

Choosing an Executive Coach: Speed Dating or an Arranged Marriage?

By Marc Levine

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Choosing the right executive coach is easily one of the most important parts of what for many business leaders can be a highly significant, career-enhancing relationship. As the popularity of executive coaching continues unabated, and as the number of executive coaches swells to meet the demand, the challenge of selecting the right coach deserves greater scrutiny.

Many of our client companies that retain executive coaches approach the linking of coach and client in one of two ways—speed dating or arranged marriages. Speed dating is by far the most popular method of coach selection and resembles a series of short job interviews. Several or as many as a half-dozen potential coaches are paraded in front of the client and, often in as little as 30 minutes, backgrounds are reviewed, experiences are shared, expectations are discussed, and impressions are formed. The client then ponders his/her choice and ultimately selects the coach who seemingly offers the best fit.

When I've asked clients why they selected their coach over others the responses are usually along the lines of, "s/he seemed like someone I could work with," or "we got along well," or "it just felt right." In a dating context this is fine. After all, even the worst of dates can lead to funny anecdotes to share with friends and may even cost less than \$100. However, these reasons strike me as inadequate given the hefty price tag attached to an executive coaching relationship. It's very hard to blame the client, however, for making these decisions anecdotally along the lines of "it just felt right."

First of all, many clients have no experience selecting coaches and often confuse fit for potential effectiveness. I refer to this tendency as the "fit bias," an example of our basic human tendency to pick comfort over unease, the fastest over the deepest or the path of least resistance. I encourage my potential clients not to pick a coach they'd like to have a beer with (i.e., a good fit) but rather someone who will challenge them or argue with them if necessary, or will feel comfortable telling them difficult truths. In a coaching context, fit may be counter-productive as the relationship isn't a friendship but rather a business partnership focused on the needs of only one of the players.

Second, as on any date, both parties are nervous. For the client, they know their coach will, in all probability, get to know them very well, warts and all, but at least initially want to create the best impression they can. (Gee, I hope I don't have anything in my teeth). And the coach, of course, wants the business and may be tempted to seem like a good fit even if they know better (When can we see each other again?).

Third, the organization views speed dating as the right thing to do. Our culture views dating as an act of free will—we date who we want—and, not surprisingly, our organizational clients say similarly, "we can't dictate who coaches who; we must offer the client a choice. Sure, all of the potential dating partners (coaches) we put in front of the client will be reasonably well-groomed (i.e., look the part) and will have lots of dating experience (a solid track record) and won't talk with their mouths full (good communication skills) but the choice is yours. Oh, and if you want dating advice (our input about who would be the best fit) we'd be happy to offer it.

An alternative method of coach selection, and one that is gaining in popularity, is the "arranged marriage," in which the organization pairs client and coach based on the specific, known competencies of the coach and the perceived need(s) of the client. The "matchmaker" role is typically played by a senior-level HR business partner in the client's organization. The key assumption here is that rarely will the client, in the context of their work role, have the opportunity to choose with whom they work closely, with the possible exception of their direct reports, and making a relationship work with a pre-selected coach mirrors closely the challenges

of making their relationships work on the job. Plus, an external “matchmaker” can largely eliminate the “fit” bias and instead focus on what the client will need from a coach developmentally, which will not always be apparent to the client at the outset of a coaching relationship.

What’s needed to make this method work?

First, a pre-qualified cadre of coaches with a solid, base-line level of coaching skills must be in place to guarantee a “lemon-free” experience for clients. You can only “present” a coach to a client if you’re sure they can deliver a quality professional experience.

Second, the organization must understand their coaches as individuals, including their strengths, weaknesses and preferred types of executives they wish to coach. Personality assessments, structured debriefs of previous coaching experiences can help in this regard as can a high-degree of self-awareness on the coach’s part.

Third, a high-level of credibility and trust must exist between the client and the matchmaker. Coaching, by definition, places the client in a potentially vulnerable position and the matchmaker must make sure that the client feels his/her best interests are being served by the coach selection.

How effective is the “arranged marriage” method vs. the “speed dating” method?

We simply don’t know. Formal executive coaching in a business context is a relatively young discipline and much work needs to be done to assess the effectiveness of coaching in general and the coaching selection process in particular. Plus, assessing these methods will always be apples/oranges comparisons in that we can’t measure the effectiveness of both methods on one individual at the same time with all other factors equal.

Arranged marriages in a coaching sense may seem counter-intuitive since it brushes up against a basic assumption we all share; we tend to know what’s best for us. And while this may be true in the broadest sense, it may not be so in a developmental context. We may not know what we need. Perhaps an outsider, free from the “fit” bias, is in a position to make a better judgment.

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