

# The Strategic HR Coach

## The New HR Coaching Role

By Susan M. Heathfield, About.com Guide

If you're an experienced Human Resources professional, you probably think coaching is just another name for what you've already been doing for years — helping managers and executives increase their capabilities and knowledge in dealing with people.

If you feel this way, I encourage you to think again. The skill of coaching, as coaching is taught and practiced today, has the potential to revolutionize the Human Resources relationship with organization managers and executives.

### What is Coaching?

Coaching is providing feedback, usually to executives and managers, about how to reach their personal best in their organizational leadership role. In her capacity as "coach," the Human Resources professional will do everything from active listening through providing test results that highlight a manager's strengths and weaknesses.

While a business coach usually works with high potential managers, the HR coach may work with every manager and supervisor at every level in the organization. This is what makes the Human Resources coaching role so challenging.

The traditional Human Resources coaching role focused on helping managers address issues and opportunities organizationally. Additionally, talented HR professionals have always provided feedback to managers about the impact of their personal and behavioral style on others.

Most frequently, the HR coach is asking an organizational leader to reflect on how she handled a particular situation. The HR coach asks hard questions and provides advice about actions that may have been more effective than the course the manager chose. People have different reactions to feedback, and even the most carefully chosen words can create an unexpected negative reaction.

Thus, the HR coach practices a blend of politically deft observations with frankness that will help the manager develop in her capacity to lead people and personally excel.

### The New Coaching Role

In the newer coaching role, which I am advocating HR professionals pursue, the HR person partners with the manager and focuses specifically on his development. Few internal HR people are working in this new coaching arena. Organizations have most frequently hired external coaches and consultants.

But they don't always need to do so, if HR professionals are prepared to take on this new coaching role. In fact, an HR professional is missing a career enhancing opportunity if she declines to develop these coaching relationships.

Fundamental to the role, according to Christina Zelazek, SPHR, Director of HR at The Mennonite Home of Albany, Oregon, is trust. "An executive might feel embarrassed admitting he needs help or

worry that the HR person might tell others in the organization.” To help, she said, “the HR person must be extremely credible with executives. You obtain credibility from how you conduct yourself, from the ideas that you have, and your own political savvy.”

Don't expect to coach unless your credentials, reputation, and standing in your organization are impeccable. The person participating in the coaching has to feel you are looking out for his best interests and maintaining confidentiality at all times.

One of the most important factors the internal HR person brings to the coaching role is her knowledge of the organization, and the impact of the manager within that environment. This is also one of the reasons HR coaches fail to attract internal clients for these new relationships.

Beyond the issue of complete confidentiality, the coaching assistance she is providing the executive must contribute more than organizational feedback to help the executive further develop his potential.

Human Resources coaches must be knowledgeable about surveys and other feedback instruments to provide impartial feedback to the manager. Coaching often takes the place of training for individuals who are advanced in their careers. So, the HR professional must be well versed in management and behavioral theory and practices.

She must know about and have access to a variety of resources for the executive as well. Goal setting strategies, follow-up, organization and highly advanced communication skills are necessary for the HR coach to succeed at coaching executives.

As a larger organizational issue, the HR manager can serve as a resource to coordinate and unify the process of coaching. She can monitor the expenditure of resources, check out the credentials of external coaches and assist with the measurement and determination of coaching results.

### **What Do You Think?**

What do you think are the most important components of the HR coaching role? I'd like to hear from you. In my next feature, I'll discuss the essential skills and capabilities the HR professional needs to bring to the coaching role. Please read [Tips for Effective Coaching](#).