



"Coaching is the process of equipping people with the tools, knowledge, & opportunities they need to develop themselves and become more effective." ~David Peterson & Mary Dee Hicks

"Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at twenty or eighty." ~Henry Ford

Should I Get a Coach?

by Douglas Jack, MA, SPHR

Coaching accelerates professional development in leaders, pure and simple. Well, relatively simple. And the goal with coaching is this: To grow you more quickly as an effective professional and developer of teams so that organizational capacity grows, results improve, and your career thrives.

Arie De Geus, former head of Strategic Planning for Royal Dutch Shell, said: "The ability to learn faster than your competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage." This statement is about organizations and seems just as true for individuals.

Today, leaders need to continue learning throughout their careers in ways that weren't common or expected even 20 years ago. Think of it: Gone are the days of apprentice-learning where an employee worked for someone who was always a generation older, and where learning happened mostly by watching, listening, and imitating. Now jobs change too quickly for that pattern. Companies restructure every year or two, and changes demand that you keep up with technology, globalization, and that you treat different workforce generations in unique ways. It really is a different ballgame.

Leaders need to plan and manage their own learning and development in new ways to stay relevant, and their companies see coaching as

worthy of investment. Coaching accelerates learning such that leaders can mitigate 'down-time' and overcome challenges that block progress and solutions. For those who are mid-career and higher, there is often a coaching component, since coaching facilitates accelerated learning like no other performance development strategy.

So, should you make the case for a business coach at this point in your own career, around the next corner, or at any point for that matter? Well, let's first consider that key question, "Do I need a coach?" by reviewing the following list of statements. Your answers will help determine whether a coach should be part of your own process:

Quiz: Do I Really Need a Coach?

Take a look at the statements below and circle Agree (A), Disagree (D), or N/A for each:

Circle one

When that upcoming restructuring happens, I may be without a job.	A D N/A	R1
My HR person let me know that I'm on the succession list for a higher position.	A D N/A	
I just started at a new company and want to ramp-up so I can quickly contribute.	A D N/A	R2
A sudden promotion means I'm surrounded by different stakeholders & responsibilities.	A D N/A	
It seems I have more on my plate at work with less time to do it. I feel less effective.	A D N/A	R3
I've been quite successful in my career, but now I'm in a rut.	A D N/A	
My manager and I get along like oil and water. It's tough for me to take her seriously.	A D N/A	R4
Demands for my job are always changing now. I need to be ahead of "the curve."	A D N/A	



Analyzing your answers is simple: The more statements you agree with, the more you should consider and investigate partnering with a business coach. Look at the column on the far right of the table; it indicates the four reasons you might need a coach that are discussed in the next section.

Keep reading.

4 Reasons You Need a Coach

Reason 1: Change is on the way; I need to prepare

Sometimes you know change is afoot as clues or outright announcements present themselves. A coach can be invaluable in situations like this. They help you to scenario plan about what might happen, what different skills or behaviors you may need to use, and how to bridge any gaps between here and there. Oliver Goldsmith said: "People seldom improve when they have no other model but themselves to copy." A corollary is evident here: People are rarely equipped for change and difficulty that they haven't prepared to tackle. Just think of it: Would you run a marathon without training?

Planning for Change: Graham lived in NYC. As his wife worked to finish an MBA, he had been advancing up through leadership roles in software development for a Fortune-500 firm. Six months

before her graduation, she was offered a great position as Director of Marketing for a regional network of hospitals in Austin. The couple agreed that the job offer was worth the move, so Graham focused on figuring out his own next role.

When Graham let his employer know of the plan to move, they surprised him with an offer to take a position with more responsibility in another part of the organization that could be done remotely. The new job, VP of Strategic Initiatives, sounded exciting and very different. So after talking it over with his wife and with the company, Graham was offered a business coach to prepare for the role. That's where I showed up. First, I met with Graham, then his current boss and future boss to understand Graham's style, his strengths, and the key expectations and challenges in that future role. I mapped out the key issues of what needed to stay the same and what needed to change, and we worked together for about eight months. Our focus: to build both awareness and capability to apply behavior that would help Graham "hit the ground running." A key to coaching is confirming its results, so I met the new boss two other times to check-in with her perceptions. Graham's efforts to flex his approach paid off: he earned quick wins as he started the VP role. And when I checked back later, he had received a high performance review at the end of his initial six months.

