The emerging practice of small group coaching
A unique opportunity for managers and high performers

Individual executive/leadership coaching has enjoyed a long, evolving history. According to Dr. Earl R. Smith II in his article titled: “A Brief History of Executive Coaching,” “the earliest form of actual business coaching was called developmental counseling to support apprentice- ships within organizations.”

Coaching has its roots in humanistic psychology, focusing on a person’s dignity and intrinsic value. Smith tells us that “From 1980 to 1994, the field of coaching underwent rapid growth and quickly expanded into different directions, such as life coaching, leadership coaching, career coaching, success coaching, etc.” And “Since 1995, the need for executive and other workforce coaching continues to grow.”

“Champions have coaches” is the mantra of good friend and colleague of mine, Cheryl Juech. We have had the privilege in our work to witness the development of leaders through executive coaching.

How do you measure/assess whether or not a leader has made changes in his/her leadership behaviors as a result of coaching?

In our practice, and in the practice of many consultants, a leader engaging in leadership/executive coaching begins with an assessment of current state competencies. Often, the assessment is a 360 Leadership Assessment, providing the opportunity for a number of raters to offer feedback about the leader’s competencies, such as: communication, collaboration, authenticity, adaptability and flexibility, etc. The feedback from an assessment tool or individual interviews provides a leader with an understanding of where others perceive his/her strengths and opportunities for growth and development to be.

Utilizing the feedback, the individual leader, with his/her coach, identifies specific developmental goals. Those goals become the focus of the coaching work, which typically will last six months to a year.

At the completion of a coaching process, a modified 360 Assessment may be initiated to determine progress toward goals. As an example, our team had the privilege of coaching 33 leaders in a manufacturing firm. We began with a 360 Assessment; worked with the leaders for a period of six months; and then three months after the coaching relationship ended, another 360 Leadership Assessment was initiated. The results? A 60 percent increase in leadership competencies.

With consistent success in accelerating leadership competencies through individual coaching, our team developed a small group coaching model, with the intention of expanding the development opportunities for a greater number of managers/leaders both within an organization, and for managers at the same level in different organizations.

Small group coaching: How it works

“If we are willing to embrace the challenge of becoming whole, we cannot embrace it alone – at least, not for long: we need trustworthy relationships to sustain us, tenacious communities of support, to sustain the journey toward an

undivided life.”
— Parker Palmer, “A Hidden Wholeness”

In our small group coaching model:
» Participants are selected through identification by a senior leader. Each small group is comprised of a minimum of four and a maximum of six participants.
» Following an initial meeting in which participants get acquainted, receive an introduction to Emotional Intelligence and gain an overview of the
small group coaching experience, individual EI 360 Leadership Assessments are conducted. 

» Our coach meets individually with participants to review their EI 360 reports and provide guidance in identifying development goals and an action plan. Participants then review their plans with their managers, who provide internal feedback and support. They are also instructed to gain additional support by sharing coaching goals with co-workers and others. 

» In a series of small group sessions, participants discuss their “wins,” challenges and commitments in relationship to their established development goals. Peer coaching is encouraged. 

» Our coach facilitates the conversation and offers “teachable moments” within the context of the discussion. 

» Between sessions, participants seek each other out for peer feedback and support. 

» Articles and other supplemental resource materials are provided. 

We are learning that small group coaching offers a unique opportunity for managers and high performers to enhance their self-awareness; develop effective leadership skills; and build peer relationships and support that last long beyond the formal small group coaching sessions. 

One of the participants in a recent small group coaching experience writes, “I would tell others to embrace the experience. Jump in with both feet and take everything you can from it as it will help immensely in your leadership development.” 

And from June Kriviskey, VMC colleague and pioneer facilitator for our small group coaching model: “It has been a privilege to witness the growth that has happened over time with the managers in the group. Their support for one another and desire to become more effective leaders is inspiring. It’s also a lot of fun!”

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