

## **Executive Coaching for Law Enforcement**

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**L**aw enforcement executives experience the stress of a changing world with demands for counterterrorism, community-oriented policing, security, and a host of additional evolving issues. At the same time, they face the pressure of decreasing tax bases, spiraling costs, and other emerging budget concerns. When private corporations face similar challenges, they often turn to executive coaches and consultants for guidance.

While the law enforcement profession periodically employs consultants, a systematic, active use of executive coaches has been minimal.<sup>1</sup> The wave of baby boomers exiting from law enforcement will thrust many individuals into leadership positions without giving them the benefit of mentoring as agencies will have to cope with the loss of highly experienced personnel. Executive coaching can meet the unique needs of law enforcement leadership in such critical times.

### **ONE CHIEF'S DILEMMA**

The chief of a police department with approximately 500 sworn officers is well educated and also well respected by his peers inside the agency and community residents.<sup>2</sup> His county police department has the sophistication (technology, training, and organization) similar to those in most large cities. The chief, other agency leaders, and critical personnel are eligible to retire. The county's proximity to a competitive employment market of other

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federal, state, and local law enforcement departments concerned him regarding his own recruitment, retention, and succession planning (R-R-S), so he contacted Dr. Steve Gladis, an executive coach. The chief, a progressive county administrator (the chief's supervisor), and Dr. Gladis worked together to determine the vision of the department in a year if it operated optimally and focused on R-R-S. This group determined the chief's strengths and challenges to optimize them in setting goals and objectives, which also included those of his department. For example, the chief chose to have preliminary R-R-S reports completed by certain dates and required the drafts from his staff. Thus, the chief was the client for the engagement, but he did not personally execute every step himself. While he could have completed this entire project on his own, he readily admits that having an executive coach helped accelerate its accomplishment.

However, the chief took complete responsibility for the plan and actively participated in its execution. For example, one task called for follow-up contact with key officers who had quit the department 6 months or longer ago to find out why they actually left and to ask them if they wanted to return to the department. It was hypothesized

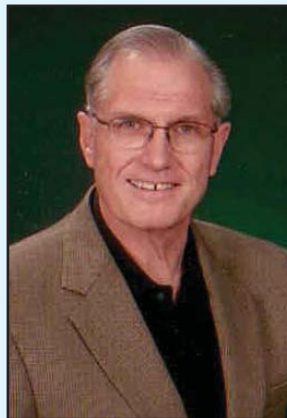
that people often might not express the real reason for leaving a department in formal exit interviews (currently used by this department and many others); therefore, personal contact by the chief might uncover any unwritten retention issues. At the same time, such interviewees were carefully selected as potential rehires.

One interview with a highly regarded officer who left the department for advancement revealed that he actually had resigned because he was not selected for a higher position he temporarily had filled for 6 months. He recounted to the chief that he was told, based on the position description guidelines, that he was not qualified, even though he had operated well in that position and, in fact, had to train his replacement.

During the conversation, the chief learned that this valued officer likely would have remained in the department if another option had been available. The chief admitted that had he known these facts at the time, he would have tried anything to retain such a star employee.

### DEFINITION

Coaching is a \$1 billion industry, second in growth only to information technology worldwide. In fact, a recent survey revealed that coaching contributes \$1.5 billion annually to the global economy.<sup>3</sup> Consulting differs from executive coaching—consultants enter organizations as experts to solve a specific problem. They have a particular area of expertise, such as financial or strategic planning or personnel development.



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On the other hand, although executive coaches may have a specialty area, they ask probing questions, rather than offer expert judgment, and use a systematic methodology (a five-step process) to lead organizations. Thus, the answers emerge from the executive or team coached, not from the coach. The executive coach drives this solution process through pre-coaching, self-discovery and awareness, goal setting and accountability, action learning and execution, and evaluation and revision.<sup>4</sup>

Executive coaches often resemble psychologists because they ask many questions but give few specific solutions. However, coaches are different from psychologists, and executive coaching and counseling should not be confused. Counseling focuses on the past and root causes of problems presented by patients. Psychologists and psychiatrists have legally mandated licenses and confidentiality rights and a theoretical research basis many years old.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, coaching, which quickly has become a powerhouse in the boardroom and among leading executives, looks more at the present and future than the past. It is action oriented and seeks accountability and effectiveness. A strong bond of confidentiality exists between the coach and client (the primary relationship in executive coaching), but there is

no legally binding privilege as in law and medical professions.

## STEPS OF THE PROCESS

The coaching process begins when clients realize they want help getting to the next level, solving an issue, or modifying a behavior that might be blocking their pursuit of success. Often, the organization's human resources department or corporate board will not only initiate the process but also pay for it.