Knowing that you need to change is one thing, and having the

perspective, insight and capability to plan for doing it is another. This reason for seeking coaching may apply to you if:

- A pending restructuring might leave you without a job, and you're not sure what to do next.
- Your plan is to relocate to another city next year to be closer to aging parents. You may need to start over.
- Your HR person let you know you're on the succession list for a senior job within the next 18-24 months.

Reason 2: Change just happened; I need to adjust

Often there isn't much advance warning of change, and some collateral shock and surprise comes with the shift. Maybe you can relate to assuming a new job or promotion and the resulting pressure to both perform and add value quickly. Many in this bucket find that there isn't the luxury of as much time compared to years ago. Sports coach Vernon Law said: "Experience is the worst teacher; it gives the test before presenting the lesson." The lesson here is not to go it alone. A great coach can help you take stock of your new surroundings and work with you to plan a course for identifying and navigating the needed adjustments.

Adjusting to Change: Claire had recently started a new job in Asia. Having recently left a similar position at a discount retailer in



NYC, she had assumed a top-level sales position in a luxury fashion house in Tokyo who hired me to be her onboarding coach. Claire was excited and nervous to start on a good foot with the somewhat different industry, the new boss, and all of it in a very different part of the world.

There were many challenges, and we worked aggressively to first chart key stakeholders in her new world, identify where the potential allies and adversaries were, and set a plan into place that earned support from her boss, peers, team as well as external stakeholders. Working together with Claire and her boss, the President/CEO, we ranked top clients at the top of our list for a good reason. Success with several of those clients built relationships of credibility and trust, and this cascaded to build and solidify a positive reputation internally with peers, boss, and team. The work itself included learning how to engage with different stakeholders successfully and then learning some Japanese language to reflect her dedication and interest in her surroundings. The outcomes were positive and worked to earn her many points in the “win” category. Claire had been hired on a two-year contract initially and saw her success recognized when the company asked her to extend it within the first year to a five-year agreement.

Being surprised by change happens in today’s world more often than not. Remember that this reason for seeking a coach may apply if:

- You started at a new company and feel pressure to perform,

yet don’t know how to get up to speed quickly.

- A recent promotion made you the boss of former peers. Now you’re surrounded by a different set of stakeholders, expectations for performance, and overall responsibilities.
- Your boss has changed, and is expecting some very different things of you. You feel unprepared to deliver on them.

Reason 3: Change is needed; I feel stuck

Successful careers can grow stagnant and exciting jobs can grow stale. Feeling that you’re making progress to resolve either sensation can be elusive as well as frustrating, just as the failing clutch on a car is difficult to shift from one gear to the next. So, what’s to do when it feels as though you’ve hit a plateau that’s uncomfortable or annoying, or both? Well, enlisting the support, challenge and structure of a coach when feeling stuck is often an effective way to dislodge a jam.

"Cultivate those who can teach you." These words of Baltasar Gracian reinforce that people have a role to play in getting unstuck. By finding and growing new people to surround, challenge and probe ways of thinking and doing, you’ll be prompted to change. And a coach is often an important part of that drive and process, helping you to re-think goals and pathways in ways that lead to better results.

Getting Unstuck: A seasoned professional with a strong career in the pharmaceuticals industry, Alyssa had successfully held the role of Director of Drug Trials for the past eight years at a major drug company on the East Coast. Regularly recognized by senior management, she was both a great manager and leader who capably developed her team as a great mentor and coach. Though happy in the role, Alyssa had bigger ideas for her future. Her longtime goal was to become EVP and Global Head of Research and Development. She had heard the incumbent was two years away from retirement, so this was her chance to plot, plan and present herself as a leading candidate. But Alyssa felt she wasn’t making much progress toward that goal, missing key opportunities to build needed relationships with global stakeholders who hold the influence to sponsor her as a candidate.

