

EXECUTIVE COACHING IS THE MEDIUM OF choice for many executives and directors looking for a bespoke and tailored approach to their professional and leadership development.

Increasingly, boards and senior leadership teams are realising the key benefits of having an external and objective coaching resource to facilitate the board through the key transitions and challenges every high-performing team faces.

In this article, we attempt to map out these challenges into five key areas and show how executive coaching can facilitate each transition.

of understanding the board dynamics and demonstrating value quickly through the application of their own expertise and experience.

In addition to observing key dynamics within the group, such as between executive and non-executive directors or the CEO and chairman, the new director needs to get a sense of the leadership style within the board and how his or her particular skills set and approach will complement that of existing board members.

Having a really clear and objective sense of individual strengths and development areas that

Coaching the board to success

Doug MacKie and **Warren Kennaugh** explain how executive coaching can help the board through the many transitions and challenges typically faced by all high-performing teams.

1. Selection – Getting the right people on board

There are a set of core competencies that every high-performing board needs to look for when recruiting. In considering the board as a high-performing team, it becomes obvious that the capacity to work effectively in a team, to complement and extend the expertise of others and practise a distributed model of leadership, are key components for each member.

In addition to these interpersonal skills, there are core intrapersonal competencies that the successful board member needs to display. Prominent among these is the notion of the growth mindset, the attitude that exudes curiosity, humility and hunger to learn even in the presence of a director's existing significant professional expertise.

This is the mindset that continually balances advocacy with enquiry, that respectfully draws out the expertise of others and that reflects on process or the “how”, not just the task in hand.

Executive coaches and mentors have at their disposal a wide range of validated instruments and profiles designed to benchmark the aspiring board member on exactly these competencies against the existing board and other high-performance indicators, giving invaluable objective feedback on the aspirant director.

2. Integration – the first 90 days determines continuing success

New directors joining boards have some key challenges early in their tenure in terms

are externally benchmarked is crucial to the success of this integration process.

When a new member joins a board, the team will reform in some way, providing early opportunities for making the team norms and goals explicit.

Crucial to early success is a transparent, consistent and agreed to approach for the integration of a new board member.

Coaches and mentors are able to support and accelerate a successful integration through a researched and proven objective process that focuses the new board member in areas of team dynamics and development, understanding complementary strengths, creating alignment and testing judgements.

3. Managing the board process – the how, not the what

Once the board is established and performing its governance and strategic objectives in an efficient and effective manner, how does it maintain and enhance its performance over time?

This is where an awareness of the board process on how it is delivering on its objectives is crucial.

A quick diagnostic on the board process can be ascertained by observing the leadership styles.

For many board members who are more used to operating from the authority of their primary management role, the concept of leading leaders can be a new one.



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There is compelling convergent evidence (pioneered by Jim Collins' L5 research) that successful leaders at the most senior levels practise a very inclusive and engaging style of leadership that coaches rather than commands others. This is a much more complex perspective on leadership that moves away from the individual traits of a leader and towards a more distributed leadership model that focuses on empowerment, collaboration and team development. This approach positively encourages diversity of thought and respectful challenge – two of the hallmarks of an effective decision-making process. This style can be learned and shaped through the expert guidance of an experienced coach or mentor. These behaviours are developed to complement existing strengths, which increase leadership style flexibility in the operation of the board as a team and in one-on-one interactions.

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4. Managing conflict – the benefits of conflict and its challenges

At some point in the lifecycle of any board, conflict will occur. Constructively handled, this can lead to diversity of discussion and thought, the enhancement of accountability and a broader perspective on issues and innovation in strategy and decision-making.

Getting the balance right without bruising personalities can be difficult at times. If left unchecked, conflict can lead to derailments and dysfunction, lack of synergies and significant distractions for the board.

Current estimates suggest up to 50 per cent of managers and leaders will derail in some way during their career and many of the derailment behaviours originally identified by the Centre for Creative Leadership, such as failure to build a team or inability to adapt to transitions, are behaviours crucial to board success.

Consequently, effective conflict management at the individual and team level is crucial for the high-performing board, and an experienced coach or mentor can provide valuable feedback and direction on keeping the conflict task focused and preventing its infiltration into the interpersonal domain.

5. Succession planning – taking the long-term view

At some point, the board will need to consider succession for key roles within the board, but also increasingly for key talent within the organisation.

Many of the competencies discussed under selection appear again in this context and can be easily assessed through the application of a skills or competency matrix.

To maintain and enhance board functioning and plan for succession, there is no substitute for a rigorous board appraisal that looks at how the board is going about its task, the collective skill set within the board, key dynamics within the team and how key synergies are being leveraged.

The London Business School recently recommended that board appraisals focus on three key issues: compliance, efficiency and effectiveness. It also suggested boards consider whether their appraisal process meets best practice, identifies the real issues and identifies how the board can improve.

In addition to the functional and relationship requirement of the board, an experienced coach and mentor can prompt a forward-focusing discussion on what gaps need to be filled in thinking, challenge, diversity, gender and risks in the current structure and approach of the board. 

The Australian Institute of Company Directors has launched its Coach and Mentor Connect service, which aims to assist boards in the development of the five pillars of board success. Aspiring and practising directors can enhance their performance and career success by using the services of a coach or mentor. For more information, please visit our website at: www.companydirectors.com.au/memberservices

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