



# The Realities of Executive Coaching

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by Carol Kauffman and Diane Coudu

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### THE SURVEY

#### Methodology and Participants

The survey analysis presented here is drawn from an online questionnaire developed by senior editors at *Harvard Business Review* and Carol Kaufmann. We compiled a list of 245 potential participants through our direct contacts in the coaching community, through references from senior executives, through HBR authors with expertise in coaching, and through organizations involved in the training of executive coaches.

The 140 coaches who participated in the time allotted are all involved in the executive-coaching business. Sixty-six percent disclosed that coaching is their primary source of income. Respondents were divided equally into men and women. Participants hailed primarily from the United States (71%) and the United Kingdom (18%). Respondents are highly experienced: 61% have been in the business for more than 10 years. Approximately half have backgrounds in business, either as executives or management consultants, and 20% have backgrounds in psychology. They are nearly all independent; only 1% described themselves as in-house corporate coaches.

The web survey was conducted using Vovici EFM survey software. We reviewed the data and shared the findings with five commentators, who offered their own expert analyses.

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BY CAROL KAUFFMAN AND DIANE COUTU

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Executive coaching is a confidential, individually-tailored engagement designed to meet the needs both of the executive being coached and the organization paying for the service. A coach meets behind closed doors with an executive, and together they create personalized goals and explore specific ways to achieve them. But what exactly happens behind those closed doors? Most of what we hear about coaching is anecdote and conjecture. To obtain a more complete understand of coaching, *Harvard Business Review* created a 23-item survey sent out to 245 coaches, of whom 140 responded during the allotted time period. A review of the key findings from the survey will be offered to executives in the magazine's January 2009 issue, in the article "What Can Coaches Do for You?" by Diane Coutu and Carol Kauffman. It will include additional analyses by five experts. This special report provides you with our findings.

### The Engagement

As a group, you take on a wide variety of tasks (Q1), but most of your assignments fall into two categories: developing the capabilities of a high-potential executive or facilitating a transition (Q2). That demonstrates that coaching today is less about fixing problem behaviors and more about enhancing the performance of valued executives.

Most of you meet with executives face to face, although a healthy minority uses the telephone for primary contact (Q8). Compensation rates vary widely: from between \$200 to \$3,500, though most of you are clustered between \$500 and \$725 per hour (Q19). Nearly all of you set a specific duration for your engagements (Q7), usually from seven to 12 months. Only 10% of you report that your typical engagements last for less than two months or for more than 18 (Q6).

Unlike life coaching, executive coaching involves a third party—the company that employs the executive. Usually the company is represented by human resources or by the executive's manager. You told us that more than half of your engagements are initiated by an organization that has decided to get a coach for one of its executives (Q4). Once the engagement has begun, however, the executive usually takes the driver's seat. He or she decides whether the match feels correct and if the meetings are to proceed (Q5).

While the engagement focuses on the individual, the organization paying for the coaching service should know the value it receives for the investment. Most of you (nearly 70%) keep the executive's manager informed of progress, and 55% communicate with HR. This is usually done in conjunction with the executive. Expectations about disclosure are discussed up front (Q9). These progress reports are usually qualitative and occasional. Less than a third of you present quantitative data on changes in your coachee's behaviors. Less than a quarter provide a quantitative assessment of the impact of those changes on business performance (Q10).

### The Work

You delineated multiple benefits to coaching (Q22). Several of you said simply: “It works!” More specifically, some of you noted that, as the 21st century brings rapid change and massive amounts of information, coaching helps executives manage business complexity. Others focused more on leadership development, with many of you bemoaning a paucity of developmental resources for high-level leaders. Coaching was also seen as creating a unique and safe space for executives and as a replacement for in-house mentors who used to perform the coaching function at a time when executive turnover was slower and a culture of employment stability was the norm.

When we asked if your goals shifted over the course of an engagement, all but a handful of you agreed (Q3). Although this fluidity can be problematic if the engagement morphs to an area outside the coach’s area of expertise, most of you felt that shifts were necessary to go “deeper” as the executive developed a greater internal focus and increased self-awareness in the context of a safe relationship. You also indicated that shifts occurred as part of a natural evolution as goals were clarified and became more aligned with the strengths and values of the executive.

### The Methods

Of the myriad approaches to achieving organizational and personal change, three stand out as the most common: engaging expert consultants, relying on individual coaches, and working with therapist healers. You told us that many clients seem to be confused about the features and benefits of each. We asked what you, as coaches (and some of you are also consultants or therapists), believe to be the most important similarities and difference between these approaches, as well as the overlaps that exist (Q17, 18).

All three approaches are founded on trust and confidentiality in the professional relationship and require that practitioners keep their personal agenda to a minimum. Coaching/consulting focuses more closely on the organization by involving management in goal setting and assessing change. It tries to improve the alignment between the executive and the organizational value system. Coaching/therapy, by contrast, is more concerned with facilitating individual behavioral change, building individual capabilities, and exploring subjective experiences. The unique coaching approach assumes an equal (versus expert) relationship between executive and coach with the aim of helping the coachee to discover his or her own path toward optimal performance in an organizational context.

### The Key Success Factors

Most of you attributed your success to your clients, the chemistry between coach and executive, and the support of the organization rather than pointing to yourselves as masterful professionals (Q20).

You told us that executives who are willing to learn and evolve and who can actively engage in the process, have the best results. Fewer than 10% of you felt that executives needed to begin the process with clear goals or high emotional intelligence. You nearly all agreed that executives with significant

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character flaws or deep-seated behavioral problems are poor coaching candidates. People suffering from deep resentment, severe narcissism, ironclad beliefs, or a victim mentality are usually unwilling to look inwards and are therefore unlikely to benefit from coaching.

An overwhelming majority of coaches attributed success to the quality of the relationship between coach and executive. Almost all of you agreed, however, that the support of the third party—the company—was also critical. Firms must be committed to the executive and his or her progress, and senior management needs to be invested in the engagement. A deep disconnect between the organization’s values and goals and those of the executives is also problematic (Q12). Coaching aims to align an executive’s values and vision; it doesn’t help people to contort themselves to a space in which they do not fit.

We also asked for your opinions of what buyers of coaching services should take into account when choosing a coach. The two most common responses were that the coach should have prior experience coaching in a similar setting, and he or she should be able to clearly explain the methods employed and why (Q16). Given the perceived importance of clear methods, we looked at what tools you thought were most valuable. Most (86%) reported that interviewing skills were paramount. Seventy-seven percent cited the 360-degree feedback instrument. Next in importance were shadowing, peer support groups, cultural assessment, and psychometrics (39%–46% rated these tools as highly important) (Q14).

### The Future

Coaching exists to help executives find solutions, yet the field of coaching must solve a few problems itself. Most of you told us that coaching as a process is highly effective but that the field feels as if it is in “adolescence.” Many of you were concerned that a lack of entry barriers leaves the profession vulnerable to being discredited by charlatans. Many also felt that action was needed to winnow out bad or ineffective coaches. Some of you suggested that an emphasis on more rigor in practice and more research on effectiveness is needed.

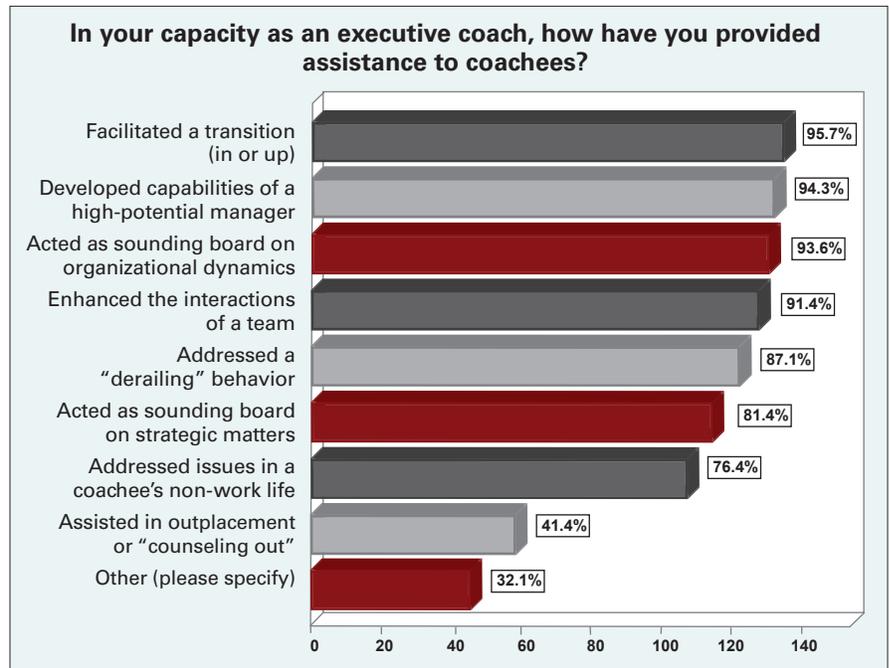
### Our Conclusion

Executive coaching does appear to be creating a space for itself in the corporate landscape, particularly with the shift toward coaching high performers. The open-ended responses often showed a surprising congruence, but sometimes lively disagreement, about where coaching needs to go from here. Although many individual coaches are skillful at helping individual companies and people, there is as yet no overarching definition, let alone organization, of the profession as a whole. Does executive coaching need such clarity to thrive? Ultimately, of course, organizations will decide.