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### Step 1: Precoaching

This first step consists of precoaching interviews, often with the CEO or human resources department, to identify the client. At this meeting, the coach listens carefully to reasons why the company wants coaching for the executive. Most experienced coaches will refuse to assist organizations that use coaching as a last-ditch solution because the process is about moving forward, rather than pretermination.

If the organization wants the best for the client executive,

coaches are open to the next interview. Usually, clients and coaches quickly determine whether an immediate sense of chemistry exists between them based on the psychological phenomenon known as “thin slicing.”<sup>6</sup> During this interview, coaches ask a series of questions centered around what executives hope to gain from coaching, what they perceive it to be, how it works, and whether they are committed to the entire process. If both meetings go well, coaches typically sign a 6-month contract with the client and company.

### Step 2: Self-Discovery and Awareness

The second step begins with an initial session, which often lasts 2 hours. The coach and client discuss what coaching is and how it differs from consulting and counseling. Coaches discuss several other factors.

- Coaching takes time, energy, and commitment from the client to work.
- The coach-client relationship is confidential except where the law dictates otherwise.
- The ebb and flow of energy in coaching potentially can decrease in the first few months as the work sets in and the initial burst of excitement wanes.
- Coaches help executives identify their “inner voices” that want to keep the safer,

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more familiar status quo. Identifying these inhibiting tendencies early in the coaching process helps both clients and coaches recognize them.

- Coaches also discuss goals, time frames, intended results, reporting, assignments, readings, personal likes and dislikes, and issues related to preparing the relationship for success.

During the next part of this step, which lasts for several weeks, various instruments are used as assessments for insight. For example, coaches might ask clients to use the balance wheel, which reviews areas they do or do not feel content in their lives; examine the strengths-finder indicator;<sup>7</sup> write a short autobiography of themselves; and complete several other exercises to provide data for the coaching engagement.

Finally, if the client agrees, some coaches offer the option of a 360-degree review.<sup>8</sup> Frequently, the CEO, human resources personnel, and client agree up front on what behavioral aspects they want covered in the coaching. This review, which might be helpful, is unnecessary at this point. Rather, it could be relevant later in the process, depending on what results the client and sponsor desire as the relationship grows.

Several instruments used in these reviews are well

researched, reliable, and data driven. They can produce prodigious reports and often propose specific remedies for the client. Other 360-degree evaluations are more qualitative 360-degree interviews asking colleagues to assess the strengths and challenges of the client.

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### Step 3: Goal Setting and Accountability

The common wisdom about goal setting is that people get what they aim for. According to most research, 90 percent of laboratory and field studies that involved specific, articulated, and demanding goals resulted in better performance than easy or no goals.<sup>9</sup> Typically, behavioral objectives consist of the action to take, standard of performance, timing of the action, and finally, results reporting (e.g., being accountable for actions). For example, a behavioral objective for improving internal relations within a company as part of the overall goal “to become a more effective

communicator this year” might be “Internal communications: After 3 months of improved internal communications with my direct reports, I will be able to articulate in writing the strengths and challenges for each person reporting to me.”

External communications objectives might include attending outside events and belonging to industry and community boards to increase outreach. Another such goal might focus on constituent communications. With each of these communications subgoals, a discussion will reveal the potential business impact of each objective if accomplished during the 6-month coaching engagement.

Following interviews with clients and a comparison of clients’ and stakeholders’ observations, the goal-setting process begins. Primarily, coaches ask clients to examine their proposed goals and objectives with stakeholders who may have participated in the 360-degree evaluation or informal interviews. Sharing goals and specific objectives with stakeholders before setting out to achieve them accomplishes several worthwhile purposes. First, clients let stakeholders know that they appreciate their input and value their opinions. Second, it places pressure on clients to live up to publicly stated goals. And, finally, clients gain corporate and moral support to reach



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the goal. When supervisors and peers know a person is working extra hard to improve, they want to support those efforts—especially if, early on, they had a hand in providing input to the process.

#### **Step 4: Action Learning and Execution**

Action learning<sup>10</sup> says that people can learn better if they do so when they 1) need the information, 2) learn it with the help of others, and 3) have effective questions drive the process. Action research (reading, interviewing others, consulting with experts) couples with the execution phase, where coaches work clients through their strategic plan toward their goals. In this step, clients research issues and teach themselves in the process.

Executing the plan, goals, and objectives (on a daily basis for 3 to 6 months) is the core of coaching. This phase is neither glamorous nor easy. There are no immediate results nor is it as dramatic as the discovery or goal-setting phase. The execution phase is slower and more cumulative. However, over time, this plan pays off in large, breakthrough dividends, so clients routinely report on their progress toward goals and objectives. Also, during this phase, clients must get information from stakeholders about the progress they observe clients making.