Since she had worked with me as a coach several years prior, Alyssa called to talk through this “stuck” situation. Within the first meeting, we identified that she was focusing too much time on her team where she felt both rewarded and comfortable, and too little time building senior relationships with others in the company. By the second meeting, we had set stretch goals with input from her boss so that Alyssa felt more accountability to apply her interpersonal strengths with C-level leaders who didn’t typically have the chance to observe her work. At senior-level Talent Review Meetings only nine months later, Alyssa’s name was mentioned as a contender for the



EVP role in R&D as well as for a Global COO role that she welcomed and hadn't even considered.

Feeling as though you're in a rut is commonplace for most professionals at some point in their career. This reason for seeking a coach may apply if:

- You feel as if you've reached a plateau in your job, company, or career.
- You've attended some conferences and workshops in the past few years. But it doesn't seem to be "moving the needle" to help me develop.
- You're in a job and very unhappy with the situation. It feels like you're in a rut. People say you shouldn't quit since the job market is tough, but you think you're getting an ulcer.

Reason 4: Change is a constant; How do I deal with it?

"We must adjust to changing times and still hold to unchanging principles." --Jimmy Carter

Many folks observe—and bemoan—the constancy of change. Nothing seems stable anymore as change bombards work processes, regulations, technology, global competition, and customer demands. It can make anyone dizzy to keep up with change, let alone manage or influence it. And after all, routine is familiar and comfortable; most folks like what they know and want to know what they can expect.

Victor Frankl was quoted to say "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves." Since change itself can't be changed, your flexibility is imperative. It's worth the energy to work on how you can open up and shift to deal even more successfully with change. And a business coach can offer a discerning view and guidance in how to think and approach things differently so that you can manage change better. A coach has an objective perspective to yield new ideas, ways of thinking, and methods for improving things.

Constant Change: Cameron worked a high-level job within the legal department of a financial services firm. A key piece of his role was staying on top of ever-changing regulations, case rulings, and precedents so that he could alert internal clients of potential lawsuits or expose vulnerabilities that affect business operations, reputation and profit. A high potential leader, Cameron was told to expect a promotion within the year to take over the role of his boss. And for his 75-hour work weeks, Cameron was both well paid and miserable. He called one Friday afternoon to ask for help, and we worked together to reconfirm the basics of his core values as well as his short-and long-term career goals. Based on that grounding, Cameron clearly realized that he didn't want to assume a higher post at all, and proposed creation of a different position that would both be of value to the firm and of interest to himself. We prepared him for a meeting to outline these ideas to

his boss, which went better than expected. And then we developed a series of 3-year career goals to reflect Cameron's values for also taking on a board role within a nonprofit organization that had been on his "to do" list for too long.

This reason for pursuing a coach may apply to you if:

- You're really uncertain what kind of job to take next.
- Your position is evolving as regulations, customers, markets, and the team's work ethic change. How can you keep up with?
- The current boss is a former direct report who you hired into the company several years ago. You're having a tough time taking direction from her.

Are you ready for a coach?

"A coach is someone who tells you what you don't want to hear, who has you see what you don't want to see, so you can be who you have always known you could be."
— Tom Landry

Aside from whether you need a coach, another important question appears on the decision dashboard: Are you ready and able to make great use of what coaching brings to you? It might be a surprise to know that not all are equally able to make use of a coach's time and effort, or ready for a coach at all points in life. Here are ideas to consider along the way to determine your own readiness.

How open are you to listening, thinking differently, and taking



advice or direction? Think of your answer in terms of a 10-point scale, where a 1 is “highly unlikely to listen” and a 10 is “ready to openly listen to anything.” If you answered at a “7” or above, you are likely to benefit from coaching, so skip ahead to the next subheading. And if you’re below a “7”, read on.