1. In your capacity as an executive coach, how have you provided assistance to coachees? (Check all that apply)

- Addressed a “derailing” behavior
- Facilitated a transition (in or up)
- Developed capabilities of a high-potential manager
- Assisted in outplacement or “counseling out”
- Acted as sounding board on strategic matters
- Acted as sounding board on organizational dynamics
- Enhanced the interactions of a team
- Addressed issues in a coachee’s non-work life
- Other (please specify)

*The vast majority of coaches, nearly 96% of all survey respondents, have facilitated a transition, while only 41% have assisted in outplacement or “counseling out.”*



These results indicate that most of the time, coaches are facilitating transitions either into a firm or upwards within the same organization, or developing capabilities of high-potentials, or are working to enhance interactions of a team. A full 87% reported that they address derailing behaviors, and 81% act as a sounding board on strategic matters. Only 41% of coaches have assisted in outplacement, or counseling people out of employment.

**2. For which of these purposes are your services most frequently engaged?**

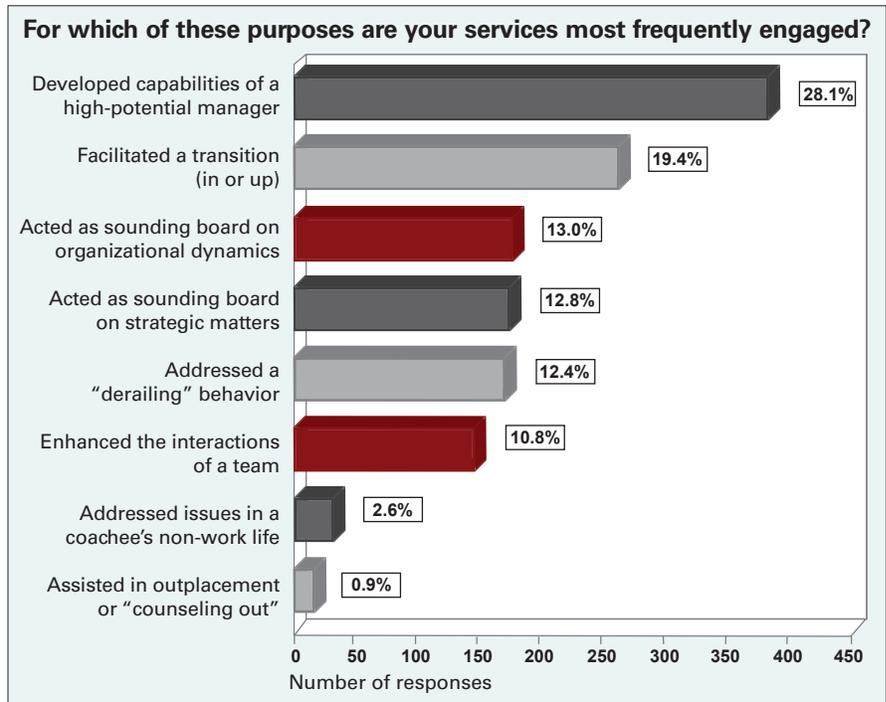
This question aimed to determine the difference—if any—between what coaches are asked to do versus what they actually do (Q1). Respondents rank-ordered the top four reasons they were hired.

We developed a point system to compare the scores from 140 different rank orderings. Each coach’s top choice received 4 points, the next choice received 3 points, and so on, in order to create an accurate weighted order.

This more complex analysis replicated a simple rank ordering.

Rank	Item	Rank	Points
1	Develop capabilities of a high-potential manger	1	385
2	Facilitate a transition (in or up)	2	266
3	Act as sounding board on organizational dynamics	3	178
4	Act as sounding board on strategic matters	4	176
5	Address a “derailing” behavior	5	170
6	Enhance the interactions of a team	6	148
7	Address issues in a coachee’s non-work life	7	35
8	Assist in outplacement or “counseling out”	8	13

Coaches reported that 48% of the time they are hired to develop high potentials or to facilitate transitions; 26% to act as a sounding board; and 12% to address a derailing behavior. Only about 3% of coaches said they were hired to address issues in a coachee’s non-work life. These results suggest that the field is shifting its focus from remedial work with problem individuals who exhibit unacceptable behaviors to the facilitation of higher performance with top-functioning executives.

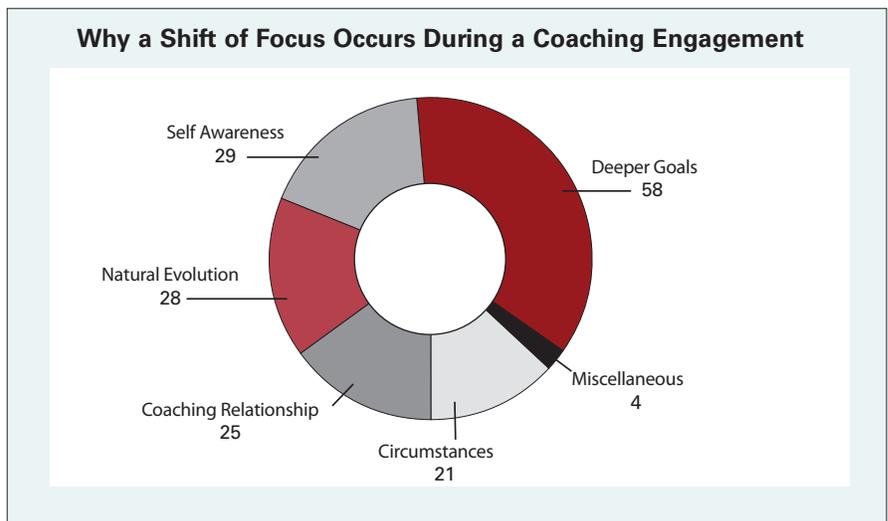


3. Does the focus of coaching sessions typically shift during the course of an engagement? Please explain below.

On this topic, coaches were overwhelmingly in agreement. All but eight respondents said that, yes, the focus did shift.

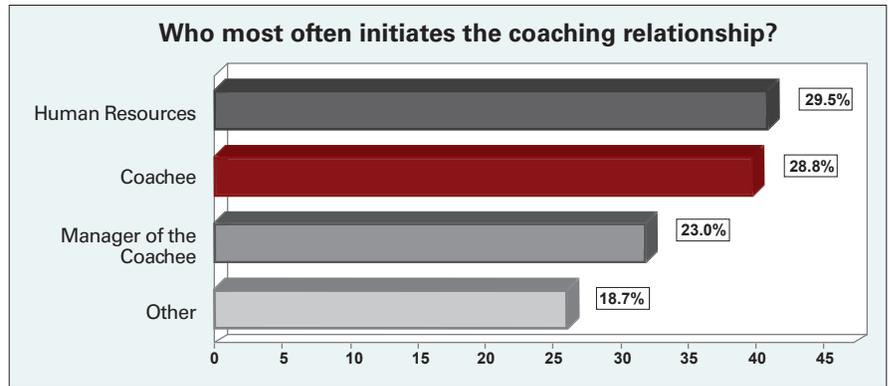
- “Over time the focus often becomes more strategic and discretionary rather than so immediate and results driven.”
- “[The sessions do] not so much ‘shift’ as refine and deepen.”
- “Yes, if the leader is promoted or changes roles during the coaching.”
- “Generally no. If the assignment is set up properly, the issues are usually very clear before the assignment gets started.”
- “The more senior the executive, the more likely [it is] that the issues will shift as the engagements tend to last longer—partly because ‘it’s lonely at the top’ and there are many key issues where someone with absolutely no axe to grind can be of great help.”
- “At first the client wants to focus on ‘doing something.’ As coaching continues, the focus moves to the ‘quality of life’ and the ‘passion of life’ and ‘living their most authentic life.’”
- “As trust and new skills take root, coaching often moves to address underlying beliefs and attitudes for deeper, more lasting change.”
- “As the coachee becomes more self-aware and understands more clearly how his/her behaviors impact others, the focus of the work changes, and we work on more in-depth issues.”
- “You are given a list of objectives that the sponsor of the program has discussed with the coachee and the coach. That becomes the roadmap. But coaching can have a lot of twists and turns.”

