

Choosing an Executive Coach?

Add data to intuition for the best decision

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Although Humans are not irrational, they often need help to make more accurate judgements and better decisions.

- Kahneman (2011)

What does rationality have to do with choosing an executive coach? While choosing an executive coach isn't a lifelong commitment, finding the right fit is still an important decision – worthy of both intuition and data.

The **Intuitive** Side

A typical coach/client interview lasts about 30 minutes. The leader shares a bit of personal history; the coach does the same. Potential clients typically ask about **style**, **approach**, and **philosophy** - surface level, meet & greet standards. These conversations are important and easy. We know how to do them. We have history, association, and other heuristics to draw upon and quickly process what we hear.

These are the paraphernalia of first impressions. All too often though the conversation stops at first impressions when there are more variables involved in a successful coaching relationship to explore. And we may unconsciously put ourselves in the position of deciding based solely on intuition.

Adding **Data**

Galef (Parrish, 2016) proposes that being open to new evidence is a critical aspect of making a more rational, less biased, evidence-based decision.

Adaptability and **flexibility** are important aspects of a coaching relationship that tend to arise less often in a coach interview, while discussing how **change** will happen, being deliberate about the nature of the **relationship**, and **qualities** and **qualifications**, are rarely addressed. These variables take a fair amount of mental effort to process and put into a decision-making framework

Idea in Brief

Kahneman (2011) revolutionized how we think about decision making. We already knew that the brain, as an efficient processing machine, often cuts corners – using heuristics to quickly process information and move on to the next task. cognitive processes that affect decision making like priming, association, repetition, help us with that efficiency. Kahneman's work, based on decades of research in partnership with Tversky, proposes when we use this kind of thinking, we experience cognitive ease (i.e., easy on the brain) and our tendency to default to this way of thinking opens us up to suboptimal decisions. Why? Because our efficient, associative brain, our priming, our history, our intuition, are all susceptible to bias. For important decisions, there's another, more strenuous way of thinking - we must deliberately tap into our evaluative brain.

Rationality= Making choices that, given the best information available, are most likely to achieve your goals

– Galef in Parrish (2016)

and are just as important as first impressions. Here is how to apply rationality and boost the information that will lead to a coach choice that is most likely to help you achieve your goals.

Tease out **Style, Approach,** and **Philosophy** with personal story depth

Style, approach, and philosophy are almost always the topics of an executive coaching meet and greet. In your initial interview, it's obvious that you'll share your personal and professional history. Get more out of it by offering a conversation that helps the coach understand your unique context. Be prepared with depth about the pivotal decisions and core memories that have contributed to who and where you are today. What the coach is curious about will tell you much about what's important to them - their approach and philosophy.

How they ask questions; how they draw, process, and present what they've heard back to you will give you a sample of their communication style. A bonus, too, is discovering points of similarities or differences that will be helpful in building rapport and maintaining a mutually trusting relationship.

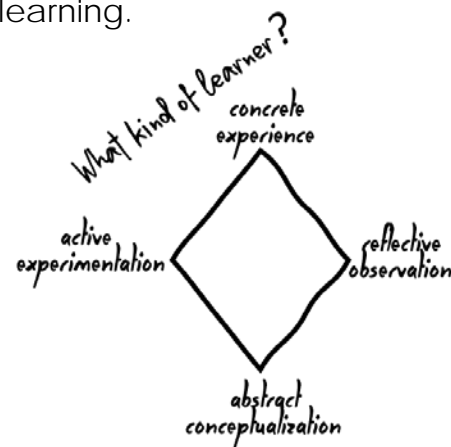
Gauge **Flexibility** and **Adaptability** by discussing "why coaching, why now?"

Coaching is a way of supporting development that makes sense when the timing and circumstances are right - variables unique to each individual client. It's not the right intervention for everyone. It's hard work. It's both reflective and active work. It's an investment of time and mental energy. Be prepared to offer why you think this relationship-based approach is right for you, right now. Even if you don't know exactly what tangible outcomes you want – and even if the purpose for the engagement is to figure that out – be ready to discuss why the approach is attractive to you and why you think it will be beneficial. Check for acceptance and resonance. How the coach responds to

your clarity, or lack thereof, will tell you much about their ability and desire to adapt to your needs, to co create a plan, their level of comfort with ambiguity, and their flexibility and stamina to work it through.