A coach works with you to explain why they’ve put forward an idea or request in ways that convince. On the other hand, if you typically start sentences with “Yes, but...” it may be that you’re venting or stuck in problem-mode more than you’re looking for solutions. Remember: “If you keep on doing what you’ve always done, you’ll keep on getting what you’ve always got.” This maxim by W.L. Bateman conveys just how important it is to break from routine so that you can effectively respond to both change and challenge yourself.

And sure, there is certainly risk in trying something new. After all, it may not succeed on the first or even the fifth try. So a coach can be extra eyes, ears and mindset to help you glean appropriate lessons from those trials that don’t end well. Ultimately, pursuing new approaches—at least, those that make sense for you—will yield a better chance of success than repeating behaviors of the past. If you’re feeling resistant or negative, reconsider what might stimulate you to “re-open” yourself to change. Maybe it’s that you’ve grown tired of hearing yourself complain about feeling stagnant. Or it could be the desire for future promotions that can come from

learning to behave with more executive style. Knowing the underlying motivation you have to change will help you stick with it when changes challenge you. And a coach may be part of that work.

How to Decide on a Coach?

Finding a coach to work with you successfully reflects on their ability and your personality. It involves chemistry and style. And while a company may typically pay for business coaching, you should be part of the process of deciding on the coach, since it’s critically important to have an effective partner who meshes with you.

To help fuel your decision, questions to ask a potential coach include:

- How many leaders have you coached, and how many do you coach now?
- Describe your ideal coaching client.
- Walk me through an example of your coaching process.
- Does your coaching process ever vary; if so, how and why?
- What’s unique about you as a coach?
- What did you learn from a coaching failure?
- How will you help me learn to do things even more effectively?
- When do you know that a coaching engagement is over?

Will You Get A Good Coach or a Great Coach?

“In times of profound change, the learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.” — Al Rogers
Change is the end result of all true learning.--Leo Buscaglia

As we close, let’s think about the type of coaching you both want and need. Some people benefit from having a business coach for strategic direction, guidance, insights, and realignment as they transition up the ladder to more complex responsibilities. Other leaders use coaching “check-in’s” each quarter or twice a year, much like getting the car’s oil changed and tires rotated. To that end, coaches can be expert ‘mechanics’ to diagnose and partner in calibrating professional perspective, goals, and approach.

Many “good” coaches out there can help improve a situation. Some have business or psychology degrees, while others have coaching certifications or years of successful experience. As well, there are “great” coaches in the world. Training and certifications or degrees aren’t the differentiator, but skill and results are. Aside from those questions raised earlier in “How to Decide on a Coach?” keep in mind some of the variances between one and the other:



Good Coaches...	Great Coaches...
Build awareness of the problem	Go beyond awareness to build solutions that fit
Support you	Support and also challenge you to stretch
Focus more on the coaching process	Emphasize achieving results that will matter
Share their own thoughts	Help you to think differently and “learn to learn”
Tell you what to try or change	Work with you; plan & practice change

Just think of a “good” coach as the medical doctor who simply reads an X-ray result to share news that your rotator cuff is torn and then sends you home. Many coaches follow this approach, leaving you to sort out healing solutions and next steps. But “great” coaches go beyond labeling the problem or building awareness of it. They stimulate problem solving as well as learning how to learn so that two unique things happen: your pain goes away, and you become more self-sufficient in the longer-term. Yes, insight is the beginning for any coach, and great coaching develops and applies skills and behavior that yields tangible, measured improvements. Above this, really great coaches balance the support they give with constructive challenges that suit the situation.

Ultimately, a great coach has courage. They need grit to deal with possible tension in the relationship; it’s true that a great coach isn’t necessarily the person you’d choose as a friend. By challenging you to try new and more effective behaviors that might feel

awkward, coaches stretch you. Stretching can leave you sore the next day, so to speak, so the great coach needs to deal with that discomfort. And this guided stretching is precisely how you build professional “muscle.”

“If you don’t have the time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?” John Wooden says. And important things are worth doing right. Work affects your livelihood, happiness, daily routine, and relationships, so decisions on career development rank among the most important you’ll make. The decision to get a coach, who to select, or how to use coaching is right up near the top. Go to it.