*When we performed a content analysis, we were able to further categorize the reasons for the shift. Please note that these are not percentages but actual numbers of responses in each category. In addition, these analyses of open-ended responses are still preliminary.*



4. Who most often initiates the coaching relationship?

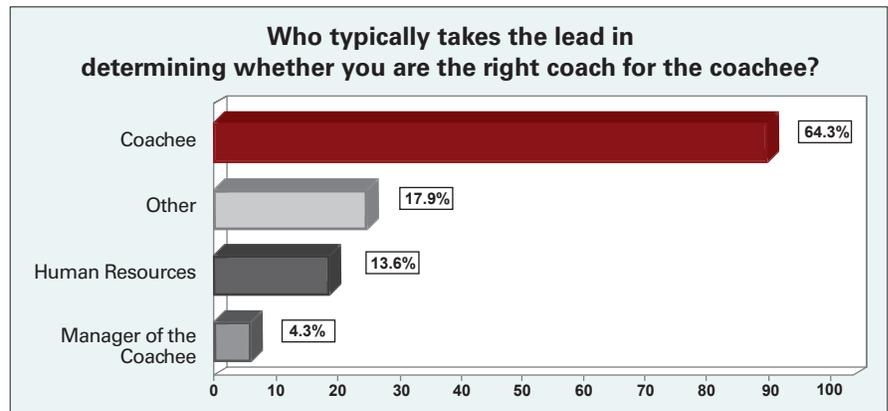
- Coachee
- Human resources
- Manager of the coachee
- Other (please specify)



The graph above is self explanatory. The large “other” category primarily consists of responses that indicated that the coachee and the corporation work jointly.

5. Who typically takes the lead in determining whether you are the right coach for the coachee?

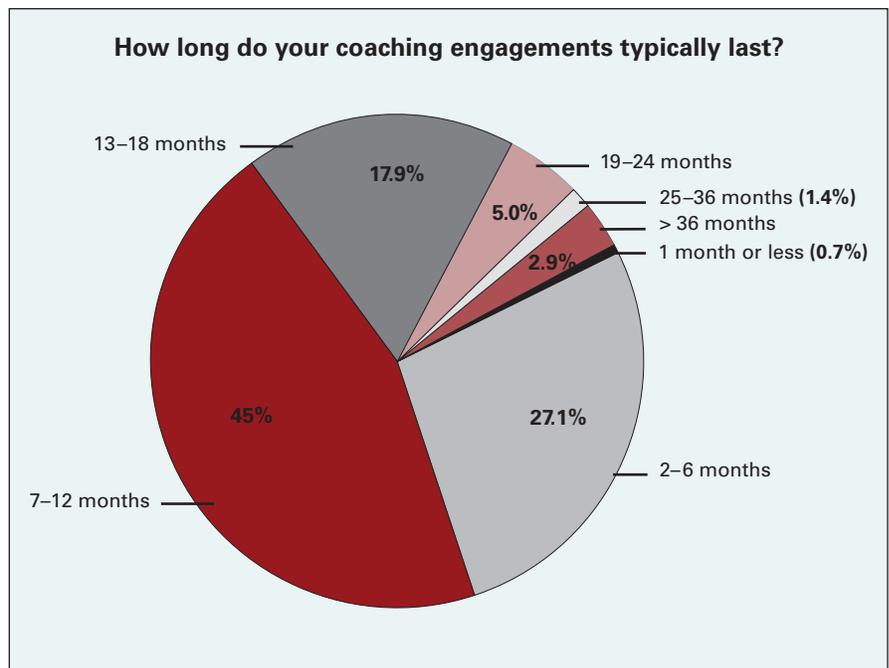
- Coachee
- Human resources
- Manager of the coachee
- Other (please specify)



The “other” responses primarily described shared responsibility between the executive and the human resources representative. Most coaches said that the executive has veto power.

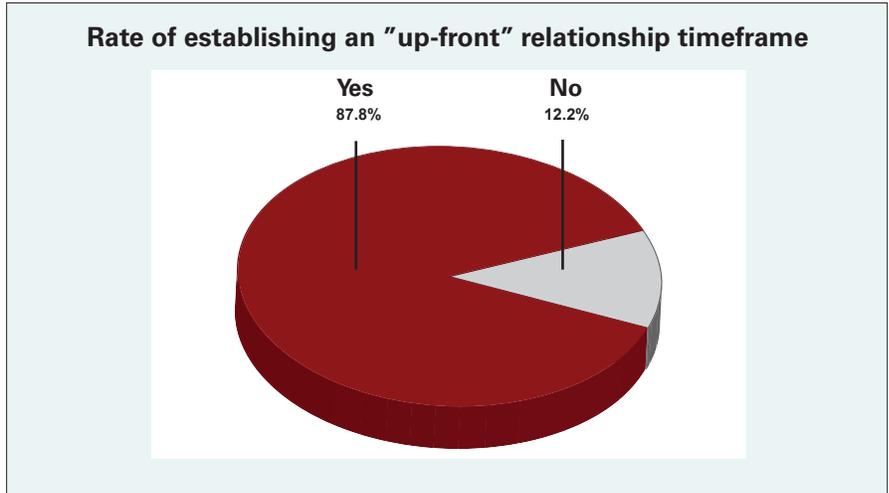
6. How long do your coaching engagements typically last?

- 1 month or less
- 2–6 months
- 7–12 months
- 13–18 months
- 19–24 months
- 25–36 months
- 25–36 months
- Longer than 36 months



Respondents reported a great range in the typical duration of their coaching engagements, from as little as one month to more than three years. By far the most popular timeframe, selected by 45%, was the 7- to 12-month range.

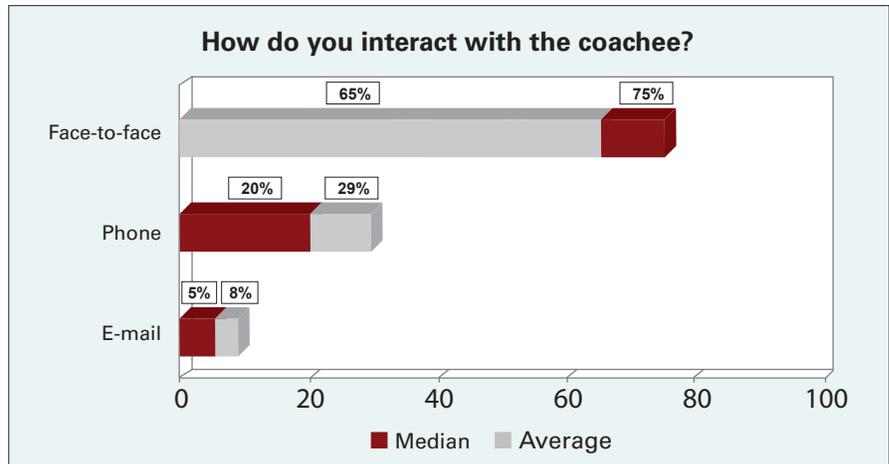
7. When you engage with a client, do you usually establish a timeframe (duration of the relationship) up front?



As the chart shows, most of our coach respondents (nearly 90%) determined how long the engagement would last before signing on to a project.

8. In a typical coaching engagement, how do you interact with the coachee?

For each category below, please indicate the percentage of the time you typically interact with the coachee via that method. (Percentages should total 100%)

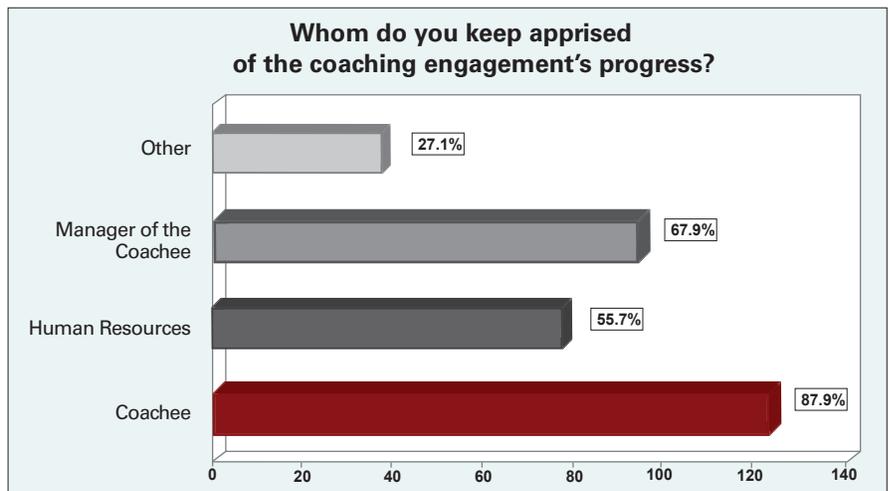


Most survey respondents said that they still engage with clients face to face, although 20% now use the phone for interactions.