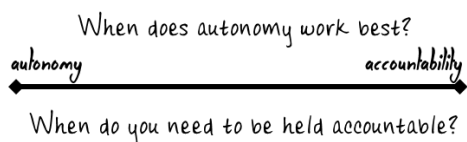
Deliberately explore how **Change** will happen

At its core, a coaching engagement is about behavioral change – change others will notice and helps leaders accomplish what they want. There are two facets front and center in how a coaching relationship supports change: **learning** and **accountability**. For learning, be prepared to offer insight about what's most helpful to you when you want to make a change. Offer up what kind of learner you are - this kind of awareness will help invite a conversation about how their philosophy and approach supports (or doesn't) your unique way of learning.



Kolb's learning styles

Accountability is bit trickier. Think about coaching on a continuum where at one end are appreciative inquiry, reflection and high autonomy - leaving the tracking of progress and action up to the client. While, at the other end are telling, advising, directing, assigning, and tracking - high accountability. Discuss where in that range is most helpful to you and how you want to be held accountable.



The Relationship - know what kind of relationship will work

A coaching relationship is not passive. Think about the kind of relationship you want and describe it in crisp, clear, actionable terms. Knowing how and when you want to be held accountable is a helpful start in describing the relationship. Thought starters are descriptors like arm's length, sounding board, confidante, objective observer, collaborative, creative, partnership, advisor, strategist. Do you want a short term, hyper focused engagement or are you in need of more investment in exploration and alternatives?

Think of some descriptors that fit what you want and need in this phase of development. No need to limit yourself to one descriptor. Be prepared, however, to explain what you mean by your answers and the experience you'd like to create with a coach. Try asking the coach to describe the kind of relationship that brings forward their best contribution and highest level of engagement.

Qualifications and Qualities - What matters?

Assuming a level playing field of qualifications, there may be one thing that's more important to you than others. Don't be shy about offering that information. Most coaches have a specialty, some coach's approach and philosophy are defined by their area of specialty. If you want a particular subject matter expertise, be clear about that and why. If you are looking for more breadth ... a mentor coach - someone who's walked in your shoes might be more important. Do you want a psychologist (not a therapist)? Someone with a Human Resources or Organizational Development background? A Multidisciplinary Coach? If you've worked with a coach before, offering what worked, what didn't - and why - is

super helpful and provides the coach with a benchmark to clarify what they uniquely have to offer. Explore their description of the qualifications and qualities they bring.

Final thoughts - Time and Chemistry

Feeling good about the decision is important, what is equally important is a decision that is based on information and intuition. Invest the time, then make the call. 30 minutes isn't long enough to decide. Schedule a longer first contact or include a follow up. Even then, don't be afraid to follow up. Again, while not a lifelong commitment, it is a commitment nonetheless, it's ok to put in the work to be sure. The chemistry question is mostly intuition and first impression but can still be grounded in information.

The relationship just needs to work.

Ask Yourself:

Style, Approach, Philosophy

What evidence did I gather about this coach's communication style, approach, and attitude? What words describe their approach to the engagement and do those words resonate? Are we philosophically aligned?

Flexibility and Adaptability

Will this coach flex to my needs? Is this person poised to adapt to rapid change and changing needs? How much flexibility do I want, how much do I need?

Change

Does this coach's approach support my way of learning? How will they help me make change happen through learning and accountability? How have they helped others make change that sticks? Does their method of supporting change resonate with me?

Relationship

Does this coach offer me the kind of relationship that will be most beneficial to me at this time? Do their philosophy, approach, style, and qualifications, support the kind of relationship I need to have right now?

Will it work?

What do the data I've gathered indicate and what does my intuition tell me? Will I enjoy spending time with this person, and will they enjoy spending time with me?

A hand-drawn equation in blue ink. On the left, the word "data" is written inside a blue circle. To its right is a plus sign "+". To the right of the plus sign is another blue circle containing the word "intuition". To the right of this second circle is an equals sign "=", followed by the phrase "better decisions" written in a cursive, hand-drawn style.

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I'm Linda Layton and I'm a [Multidisciplinary Coach](#). I'm also an analyst, researcher, curator of the un/not yet popular, overlooked, or left behind, solopreneur, and matriarch.

*The purpose of **The Multidisciplinary Coach** is to provide a platform to cultivate and integrate multiple points of view into a cohesive approach to leadership and organizational development.*

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