



## ARTICLE

# The Five Keys to Successful Executive Coaching

By Dean Anderson, Ed.D. and Linda Ackerman Anderson, Ed.D.

## Introduction

Executives have never before been as challenged in their roles as they are today. The business challenges they face are enormous—globalization and the integration of cultures, unheard-of technological advances, increasingly sophisticated customers AND employees, a struggling economy, and the need to find business performance enhancers beyond cost-cutting and downsizing. On top of this, the personal challenges they face are equally profound—unrealistic business pressures testing their professional ethics, the glitz of celebrity status and massive personal incomes testing their personal values, and long, pressure-filled hours of work testing their commitment to family and their own health.

How do executives navigate their tumultuous existence?

One key strategy is the use of a personal executive coach. In the past decade, executive coaching has blossomed into a relatively commonplace service. In days past, coaches were “offered” only to executives in trouble, or on the brink of being demoted or losing their jobs. Today, the most successful executives are using coaches to help them navigate the business chaos, as well as find and realize their personal potential. In the context of transforming their organizations, some CEO’s recognize that having a coach to assist them to model the mindset and behavioral requirements of the transformation is absolutely essential.

We have been coaching executive change leaders as part of our change consulting practice for over forty years. In this article, we describe the five keys to success that we believe

will make every coach, and the executives they work with, far more successful.

## **Key #1** **The Best Coaching** **is Two-Way**

Most people think of coaching as a one-way street. Their belief is "I have the expertise, and you don't. Therefore, my job is to teach you, and your job is to learn from me."

We do not subscribe to that approach. Our experience has repeatedly demonstrated that the best coaching is two-way, where the coach and the learner are simultaneously engaged in both teaching and learning.

Make your coaching relationships two-way by asking the executives you work with to coach you about your coaching skill and style. They

will deeply appreciate your request, and you will be surprised at how helpful their input will be to the both of you. Based on their feedback, you can adjust your style to immediately benefit them, as well as integrate new coaching approaches that will make you more valuable to your other clients.

When you engage in two-way coaching, you will find your executive learners much more committed to both you and their learning process. By making yourself vulnerable as a learner, you create a safer, more inviting climate that will inspire them to deeper personal exploration. They will engage with you in a more sincere and thoughtful way. It is a bit magical how this works, but it does. Try it.

And keep this in mind: your coaching ability is directly proportionate to how much you engage in your own learning.





## **Key #2** **Contract Up-Front for Both Desired Outcomes and Desired Process**

In your first meeting, ask the executive to specifically identify the objectives of your coaching relationship: what results she will produce, actions she will take, behaviors she will exhibit, and worldviews or internal experiences she will develop through your relationship that will have her say that your coaching was extremely successful. Write these down in contract form.

Then ask her specifically what coaching process would lead to this success. Include items like:

- Frequency of meetings
- Mix of phone, email, and face-to-face meetings
- Mix of your asking questions for her to ponder versus giving advice
- Use of 360 feedback or surveying colleagues/family members for input

- The extent to which she would like you to observe her in work settings
- Mix of praise versus corrective feedback that she desires
- How she best likes corrective feedback delivered (more on this critical point later)
- How to address any needs to course correct your coaching relationship

Since your relationship is two-way, be sure to identify your own learning objectives and the ideal process for how you will succeed.

## **Key #3** **Clarify that You Will Address Both the External and the Internal Dynamics of Success**

This is very important. By external dynamics, we mean the executive's performance and results and the external conditions that lead to them. Internal dynamics refer to the executive's beliefs, values, and emotions. We see behaviors

as being on the cusp between internal and external, but nonetheless, are very much included and central to the coaching process.

The point here is simple. Most executives include in their desired outcomes things like leadership style, communication style, interpersonal style, power-related problems, and their influence on people. These issues cannot be effectively improved without addressing mindset issues like beliefs, values, and emotional patterns. Make this overt with your executives so they expect deep introspection and inquiry to be a part of the coaching process. Get their agreement that you will address all aspects of their way of being that is promoting or limiting their success, appropriately paced to their needs. If they are not willing to consciously engage their inner world with you, then you will have a tough time supporting them as needed, and might want to consider ending the coaching relationship.

## Key #4

# Engage Both Their Strengths and Weaknesses In Pursuit of Their Desired Outcomes

In the past decade, a number of institutes that train coaches have been started. While we are very much in favor of training for coaches, a number of these programs promote an approach that is one-sided and limited in its value. This particular view says that coaches should not address people's weaknesses, but should instead help them identify and build only upon their strengths. Nonsense. The best coaches do both as the need dictates.