9. Whom do you keep apprised of the coaching engagement's progress?  
(Check all that apply)

- Coachee
- Human resources
- Manager of the coachee
- Other (please specify)

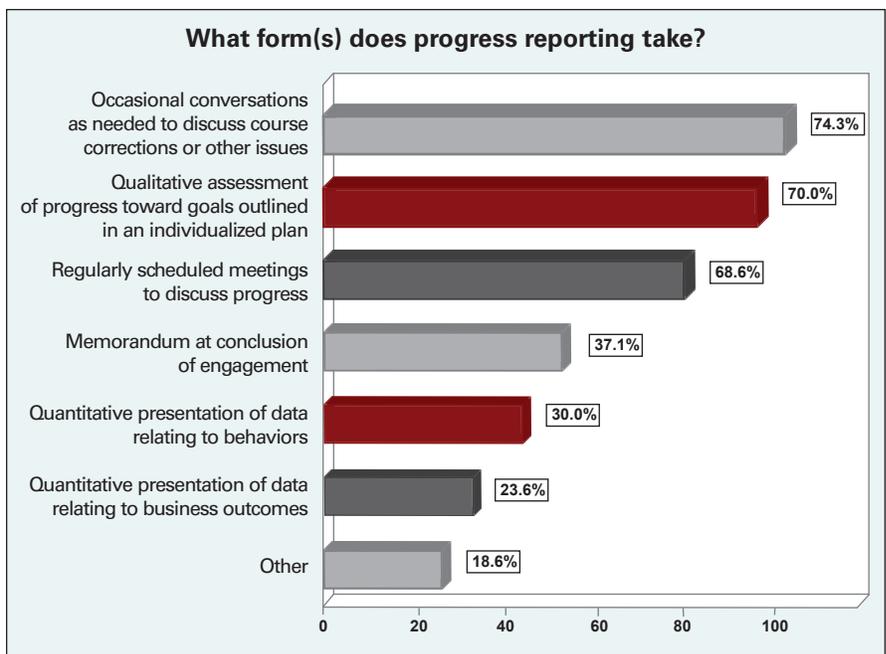
*While the open-ended responses often emphasized confidentiality, coaches told us that they do keep the manager apprised of the progress 68% of the time. Examples of responses from the "other" category show that coaches vary widely on the issue of keeping the corporation abreast of progress.*



- "It is the executive[s] responsibility to communicate results and progress. Built in, however, are joint meetings with [the] manager and calls from [the] coach to [the] manager and HR, with [the] coachee aware that these checks and balances are part of the process."
- "Many of my clients are at CEO or senior management level, and in effect, there is no one specific person to report to."
- "I will establish at the outset with the coachee, the manager, and any others involved a code of confidentiality and a process for reporting progress. In most cases, I discuss progress with the coachee at the end of each session."
- "As part of HIPO development programs and/or if the HR manager brought me in, there are regular checkpoints with HR and the manager."
- "I maintain strict confidentiality regarding the content of coaching. Reporting to human resources is given in terms of general themes of organizational value. Any reporting concerning progress to HR is [done] with the coachee present and [is] led by the coachee."
- "[It] depends on [the] organization, however, always the boss and then others such as Chief Learning Officer or Leadership Development [manager]."
- "We do not take any coaching engagement where we have to report 'progress' to anyone. We feel that would compromise the coaching relationship."

10. What form(s) does progress reporting take? (Check all that apply)

- Quantitative presentation of data relating to behaviors
- Quantitative presentation of data relating to business outcomes
- Qualitative assessment of progress toward goals outlined in an individualized plan
- Regularly scheduled meetings to discuss progress
- Occasional conversations as needed to discuss course corrections or other issues
- Memorandum at conclusion of engagement



Coaches clearly use conversations with the executive and qualitative assessments most often to report progress. What is not addressed in this question is to whom the qualitative assessments are given, or indeed, their level of sophistication and validity. The data point to a lack of quantitative progress reporting of executive behaviors and even less quantitative data on business outcomes related to the coaching.

“Other” responses included:

- “Additional 360-degree feedback to gauge progress against original 360-degree feedback report.”
- “Return on investment analysis.”
- “Follow up to 360-degree evaluations or interviews with input sources.”
- “Discussions with coachee, including reviewing original intake/desired shifts, goals, and scoring 0–10 on various issues.”
- “Meetings but not regularly scheduled ones, a sort of as-needed basis.”

**11. What type(s) of challenge have you had most success in helping coachees address?**

This question generated a wide range of responses. Many coaches mentioned helping executives become more strategic, navigate tricky political waters and transitions, and increase leadership skills. Key areas of growth of the executives include their realizing their impact on others, reducing derailing behaviors, increasing influence, and managing up or down more effectively.

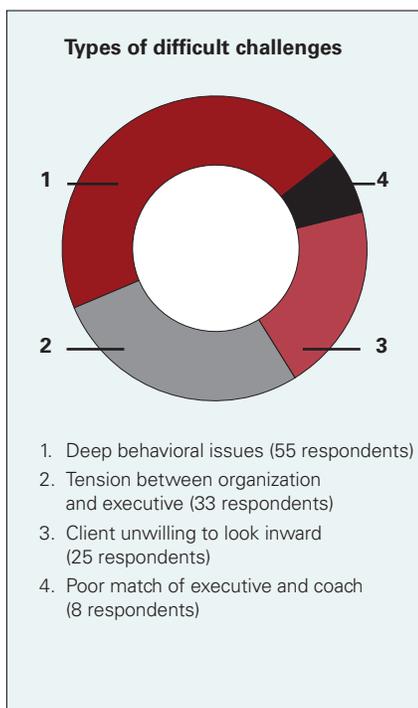
Responses included:

- “Situations where the coachee develops a better understanding of the dynamics and requirements of the situation and learns to adjust their behavior in a manner that is still authentic and consistent with their values.”
- “Eliminating fatal flaws seen as preventing the individual from being promoted to the next level.”
- “Those arising from clients going through transition. Typically the coaching leads to clients gaining useful insights about how to both manage the transition itself, and then how to operate effectively in the new domain.”
- “Helping high-performing executives acquire new insights, skills, and capabilities quickly that improve their on-the-job effectiveness.”
- “I have been successful at helping coachees to establish a vision for their professional lives and a strategy for executing successfully on current challenges.”

**12. What type(s) of challenge have you found difficult to help a coachee address?**

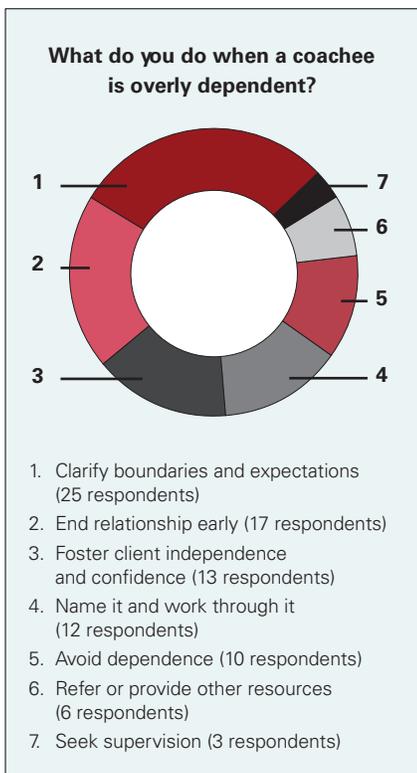
The survey responses indicated that coaching is unsuccessful when executives have severe behavioral problems, when they are unwilling to look inward, or when they have fundamentally different values from those of the organization. The behavioral challenges coaches cited as resistant to coaching include narcissism, deep resentment, a sense of resignation, and very serious self-esteem issues. While many executives don’t begin the engagement with high self awareness, they must have some interest in changing or in looking at themselves honestly—otherwise, coaching is extremely difficult. Executives who are chronic blamers, are attached to a victim mentality, or have an ironclad belief system often do not respond well to coaching.

Coaching can be extraordinarily difficult when a fundamental tension exists between the executive and the organization. For example, if there is radical discord between the values of the executive and of the organization, coaching is unlikely to be the answer to the organization’s dilemma—unless the real agenda is to “inspire” the executive to leave. A few mentioned that “bad salvage attempts” were set ups to fail. In essence, coaches cannot force executives to want to become something they are not. Nor can coaches make someone succeed at a job for which he or she is entirely unsuited, such as a promotion that is beyond the executive’s capabilities.



Specific examples of challenges cited by survey participants include:

- “If they do not agree with the need for change, the goal is impossible to achieve.”
- “Deep resentment and resignation: Coaching someone who is living and working against their values or core beliefs. Most often the conundrum is staying because the money or prestige is counter to their personal vision. (This is especially difficult when someone has stayed years, sacrificing the self for a company, and regrets not taking care of health and family.)”
- “Anything that fits in the category of the coachee trying to become something they are not—for the sake of the job or the company.”
- “Probably the most difficult challenge is with highly political organizations—typically those with complex governance structures. Such organizations often purposefully encourage internal competition. When the culture rewards an attitude or behavior (either purposefully or not), no amount of coaching will support an executive changing it.”
- “We cannot coach intellectual capacity or address deeper psychological wounds. (We will make referrals to deal with the latter.)”
- “When [the] coachee is truly being railroaded by [his or her] organization.”



**13.** Have you ever felt that a coachee had become overly dependent upon you? If so, how did you address that situation?

Only 40% of respondents said that a client had become overly dependent upon them. Coaches reported that they address situations differently when that situation did occur. When we performed a content analysis of the responses, we found that coaches most often tried to clarify boundaries.

