

Executive Coaching – Personnel Decisions International (PDI)

Executive coaching has become a popular method for promoting emotional intelligence in organizations. However, there have been few rigorous evaluations of such programs. An exception is the program developed and offered through PDI. This program has served over 4,000 individuals, and it provides a good model of this type of development mode. Depending on the individual, coaching can target any of the competencies associated with emotional intelligence, but typically it focuses on the self-awareness, self-management, and social skills competencies.

The ICE program is delivered by highly trained individuals. About 80% of their coaches have a doctorate in psychology. The others have a masters in psychology or social work. In addition, new coaches go through a development program of their own after they are hired, which may include close, weekly supervision for some.

Like most coaching programs, ICE serves middle managers and above. The program typically involves a team of people, including the participant, his or her organizational sponsor (typically the person's boss), and a PDI coach. Much of the coach's time and effort, particularly in the beginning of the process, goes into "forging a partnership" with the participant and "inspiring commitment (Peterson, 1996)."

The typical ICE participant begins with an initial one-to-two day diagnostic assessment and feedback session, followed by about one day of coaching per month for the next six months. There often is a follow-up phase lasting six to 12 months as well. All together the typical participant receives about 50 hours of intensive one-on-one coaching. During the first session, the coach explores with the participants their goals

and how they view their current work situation. The coach also establishes clear expectations about confidentiality.

The initial assessment may consist of a variety of procedures used in various combinations, including an in-depth interview, 360 degree assessment, personality and cognitive ability tests, and work simulations. The coach helps the participant to translate data from the assessment phase into relevant information on goals, abilities, others' perceptions, and organizational standards and expectations. Then the coach helps the participants to "prioritize their development goals and develop a concrete plan for development and change" (Peterson, 1996, p. 80). The plan consists of specific behavioral learning objectives, defined in terms of on-the-job behaviors. The organizational sponsor, as well as the participant and coach, must agree on the coaching plan.

The coaching phase also uses a variety of methods, including didactic presentations, books, discussions, case studies, analysis of real-world examples, role playing, observations of "stars" in action, work adjustment counseling, mentors, and rotational assignments. Whatever methods are used, the coaches encourage people to practice their new skills frequently over a long period of time and to apply them in different ways in new situations. In fact, the coaches often help people find opportunities to apply the skills they have learned.

Promoting persistence is an important part of the coaching process. The coach helps participants to "stay motivated when they hit plateaus"(Peterson, 1996, p. 80). The coach also "supports people so they feel comfortable enough with risk-taking and do not panic or give up when things get tough" (Peterson, 1996, p. 80). Coaches also help

people “identify and anticipate specific situations in which old, ineffective habits are most likely to crop up” (Peterson, 1996, p. 80). In addition to working directly with the participant, the coaches also frequently work with the organizational sponsors. For instance, they may help the sponsor to become “a better role model” or to provide “more feedback and encouragement to support learning in the work environment” (Peterson, 1996, p. 81).

The maintenance and support phase of the coaching program involves periodic contacts and review sessions as needed to help participants maintain their changes over time. Participants and their organizational sponsors receive at least two calls, three and six months following conclusion of the coaching phase. Some participants also return for brief review sessions.

Given the individualized nature of the program, the evaluation research design makes use of each participant’s individually-developed coaching objectives as the primary evaluation measure. Data come primarily from a coaching plan rating form. This form is completed at the minimum by the participants, their bosses, and their coaches. The raters fill it out at entry into the program, at the conclusion of coaching, and about six months after the conclusion of coaching. The form includes four different types of rating scales: current effectiveness, retrospective degree of change (for the post-coaching and follow-up ratings), global rating scale, and control scale. The last scale is made up of items that are unrelated to the coaching goals and thus are not expected to change as a result of coaching. In this way each participant serves as his or her “control,” with change on targeted behaviors compared to change on those behaviors not targeted for coaching.

Results of one evaluation study found that the participants improved significantly more on the coaching items than on the control items. Bosses actually perceived more positive change than did participants. And the changes persisted through the six-month follow-up.

For more information, see:

Peterson, D. B. (1993). Measuring change: A psychometric approach to evaluating individual training outcomes. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, San Francisco.

Peterson, D. B. (1993). Skill learning and behavior change in an individually tailored management coaching program. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, San Francisco, CA.

Peterson, D. B. (1996). Executive coaching at work: The art of one-on-one change. Consulting Psychology Journal, 48(2), 78-86.

Peterson, D. B., Uranowitz, S. W., & Hicks, M. D. (1996). Management coaching at work: Current practices in Fortune 250 companies. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Psychological Association, Toronto.