#### **Step 5: Evaluation and Revision**

How will clients know success when they see it? If coaches have done their job well and clients have cooperated along the journey, clients will have a few successes and even some breakthrough moments. Sometimes, clients will look at something clearly for the first time in years. When this happens, coaches typically congratulate them to celebrate such breakthrough “aha” moments

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and recognize their clients’ hard work. Leaders will remember the moment they discover why, for example, a particular advisory board member clashes so often with others, or how they can overcome procrastination at work, curb a temper outburst, find time to work on a strategic plan, take a stand on innovation, or even decide when to move on. Such breakthrough moments are the highlights of the coaching process.

Making even a small but significant change in any person

is difficult, especially in high achievers who believe their success results from certain patterns of behavior (bullying, anger, tantrums), instead of in spite of them.<sup>11</sup> Such behavior might get short-term results but, ultimately, become incredible derailers because such leaders affect greater numbers of people in the organization.<sup>12</sup> Thus, what might have worked before becomes inoperative later. Successful people become almost superstitious about behavior (if it worked then, it will work now). These leaders adapt the same sort of rituals every time they face a new issue. Breaking this cycle may seem minor at first, but the long-term results are substantial both to executives and their organizations. Therefore, even subtle changes in highly influential people mean major changes in organizations.

A powerful evaluation tool is to simply ask stakeholders, “Has [the client] made any progress on goal 1, which was to more clearly communicate a vision on this project to employees?” Alternately, this question can be open-ended, “Describe just what [the client] did to communicate her vision to employees....”

Providing a numeric scale gives the evaluation a degree of quantitative measure to a somewhat qualitative evaluation. Using this technique, coaches can provide clients with a specific

indicator about how far they have come.

At the point in the coaching process when either the coach or client or both sense that the client is at an effective stopping point, clients receive a final report. Coaches use this occasion to carefully recount the journey and then succinctly review all of the steps they have taken together, from the pre-coaching meeting to self-discovery and awareness, goal setting and accountability, action learning and executing, and evaluation and revision. This review has a remarkable effect; it allows clients to recall every major twist, turn, bump, and straightway encountered from start to finish. Acknowledgement and appreciation, or recognition of results, are important to the completion of the process.

## CONCLUSION

Coaching can meet the unique needs of law enforcement by providing a framework, methodology, and systematic technology for furnishing much-needed support for leaders facing daunting challenges. In law enforcement, executives and key leaders face intense demands, stressful situations, accountability, and isolation. Where do law enforcement leaders find a sounding board and strategy partner? Where do they go to confide in a trusted advisor outside the politics of their field? Who supports the

executives who lead the heroes of law enforcement?

While it probably occurs in an ad hoc manner across the country, a more concerted effort to implement executive coaching should take place in major law enforcement training and development institutions. It is a powerful, cost-effective way to provide support for leaders, leverage their strengths, and maximize their engagement for the benefit of the entire department or force. The return on



value for executive coaching has not been measured specifically for law enforcement, but corporate leaders document a predictable 545 percent return on investment for executive coaching.<sup>13</sup> Imagine the impact on law enforcement if executives increased their effectiveness by nearly 5.5 times. ♦

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> An extensive review of the literature revealed little information linking law enforcement and executive coaching. The

authors' contact with the Police Executive Research Forum reinforced this finding.

<sup>2</sup> One of the authors served as the executive coach for this chief. While the chief gave his permission to cite the coaching work as an example to instruct other departments, the authors have chosen not to use his name nor identify his department because of the original confidentiality agreement pledged to him as a client. Further, the chief has read and approved this article prior to publication.

<sup>3</sup> International Coach Federation, "Global Coaching Study," February 5, 2007; retrieved from <http://www.coachfederation.org/ICF>.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Gauthier and David Giber, "Coaching Business Leaders," in *Coaching for Leadership*, ed. Marshall Goldsmith and Laurence Lyons (San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer, 2006), 116.

<sup>5</sup> Lynn Grodzki and Wendy Allen, *The Business and Practice of Coaching* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2005), 24-42.

<sup>6</sup> Malcom Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Marcus Buckingham and Daniel Clifton, *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> This review combines various perspectives by using feedback from such sources as peers, subordinates, and stakeholders.

<sup>9</sup> G. Latham and Edwin Locke, "Building A Practically Useful Theory of Goal Setting and Task Motivation," *American Psychologist* 57, no. 9 (2002): 705-717.

<sup>10</sup> R.W. Revans, *ABC of Action Learning* (London, England: Lemos and Crane, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Marshall Goldsmith, "Helping Successful People Get Even Better," *Business Strategy Review* 14 (March 2003): 9-16.

<sup>12</sup> David Dotlich and Peter Cairo, *Why CEOs Fail* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Joy McGovern, et al, "Maximizing the Impact of Executive Coaching: Behavioral Change, Organizational Outcomes, and Return on Investment," *The Manchester Review* 6, no. 1 (2001).