Here are some examples of what the coaches reported:

- “I refer the coachee to the timeframe that we set up front and press ahead. If we aren’t making actual progress, just having ‘feel good’ or repetitive conversations, I suggest we end the assignment early.”
- “I work to make sure that I am always mastering my own skills so as not to slip into easier approaches that ultimately take away from the client’s self-confidence.”
- “I diminish the amount of contact while deflecting questions of ‘How should I handle this’ [by asking] ‘How do you think you should handle this?’”
- “We work hard to set expectations up front. This includes agreeing to honest feedback about things that may be hard to hear—such as dependence. If we sense this is the issue, we address it head on and help the coachee work through it. If it is not rectified, we will fire ourselves.”
- “By sharing feedback, by instilling the confidence in the person’s ability to be autonomous, [and] through coaching questioning.”
- “I actually don’t believe in over-dependency. If someone is unusually dependent for a long time it usually means there is a deficit in their

development which must be addressed. If the deficit is severe and they are aware of it, I refer them for treatment. If it [is] simply a normal dependency, which someone feels whilst learning new ways of being and working, I accept that and gradually help them to develop the robustness they need to stand alone.”

- “I always ensure that there is no dependence.”
- “When I see any evidence of possible dependency, I reflect back what I am feeling, and we discuss where else this happens. We use this as an opportunity for further learning to help build confidence in [the coachee’s] own decisions.”
- “I would examine myself to see what I was doing to foster this and correct it. [I would] encourage him/her to have the confidence to stand alone.”

14. How valuable are the following tools to you? Please rate each tool you employ on a scale of 1–10, with 10 being extremely valuable.

- 360-degree feedback collection
- Communications evaluation (such as videotaping)
- Cultural assessment
- Intelligence tests
- Interviewing
- Peer support groups
- Psychometrics
- Shadowing
- Other

How valuable are the following tools to you?

	1*	2	3	4	5*	6	7	8	9	10*
<b>360-degree feedback collection</b>	2.9% (4)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	4.4% (6)	5.1% (7)	10.9% (15)	11.7% (16)	13.1% (18)	51.8% (71)
<b>Communications evaluation (e.g., videotaping)</b>	9.0% (11)	4.9% (6)	4.1% (5)	3.3% (4)	23.0% (28)	16.4% (20)	13.9% (17)	11.5% (14)	1.6% (2)	12.3% (15)
<b>Cultural assessment</b>	6.4% (8)	1.6% (2)	0.8% (1)	0.8% (1)	20.8% (26)	11.2% (14)	16.0% (20)	22.4% (28)	10.4% (13)	9.6% (12)
<b>Intelligence tests</b>	37.5% (45)	10.8% (13)	9.2% (11)	7.5% (9)	24.2% (29)	3.3% (4)	4.2% (5)	0.8% (1)	1.7% (2)	0.8% (1)
<b>Interviewing</b>	0.7% (1)	0.7% (1)	0.7% (1)	1.5% (2)	1.5% (2)	3.7% (5)	4.5% (6)	16.4% (22)	11.9% (16)	58.2% (78)
<b>Peer support groups</b>	5.9% (7)	3.4% (4)	2.5% (3)	2.5% (3)	19.3% (23)	10.1% (12)	10.1% (12)	23.5% (28)	10.1% (12)	12.6% (15)
<b>Psychometrics</b>	3.9% (5)	2.3% (3)	1.6% (2)	5.5% (7)	18.8% (24)	10.9% (14)	18.0% (23)	14.1% (18)	14.1% (18)	10.9% (14)
<b>Shadowing</b>	5.5% (7)	1.6% (2)	3.9% (5)	3.1% (4)	13.4% (17)	14.2% (18)	11.8% (15)	15.7% (20)	11.0% (14)	19.7% (25)
<b>Other</b>	3.6% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	7.1% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	10.7% (3)	14.3% (4)	64.3% (18)

\* 1 = Not at all valuable, 5 = Neutral, 10 = Extremely valuable

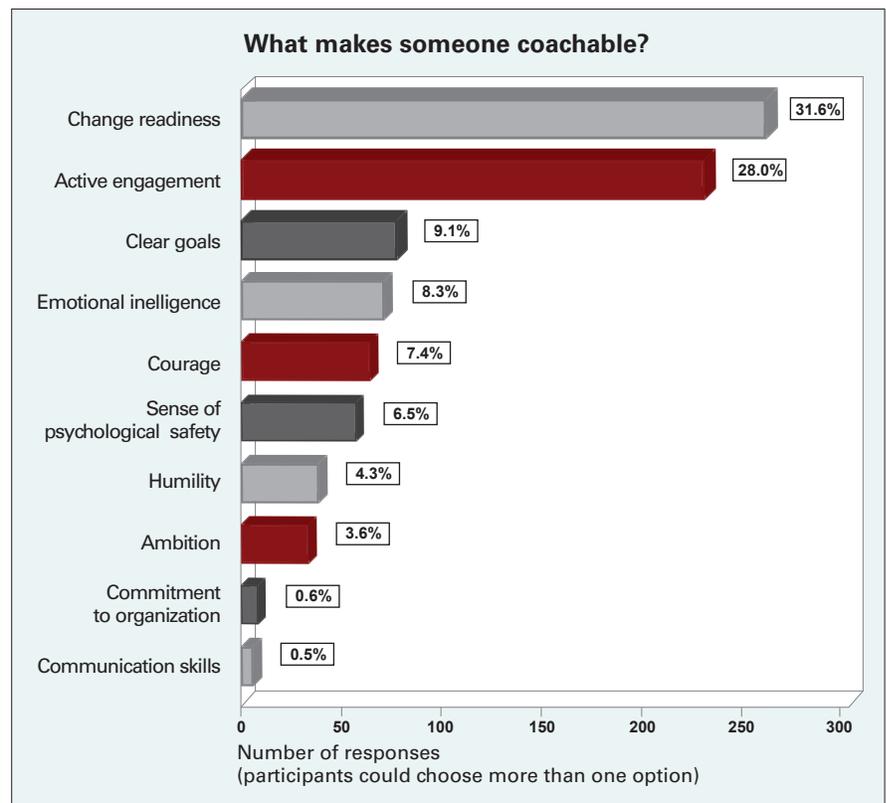
To make the chart more useful, we collapsed the figures, looking only at what percentage of coaches rated a tool to be particularly valuable (scoring 8–10). Percentages of coaches who thought each area was important to extremely important (rating 8–10) are as follows:

How valuable are the following tools to you?	
Interviewing	86%
360-degree feedback collection	77%
Shadowing	46%
Peer support groups	46%
Cultural assessment	42%
Psychometrics	39%
Communications evaluation ( such as videotaping)	25%
Intelligence tests	3%

Additional tools mentioned by coaches include values inventories, EQ instruments, Extended-DISC, Myers-Briggs, qualitative 360, utilizing internal material, and Hays surveys.

15. What makes someone coachable? Please select and rank order the top three reasons from the list below.

- Active engagement
- Change readiness
- Clear goals
- Communication skills
- Emotional intelligence
- Ambition
- Sense of psychological safety
- Commitment to organization
- Courage



Change readiness and being actively engaged in the process were the most frequently cited factors that contribute to making a person coachable, according to survey participants. Many coaches felt that the rest of the qualities emerged from the coaching process; they were not prerequisites for coaching.

16. In general, how much importance should buyers of coaching services attach to each of the following in their selections of coaches? Please rate each of the following using a scale of 1–10, with 10 being extremely important.

- Certification in a proven coaching method
- Experience coaching in similar setting
- Experience working in similar setting
- Clear methodology
- Background in organizational development
- Background in executive search
- Experience as a psychological therapist
- Experience as a coachee
- Status as thought leader
- Quality of client list
- Ability to measure return on investment

**How much importance should buyers of coaching services attach to each of the following in their selections of coaches?**

	1*	2	3	4	5*	6	7	8	9	10*
<b>Certification in a proven coaching method</b>	16.8% (23)	8.8% (12)	3.6% (5)	2.2% (3)	24.1% (33)	9.5% (13)	6.6% (9)	8.8% (12)	8.8% (12)	10.9% (15)
<b>Experience coaching in similar setting</b>	0.0% (0)	0.7% (1)	1.4% (2)	0.7% (1)	2.2% (3)	15.9% (22)	13.8% (19)	24.6% (34)	19.6% (27)	21.0% (29)
<b>Experience working in similar setting</b>	6.0% (8)	4.5% (6)	6.7% (9)	3.7% (5)	23.1% (31)	13.4% (18)	15.7% (21)	12.7% (17)	5.2% (7)	9.0% (12)
<b>Clear methodology</b>	1.5% (2)	0.0% (0)	2.2% (3)	3.0% (4)	8.1% (11)	17.0% (23)	7.4% (10)	18.5% (25)	13.3% (18)	28.9% (39)
<b>Background in organizational development</b>	8.1% (11)	4.4% (6)	7.4% (10)	5.9% (8)	16.2% (22)	12.5% (17)	10.3% (14)	21.3% (29)	7.4% (10)	6.6% (9)
<b>Background in executive search</b>	44.4% (59)	10.5% (14)	9.0% (12)	5.3% (7)	24.8% (33)	3.8% (5)	0.8% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	1.5% (2)
<b>Experience as psychological therapist</b>	27.2% (37)	8.1% (11)	9.6% (13)	2.2% (3)	24.3% (33)	7.4% (10)	8.1% (11)	5.9% (8)	2.9% (4)	4.4% (6)
<b>Experience as a coachee</b>	6.6% (9)	3.7% (5)	4.4% (6)	4.4% (6)	16.9% (23)	15.4% (21)	11.8% (16)	11.0% (15)	8.1% (11)	17.6% (24)
<b>Status as thought leader in the field</b>	6.7% (9)	4.5% (6)	5.2% (7)	2.2% (3)	25.4% (34)	14.9% (20)	15.7% (21)	14.2% (19)	7.5% (10)	3.7% (5)
<b>Quality of client list</b>	2.9% (4)	2.2% (3)	2.2% (3)	0.7% (1)	9.6% (13)	11.8% (16)	20.6% (28)	23.5% (32)	15.4% (21)	11.0% (15)
<b>Ability to measure return on investment</b>	2.9% (4)	5.8% (8)	5.8% (8)	3.6% (5)	16.1% (22)	16.8% (23)	16.8% (23)	13.9% (19)	9.5% (13)	8.8% (12)
<b>Other</b>	3.9% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	3.9% (2)	3.9% (2)	3.9% (2)	3.9% (2)	11.8% (6)	68.6% (35)

\* 1 = Not at all important, 5 = Neutral, 10 = Extremely important

As in question 14, we collapsed the figures in order to determine the percentage of coaches who rated a particular category to be important or extremely important (rating 8–10).