This orientation to only the "positive" is a backlash from years of people delivering negative feedback in negative ways. Belittling





and persecuting others in the name of improvement has caused some coaches to decide that negative feedback should be avoided at all costs. Let's not throw the baby out with the bath water. People's blind sides and limitations do have a direct impact on their performance and ability to succeed. And, coaches can learn to work these "negative" areas in positive and constructive ways.

Working "dark side" issues (executive's destructive behaviors, negative emotions, and narrow-minded beliefs), however, is far more difficult than helping executives expand their already developed strengths. For this reason, coaches who aspire to become masterful should get expert training in therapeutic and psychological methods, and should engage deeply in their own inner growth. The deeper you go in addressing your own personal issues, the more capable you will become in helping others to navigate theirs.

We cannot emphasize enough that this work should only be undertaken by coaches who are competent to do it. Coaches not trained in therapeutic or psychological approaches should engage only in the simpler, "positive" style of coaching that focuses more on the external and less on the internal. They can help their clients identify their vision of what they really want, the action steps to get there (especially those tasks they tend to avoid), and the strengths they must rely on to express more of their potential.

## **Key #5**

### **Help Increase Conscious Awareness of Blind Spots**

A coach has the most positive impact on an executive when he or she possesses both the perceptive capability to see what the executive does not see, AND the ability to help the executive look into this blind spot. Often, significant emotional charge surrounds blind

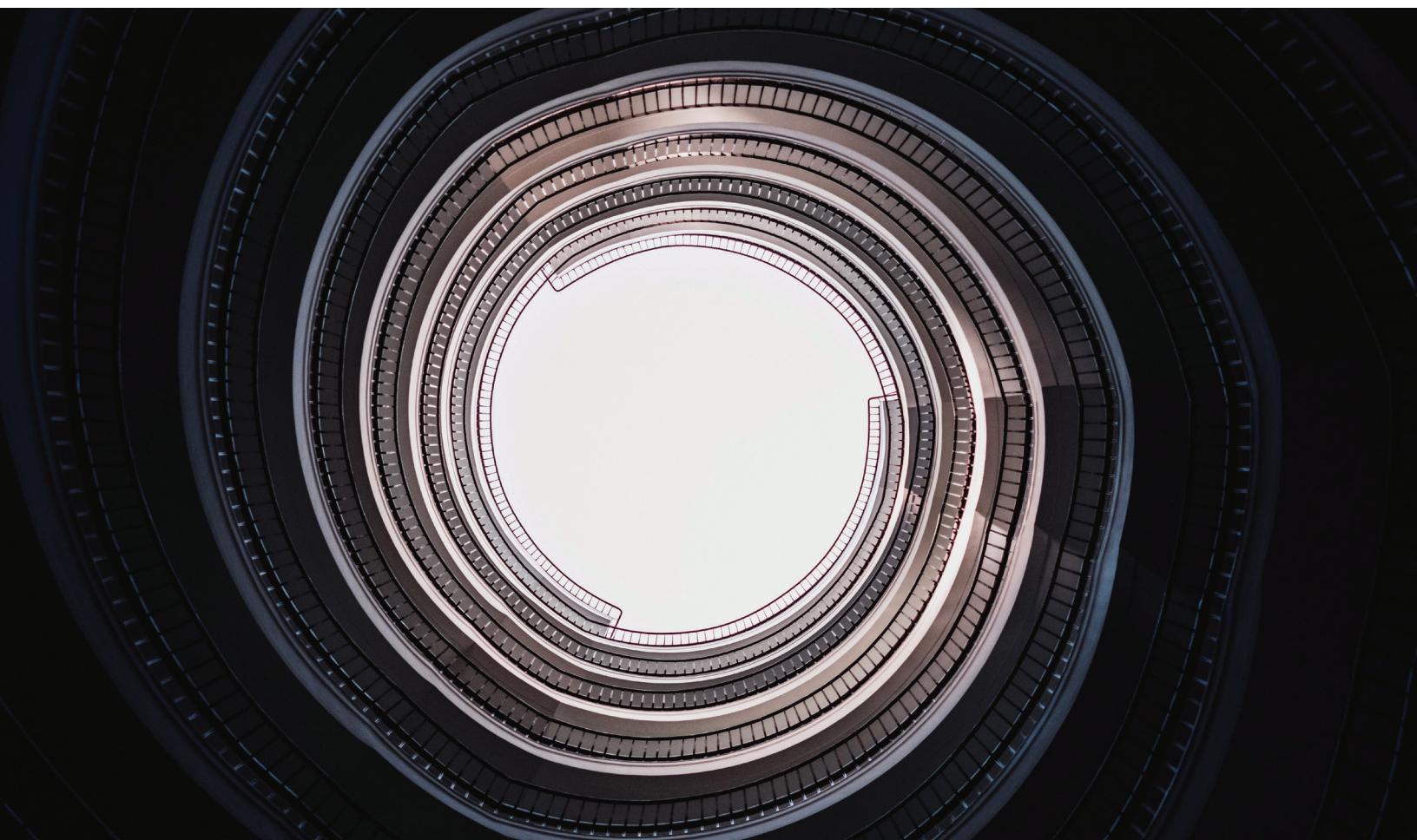
spots. Denial or deeply entrenched unconscious habit patterns may be at play. Or perhaps the executive holds a world view that is not large enough to embrace a more holistic perspective on an issue.

