company, his board had recommended coaching as a tool to help him continue to meet the organization's goals. Upon joining the company six years earlier, Ryan had achieved new financial milestones, immersing himself in every area



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of the business and giving up evenings and most weekends with his family. Now that growth was slowing, he thought a “jolt” from the right coach could help him clear the hurdles limiting the company’s progress.

The source of Ryan’s problem quickly became clear: He had grown the organization to the point that it now required greater empowerment of his executive team and less personal quarterbacking. He could no longer attend every important meeting and focus on every organizational need. Yet the company still operated under this paradigm, slowing key initiatives and sowing dysfunction.

Ryan didn’t see the situation this way. In his mind, his colleagues were doing a good job of “keeping the train on the track” but hadn’t shown an ability to solve deep problems. As the company leader most deeply immersed in the business and the competitive landscape, he sought to be the focus of the coaching engagement.

I originally tried posing questions about the company’s predicament with the intention of spurring deeper reflection, but Ryan held firm. He saw no reason to dedicate time and resources on personnel he considered “nonvital.” Further, he correctly perceived that many of these executives were unhappy and didn’t want to make investments in them only to see them leave.

This is the point in a coaching engagement when it’s best to start giving direct guidance and advice.

For example, I advised Ryan to make team alignment and empowerment his top priorities for the coaching engagement. Though initially reluctant, he ultimately agreed to this area of focus. I guided him through careful planning

of offsite gatherings that would create safe spaces for his executive team to have candid conversations about the group, their work together, and the company’s thorniest challenges.

At these offsite meetings, Ryan’s team ultimately helped him face the reality that he had created an organizational culture that couldn’t function in his absence and was thus impeding growth. The gatherings also revealed untapped potential in the group of executives, stymied by micromanagement but still passionate about the business and dedicated to making it better.

In just a few months, Ryan shifted his focus to more future-facing issues and initiatives, allowing his newly empowered team to troubleshoot the company’s day-to-day problems independently. His work-life balance dramatically improved, as did his relationships with team members, who—following Ryan’s example—sought to better empower those reporting to them. In 18 months, the company began again to meet growth targets.

Coaching helped Ryan evolve as a leader and transformed the organization, but only through direct advice. He didn’t have all the “answers” to his leadership gaps inside him. At key points in the journey, he needed more than just questions.

## **SLOWING DOWN TO GO FAST**

As the newly hired COO of a fast-growing start-up, Lisa had strong experience and a track record of success, albeit all at the same company. This was her first shift into an entirely new organizational culture since she had left graduate school for full-time employment.



Lisa's new company had wisely engaged a coach to help ease her transition and accelerate her effectiveness at the onset of her employment. She and I spent a full day and a half getting to know each other offsite and determining what success would look like once the coaching process was complete.

Lisa's competence and enthusiasm were striking from the start. She was energized, focused, and determined to prove to the CEO and board of directors that they had chosen well by hiring her. She had a range of ideas about how the company could meet its aggressive targets and was determined to "hit the ground running" by making significant, immediate changes. As a seasoned coach, I saw in Lisa someone clearly seeking to do too much too soon.

To best serve the company, I had to advise that Lisa slow her pace and concentrate on onboarding in advance of advocating for bold, new initiatives and tactics. She needed to listen much more than she thought and receive an immersive education in the brief but dramatic history of the company. This would be crucial in helping her gain the trust of her subordinates, some of whom were wary of additional change and entertaining other job offers. She further needed to understand routes to success already explored and dismissed and the reasons why so as not to duplicate efforts, frustrate colleagues, and ultimately slow her pace when the company was counting on her to meet targets within a designated time frame, after her immersion.

Patience doesn't come naturally to leaders like Lisa, but my counsel that she set aside her operational goals for a months-long period of intensive listening worked wonders. While initially frustrated with the listen first and listen more approach, she acquiesced to following a "playbook" for new leaders designed to help her learn the corporate culture, ironically speeding her assimilation. This allowed her to expediently approach her "real work," once ready, with much deeper strategic insight and the trust of her subordinates

and superiors. It was no surprise to learn that her ideas ultimately helped the start-up gain added market share and cut costs well ahead of schedule.

Lisa had all the skills necessary to do her job but would have likely failed to meet her goals without a coach willing to explicitly tell her to slow down and build trust. Advising patience helped expedite her full onboarding, aligning her with her team so she and the company could more quickly succeed.

## COACHING AS CRAFT WORKS BETTER WITH THE RIGHT TOOLKIT

Executive coaching shouldn't be defined or measured by any set process or philosophy. As a goal-oriented practice, it's effective simply when it helps a coachee get to where an organization needs him or her to be, in the best and quickest way possible. Imposing limitations on what constitutes "good" or "pure" coaching doesn't reflect the needs of clients and the complexity of individuals who will sometimes respond to inquiry-only approaches and sometimes require clear guidance to overcome limitations and blind spots in the most expedient time frame. Adding the most value to a coaching engagement requires an openness and expertise in both methods. If executive coaching is best considered a craft, it works far better with the right toolkit. <sup>AQ</sup>

*Chris "Mitch" Mitchell is a principal at FMG Leading with more than 25 years of executive coaching experience. His methods bring a holistic approach to leader development, focusing on the tensions and gaps in leadership, while engaging individuals as complete, integrated systems. Mitchell helps executive leaders thrive by managing essential habits and skills, such as the ability to compartmentalize personal and business issues, manage priorities, and overcome fear in performance, productivity and presence. He has guided numerous executives through times of upheaval and transformative change.*