Criteria	Percentage thought important
Experience coaching in similar setting	65%
Clear methodology	61%
Quality of client list	50%
Experience as a coachee	36%
Background in organizational development	35%
Ability to measure return on investment	32%
Certification in a proven coaching method	29%
Experience working in similar setting	27%
Status as thought leader in the field	25%
Experience as psychological therapist	13%
Background in executive search	2%

17. What are the similarities and differences between coaching and consulting?

Several themes emerged from the responses of coaches. Both coaching and consulting, they told us, involve management and goal setting, and both fields involve planning and evaluating change. Both, too, rely on a wide range of tools, and they are financed by the company rather than individual executives.

But respondents also pointed out several clear differences. Consultants are concerned with the performance of the organization, for instance, whereas coaches are more concerned with the health of the individual. And while consultants are expected to devise frameworks and provide solutions, coaches are tapped to help executives find their own answers. Some coaches pointed out that consulting builds hierarchical relationships, but coaching assumes equality in the relationship between coach and executive.

Some examples from the respondents of comparisons between the two disciplines include:

- "Coaching involves a personal commitment to the coachee that supercedes the commitment to the organization."
- "They have very similar components: good listening, giving the clients what they need, keeping one's agenda at a minimum.... Consultants do glossy, color-coordinated briefs; coaches have conversations."
- "Coaching is more of a personal or team dynamic; consulting is about understanding a strategic or organizational issue."
- "Both seek first to assess, then to plan, then to implement, then to evaluate change."
- "As a consultant you are getting paid for having the right answers. As a coach you are getting paid for having the right questions."
- "Coaching is non-directive and [is] about pulling the solutions out, and consulting is directive and putting the solutions in."
- "Trust is key in both. High capacity to listen and to be persuasive and credible. The greatest difference is who is the primary client."
- "Coaching is about supporting the clients in identifying an answer that leads to change. Consulting is about providing the client with an answer that leads to change."
- "Consultants are paid to be right and, therefore, give answers. The consultant is the center of attention. Coaches are paid to build the capacity of others. The coachee is the center of attention."

18. What are the similarities and differences between coaching and therapy?

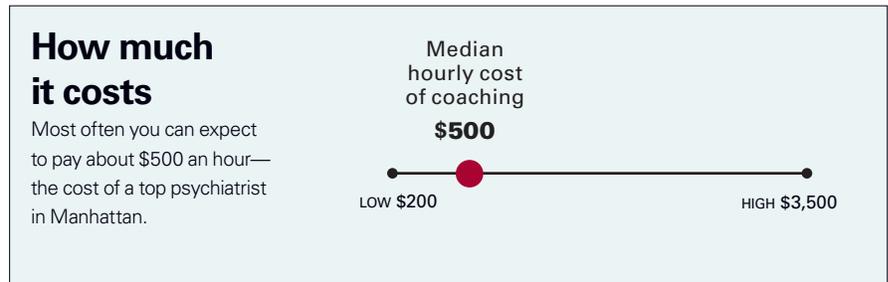
Coaches offered the following comparisons between the two disciplines:

- “Both happen in conversation; both are intimate relationships; both are outcome focused. Therapy includes an intentional focus on healing; coaching does not. Therapy presupposes a problem to be solved. Coaching presupposes mental health and has a more forward-looking focus on growth. While healing may occur as a result of coaching, it is not an intention.”
- “Executive coaching is based on achieving business results and is therefore focused on the client’s success in his role at work. The client’s past is irrelevant.”
- “Therapy often focuses on the past and looks at how past events have influenced the present. Coaching focuses on the future, visiting the past for perspective but creating action in the present to create new outcomes in the future.”
- “Therapy often begins with an assumption that the client (patient) is broken and needs fixing. At the very least, the therapist is focused on bringing the client to some level of normalcy. The coach sees his or her client as naturally creative, resourceful, and whole, and capable of self-discovery and purposeful action.”
- “Coaching focuses on solutions; therapy too often focuses on insights that lead to understanding, but little action.”
- “Coaching and therapy should never [be] blurred. It is imperative that a coach knows when a person needs a therapist versus a coach, and [he or she] should have referral sources for clients that need that kind of help.”
- “They both invite self reflection and self awareness and behavior change. They both create safe spaces for doing so.”

Comparison of the answers from questions 17 and 18

CONSULTING	Overlap	COACHING	Overlap	THERAPY
Focuses on organizational performance	Advises individual leaders on business matters	Focuses on the future	Paid to ask the right questions	Focuses on the past
Paid to come up with answers and frameworks	Involves management in goal setting	Works with healthy individuals	Tackles difficult issues at work and home	Diagnoses and treats dysfunctionality
Provides expert advice on business matters	Plans, evaluates, and assesses change	Helps executives to discover their own path	Focuses on individual behavioral change	Sets cure as the primary goal
Strives for objectivity	Uses broad array of tools	Fosters individual performance in a business context	Explores subjective experience	Paid for by the individual
Provides quantitative analysis of problems	Based on organizational ethics	Advises individual leaders on business matters	Tolerates failure	Based on medical ethics
Builds hierarchical relationships	Paid for by the company	Assumes an equal relationship between the executive and coach	Builds individual capabilities	Confidentiality is protected by law
<b>Shared by Consultants, Coaches, and Therapists:</b>				
Rely heavily on trust-based relationships Honor the confidentiality needs of the client Keep their personal agenda at a minimum Build on other disciplines				

19. What is the typical cost range, per hour, to employ a top-tier coach?



Compensation rates for coaches vary widely: from between \$200 an hour up to \$3,500 an hour. The median rate, however, is \$500 an hour, and most coaches reported charging somewhere between \$500 and \$725 per hour.

20. Reflecting on one of your favorite “success stories” as a coach, what were the key factors behind its success?

The responses revealed three key factors behind coaching success.

**The executive’s motivation and commitment to change.** Executives who get the most out of coaching are those with a fierce willingness to “learn,” “evolve,” and “be vulnerable.” Coaches also cite qualities such as courage, humor, and humility.

**The support of the company.** Firms must be committed to their executives’ progress and must truly desire to retain and develop the coached executive. Buy-in from senior management is crucial.

**Clarity of goals.** Whether the goals of the coaching engagement are for developing leadership behaviors or for facilitating deep organizational change, the company, the executive, and the coach all need to be clear from the start about the desired outcome of the investment.

**21. To what do you attribute the growth of the executive coaching industry?**

According to survey respondents, coaching:

- Delivers improved management performance.
- Helps executives manage business complexity.
- Accelerates leadership development.
- Replaces in-house mentors.

Coaches also stated that the growth of coaching is due, at least in part, to a new perception of the practice as one of positive talent development rather than one of behavioral correction.

Respondents answers to question 21 include:

- “[There is a] growing recognition that most executive development is achieved through customized individualized ways [rather than through] programmatic efforts.”
- “The increased rate of change in business.”
- “The need that organizations have to retain and develop talent in a competitive market and also to address performance and effectiveness issues in a direct, personal way with important, but challenging, top performers.”
- “[There is a] huge need among executives to build leadership skills, most specifically to manage people—a level of emotional maturity and introspective capacity that very few senior executives have.”
- “Executives can lead very lonely lives. Coaches allow for conversations they cannot have with superiors, peers, employees, or family.”
- “Coaching is a safe place to have difficult conversations.”
- “Management has become so busy that they don’t have time to communicate and provide support to their employees.”

**22. What are your thoughts on executive coaching as a profession?**

Most respondents felt that while coaching skills are highly developed, the profession itself is not. More than 80 coaches (over half) said that the field is not mature—it is in its “adolescence.” Other respondents cited lack of rigor in the field and a problem with charlatan coaches. Some believe that a shakeout in the field will ensue, perhaps as a result of these issues, and others call for a credentialing process.