Engaging in conversations about these blind spots can often seem like you are “holding their feet to the fire,” meaning that the topic makes them squirm. However, your job is to help the executive remain present and engaged until insight or conscious awareness occurs. This takes backbone and skill on your part, but often pays off with significant breakthroughs for your clients.

There are very important agreements to establish during contracting to ensure that these most challenging—yet most powerful—conversations are a success. During initial contracting, when you identify the way your client wants corrective feedback delivered, also ask him how he usually responds to people who give him negative feedback. If he says that he responds negatively (most likely), then ask him

what he would like you to do to get his attention about the fact that he is responding negatively, and how you can support him to stay positively engaged. Ideally, you will agree on some signal that you can use that will cause him to pause, self-reflect, see his pattern at play, and shift his attitude.

Once this signal is agreed to, go a step further, and ask him what he would like you to do if he does not respond to the signal. The key here is to get permission to deliver corrective feedback, and to establish a process that will enable you to keep him engaged in a positive way, and that will protect you from his habitual negative response to feedback, or from being fired as his coach. Remember, senior executives, especially CEO’s, are not used to people delivering negative personal feedback. However, we find that the most aware and dedicated CEO’s cherish it, and will value you more for having the guts to deliver it. Just be sure that you set up the expectations and conditions to make such interventions healthy and helpful. Good luck!



## About The Authors

### Linda Ackerman Anderson, Ed.D.

Dr. Linda Ackerman Anderson, Co-Founder of Being First, Inc., specializes in facilitating transformational change in Fortune 1000 businesses, governments, the military, and large not-for-profit organizations. Industry experts regard Linda as a founding leader of Organization Transformation and a godparent to the Organizational Development community.

As one of the pioneers of Conscious Change Leadership, Dr. Ackerman Anderson brings decades of expertise in developing conscious change consultants and equipping them with the insights and methods to become experts in their fields. She specializes in assisting leaders to sort through the chaos of transformation, develop change processes that produce extraordinary business outcomes, transform organizational mindset and culture, and personally model the changes they seek to create. Linda speaks about leading conscious transformation at international conferences, co-wrote two best-selling books, created the renowned 9-phase change model; The Change Leader's Roadmap™, and published over 50 articles.

### Dean Anderson, Ed.D.

Dr. Dean Anderson, Co-Founder and CEO of Being First, Inc., is an international speaker and bestselling author with over forty years of experience in developing executives of Fortune 1000 companies, government agencies, and large non-profit organizations to design and implement transformational change, deliver breakthrough results, increase organizational change capacity, and establish a high performing, co-creative corporate culture that unleashes human potential.

As one of the pioneers of Conscious Change Leadership, Dean is passionate about co-creation—the high-performance way of being and working that produces results for one's self, the other individuals involved, and the whole enterprise. Dr. Anderson's comprehensive understanding of human motivation and performance, vertical leadership development, and the process of transforming mindset, behavior and culture gives him a unique perspective that has established him as a thought-leader in the field of Organization Transformation. Dr. Anderson co-wrote two best-selling books, published over fifty articles, and has been featured in leading publications such as Business Week.



#### WEB

[BeingFirst.com](http://BeingFirst.com)

#### PHONE

970.385.5100

#### MAIL

Being First  
1242 Oak Drive, DW2,  
Durango, Colorado,  
USA 81301

## About Being First

Being First is a breakthrough company, providing advanced expertise in personal and organizational transformation.

We guide visionary leaders to transform themselves and their organizations to Achieve Breakthrough in business results, culture, leadership, and executive team performance, while building world-class change leadership capability. We are pioneers teaching Conscious Change Leadership, and provide a complete System of Transformation to our executive clients.