Excerpts from coaches’ responses include:

- “The profession is not yet mature, but the power of coaching is clear. Our particular challenge is organizing ourselves and delivering to stringent criteria rather than flying by the seat of our collective pants.”
- “I expect the profession to grow and for credentialing to become more rigorous over time.”
- “The profession is as mature as each individual coach. It will continue to grow as long as it adds value. Along the way incompetent coaches will be weeded out, and competent coaches will flourish.”
- “I believe it is on the rise: More and more executives and teams are facing issues too complex to deal with on their own without outside perspective.”

Carol Kauffman plans to continue researching the field of coaching. If you are interested in participating in further studies, please contact her at [Carol\\_Kauffman@hms.harvard.edu](mailto:Carol_Kauffman@hms.harvard.edu).

- “It is still in its infancy and suffers from a lack of clear standards.... Buyer beware is the motto right now.”
- “There are a lot of charlatans out there who give the profession a bad name. I expect it will become more professionalized over time.”
- “This is a business that needs a shakeout. More money is being made in coach education than in coaching, and the lack of entry barriers (other than marketing) is a problem.”
- “The industry is maturing. We will see more coaches coming from university graduate programs as it becomes more of a recognized profession.”
- “It’s not mature yet. I worry that there are many people out there who believe because they’ve worked in business they can be a coach without any training.”

23. Please provide us with any other insights you have about the realities of coaching that we have not yet addressed.

Our open-ended question prompted a variety of responses:

- “Corporations need to be trained how to identify excellence in a coach, just as they identify excellence in a business consultant. It might be very interesting for HBR to look at what makes a great executive coach.”
- “Knowing what type of coaching best serves the immediate and long-term needs of clients is important. Like in medicine, sometimes a specialist is what is needed.”
- “[There is a] need to standardize the professions without stifling it.”
- “To be credible, coaching must codify its purpose, objective, methodologies, and ethics and generate credible research that measures real impact.”
- “Coaching is particularly effective with mid-career women looking for a second wind or who are ready to play a bigger game.”
- “I think your survey has missed the human dimension as a grounding philosophy for coaching. To the extent that leaders can embrace their own humanity, honor their imperfect-ness and embrace more wholeness, [we will] actually have more productive companies.”
- “Organizational politics and procedures can restrict coaching’s potential as a key component of positive change.”
- “The skilled worker is someone who can adapt styles/tools/processes to meet the needs of the coachee within the business context. It is important to remember that the client is the paying organization.”
- “Few, if any, coach-training companies have a system whereby they only accredit the best coaches on their courses. [This practice] only increases the number of mediocre coaches in the market.”
- “I think that the ROI aspect of the process needs to be addressed more fully. To do this, you need coaches skilled in assessment, statistics, and psychometrics.”

These survey results shed new light on the current state of coaching practice.

BY DIANE COUTU AND  
CAROL KAUFFMAN



## What Can Coaches Do for You?

The coaching field is filled with contradictions. Coaches themselves disagree over why they're hired, what they do, and how to measure success. Here's what you should know.

Joshua Gorchov

**IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY**, the French statesman Cardinal Richelieu relied heavily on the advice of Father François Leclerc du Tremblay, known as France's *éminence grise* for his gray monk's habit. Like the famous cardinal, today's business leaders have their gray eminences. But these advisers aren't monks bound by a vow of poverty. They're usually called executive coaches, and they can earn up to \$3,500 an hour.

To understand what they do to merit that money, HBR conducted a survey of 140 leading coaches and invited five experts to comment on the findings. As you'll see, the commentators have

conflicting views about where the field is going – and ought to go – reflecting the contradictions that surfaced among the respondents. Commentators and coaches alike felt that the bar needs to be raised in various areas for the industry to mature, but there was no consensus on how that could be done. They did generally agree, however, that the reasons companies engage coaches have changed. Ten years ago, most companies engaged a coach to help fix toxic behavior at the top. Today, most coaching is about developing the capabilities of high-potential performers. As a result of this broader mission, there’s a lot more fuzziness around such issues as how coaches define the scope of engagements, how they measure and report on progress, and the credentials a company should use to select a coach.

Do companies and executives get value from their coaches? When we asked coaches to explain the healthy growth of their industry, they said that clients keep coming back because “coaching works.” Yet the survey results also suggest that the industry is fraught with conflicts of interest, blurry lines between what is the province of coaches and what should be left to mental health professionals, and sketchy mechanisms for monitoring the effectiveness of a coaching engagement.

Bottom line: Coaching as a business tool continues to gain legitimacy, but the fundamentals of the industry are still in flux. In this market, as in so many others today, the old saw still applies: Buyer beware!

**Diane Coutu** ([dcoutu@harvardbusiness.org](mailto:dcoutu@harvardbusiness.org)) is a senior editor at Harvard Business Review. **Carol Kauffman** ([carol\\_kauffman@hms.harvard.edu](mailto:carol_kauffman@hms.harvard.edu)) is an executive coach, a psychologist, and an assistant clinical professor at Harvard Medical School in Boston.

» [hbr.org](http://hbr.org)  
See the complete results from HBR’s survey of coaches at [coaching.hbr.org](http://coaching.hbr.org).

WHAT THE COACHES SAY

# Did you know...

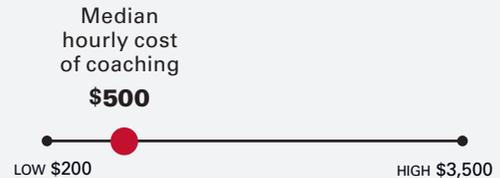
## Top 3 reasons coaches are engaged

Coaches are no longer most often hired to usher toxic leaders out the door.

- 1 Develop high potentials or facilitate transition ..... **48%**
- 2 Act as a sounding board ..... **26%**
- 3 Address derailing behavior ..... **12%**

## How much it costs

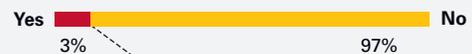
Most often you can expect to pay about \$500 an hour – the cost of a top psychiatrist in Manhattan.



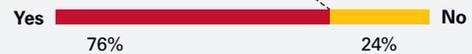
## Is coaching personal?

Companies may not hire coaches to attend to issues in executives’ personal lives, but more often than not, personal matters creep in.

Are you frequently hired to address personal issues?



Have you ever assisted executives with personal issues?



## What to look for in a coach

Respondents had mixed views on what qualifications are important.



# The Coaching Industry: A Work in Progress

BY RAM CHARAN

**THERE'S NO QUESTION** that future leaders will need constant coaching. As the business environment becomes more complex, they will increasingly turn to coaches for help in understanding how to act. The kind of coaches I am talking about will do more than influence

this direction, but most are still boutique firms specializing in, for example, administering and interpreting 360-degree evaluations. To get beyond this level, the industry badly needs a leader who can define the profession and create a serious firm in the way that Marvin Bower



The industry badly needs a leader who can define the profession, the way Marvin Bower did for management consulting.

behaviors; they will be an essential part of the leader's learning process, providing knowledge, opinions, and judgment in critical areas. These coaches will be retired CEOs or other experts from universities, think tanks, and government.

Clearly, this is not a description of what most coaches do today, as the survey results demonstrate. What we think of as coaching is generally a service to middle managers provided by entrepreneurs with a background in consulting, psychology, or human resources. This kind of coaching became popular over the past five years because companies faced a shortage of talent and were concerned about turnover among key employees. Firms wanted to signal their commitment to developing their high-potential executives, so they hired coaches. At the same time, businesspeople needed to develop not just quantitative capabilities but also people-oriented skills, and many coaches are helpful for that. As coaching has become more common, any stigma attached to receiving it at the individual level has disappeared. Now, it is often considered a badge of honor.

The coaching industry will remain fragmented until a few partnerships build a brand, collect stellar people, weed out those who are not so good, and create a reputation for outstanding work. Some coaching groups are evolving in

did when he invented the modern professional management consultancy in the form of McKinsey & Company.

A big problem that tomorrow's professional coaching firm must resolve is the difficulty of measuring performance, as the coaches themselves point out in the survey. I'm aware of no research that has followed coached executives over long periods; most of the evidence around effectiveness remains anecdotal. My sense is that the positive stories outnumber the negative ones – but as the industry matures, coaching firms will need to be able to demonstrate how they bring about change, as well as offer a clear methodology for measuring results.

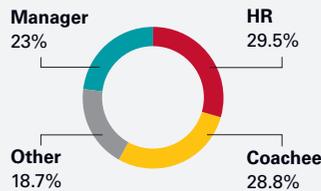
Despite the recession, I agree with most survey respondents that the demand for coaching will not contract in the long term. The big developing economies – Brazil, China, India, and Russia – are going to have a tremendous appetite for it because management there is very youthful. University graduates are coming into jobs at 23 years old and finding that their bosses are all of 25, with the experience to match.

**Ram Charan** has coached CEOs and other top executives of *Fortune* 100 companies. He is the author of 14 books, including *Leadership in an Era of Economic Uncertainty* (McGraw-Hill, 2009).

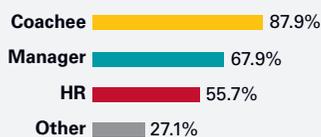
## Who is involved?

Though they acknowledged that confidentiality was central to successful coaching, respondents said that in most cases, they gave updates on coachees' progress to other stakeholders in the organization.

Who typically initiates the coaching relationship?



Who is kept apprised of progress?



## How long it takes



# Does Your Coach Give You Value for Your Money?

BY DAVID B. PETERSON

**FORTY YEARS AGO**, no one talked about executive coaching. Twenty years ago, coaching was mainly directed at talented but abrasive executives who were likely to be fired if something didn't change. Today, coaching is a popular and potent solution for ensuring top performance

ance. It's rare that companies hire business coaches to address non-work issues (only 3% of coaches said they were hired primarily to attend to such matters), yet more than three-quarters of coaches report having gotten into personal territory at some time. In part this reflects



Fewer than one-fourth of the respondents said they provide any kind of **quantitative data** on business outcomes of the coaching.

from an organization's most critical talent. Almost half the coaches surveyed in this study reported that they are hired primarily to work with executives on the positive side of coaching – developing high-potential talent and facilitating a transition in or up. Another 26% said that they are most often called in to act as a sounding board on organizational dynamics or strategic matters. Relatively few coaches said that organizations most often hire them to address a derailing behavior.

The research also revealed an important insight about what companies ask coaches to do and what they actually end up doing. Consider work/life bal-

the extensive experience of the coaches in this survey (only 10% had five years or less experience). It also underscores the fact that for most executives, work and life issues cannot be kept entirely separate. This is particularly true of senior executives who spend grueling hours on the job and are often on the road and away from home. Many of them feel some strain on their personal lives. Not surprisingly, therefore, the more coaches can tap into a leader's motivation to improve his or her home life, the greater and more lasting the impact of the coaching is likely to be at work.

The problem is when organizations ask for one thing and get something else.

Often companies have no idea what the coaches are really doing.

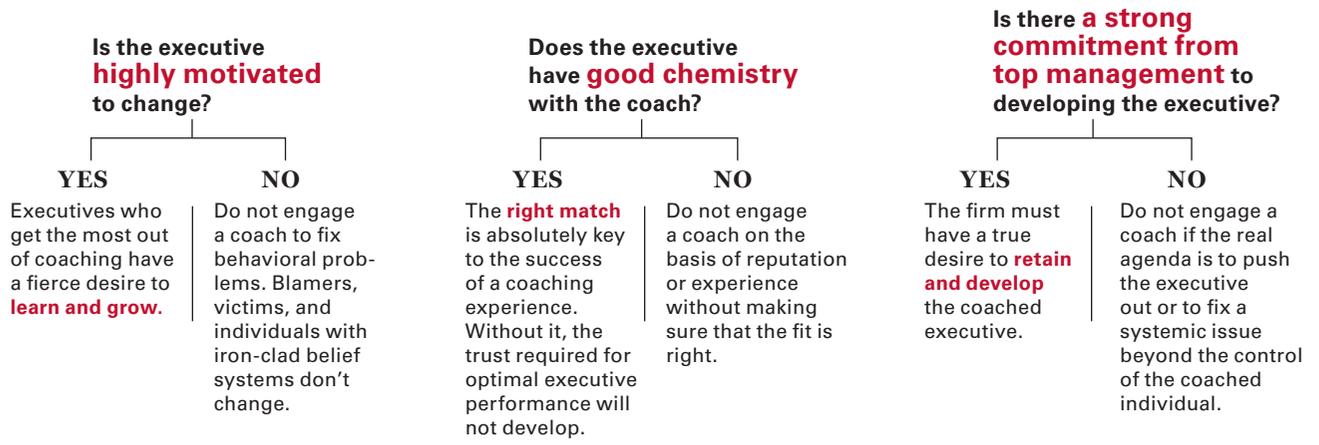
One reason seems to be that coaches can be very lax in evaluating the impact of their work and communicating results to executives and stakeholders. While 70% of coaches surveyed said they provide qualitative assessment of progress, fewer than one-third ever give feedback in the form of quantitative data on behaviors, and less than one-fourth provide any kind of quantitative data on business outcomes of the coaching engagement. Even this may represent a somewhat optimistic picture, given that this data comes from the coaches themselves.

While it can be difficult to draw explicit links between coaching intervention and an executive's performance, it is certainly not difficult to obtain basic information about improvements in that executive's managerial behaviors. Coaching is a time-intensive and expensive engagement, and organizations that hire coaches should insist on getting regular and formal progress reviews, even if they are only qualitative. Judging from this survey, companies won't get them unless they ask for them.

**David B. Peterson** (david.peterson@personneldecisions.com) is a senior vice president at Personnel Decisions International in Minneapolis and leads PDI's executive coaching practice.



## WHAT THE SURVEY SAYS Ingredients of a successful coaching relationship



# The Dangers of Dependence on Coaches

BY MICHAEL MACCOBY

**ALL COACHES RECOGNIZE** that they should be making you more competent and self-reliant. If the coaching relationship isn't doing that, it's very likely that you're becoming overly dependent. Dependence isn't always bad, of course – friends relying on one another, for example, is a good thing. But we all know people who can't make a decision without first talking to their psychotherapists, and some executives defer to their coaches in the same way. They have conversations with the coach that they ought to be having with other executives in the C-suite or with their teams.

The data in this survey show that more than half of the respondents think their clients do not become overly dependent on them. In my view, that's unrealistic. Coaches have an economic incentive to ignore the problem of dependency, creating a potential conflict of interest. It's natural for them to want to expand their business, but the best coaches, like the best therapists, put their clients' interests first. Harry Levinson, the father of coaching, worked with the top executives of his day. He said that if a coach wasn't aware of the dependency dynamic, then he had no right

to be a coach. What this means for you is that before you hire a coach, you should ask him how he handles dependency in relationships.

A related finding of the survey deserves special attention: Although almost 90% of the respondents reported that they establish a time frame prior to starting an engagement, all but eight said that the focus of the assignment shifts from the original intent. There are no data in the survey about the mechanics of how those engagements shift, but



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in my 35 years of working in the field, I have observed that it's typically a matter of coaches recontracting with executives. Coaches who are essentially consultants may have a contract with you to work out strategy, for example, and then may offer to stay on to help with implementation. Or if you hire a coach to help you be a better team player, she may suggest that you need additional work in managing upward or working with difficult

but creative subordinates. All this takes more time – and money. Extending contracts is not necessarily unethical. Just be aware that your coach may be asking you to recontract for more than you bargained for or really need.

Two particular kinds of shift in focus, though, are dangerous and should be avoided. One is when a behavioralist coach (my term for someone who monitors your behavior) seduces you into a form of psychotherapy without making that explicit. For example, he or she may say that you are now ready to explore deeper issues that keep you from realizing your full potential. The other is when personal coaches morph into business advisers. In these cases,

your coach becomes a kind of speaking partner – someone you can bounce strategic ideas off of. That can be just as dangerous because it's a rare coach who has deep knowledge about your business.

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## WHAT THE SURVEY SAYS

### Does the focus of coaching engagements shift?

All but eight of the 140 respondents said that over time their focus shifts from what they were originally hired to do.

**“Absolutely!** It starts out with a business bias and inevitably migrates to ‘bigger issues’ such as life purpose, work/life balance, and becoming a better leader.”

**“Generally no.** If the assignment is set up properly, the issues are usually very clear before the assignment gets started.”

# How Do You Pick a Coach?

BY P. ANNE SCOULAR

**THERE ARE TWO BASIC RULES** for hiring a coach. First, make sure that the executive is ready and willing to be coached. Second, allow the executive to choose whom he or she wants to work with, regardless of who in the organization initiated the engagement. The survey data support this emphatically: Willingness and good chemistry were by far the most frequently cited ingredients of a successful coaching relationship. Beyond that, respondents had strong and sometimes divergent opinions about what matters most in hiring a coach.

The surveyed coaches agreed for the most part that companies need to look

feedback and in-depth interviews. From an organization's perspective, methodology is a good way to winnow the pile. If a prospective coach can't tell you exactly what methodology he uses – what he does and what outcomes you can expect – show him the door. Top business coaches are as clear about what they don't do as about what they can deliver. For example, a good coach will be able to tell you up front whether or not she is willing to serve as a sounding board on strategic matters.

Significantly, coaches were evenly split on the importance of certification. Although a number of respondents

itiation – whereby reliable international bodies subject providers to a rigorous audit and accredit only those that meet tough standards.

What should be the focus of that accreditation? One of the most unexpected findings of this survey is that coaches (even some of the psychologists in the survey) do not place high value on a background as a psychologist; they ranked it second from the bottom on a list of possible credentials. That's surprising; some of the organizations I've worked with will hire *only* psychologists as coaches. It may be that most of the survey respondents see little connection between formal training as a psychologist and business insight – which, in my experience as a trainer of coaches, is the most important factor in successful coaching.

Although experience and clear methodologies are important, the best credential is a satisfied customer. A full 50% of the coaches in the survey indicated that businesses select them on the basis of personal references. So before you sign on the dotted line with a coach, make sure you talk to a few people she has coached before.

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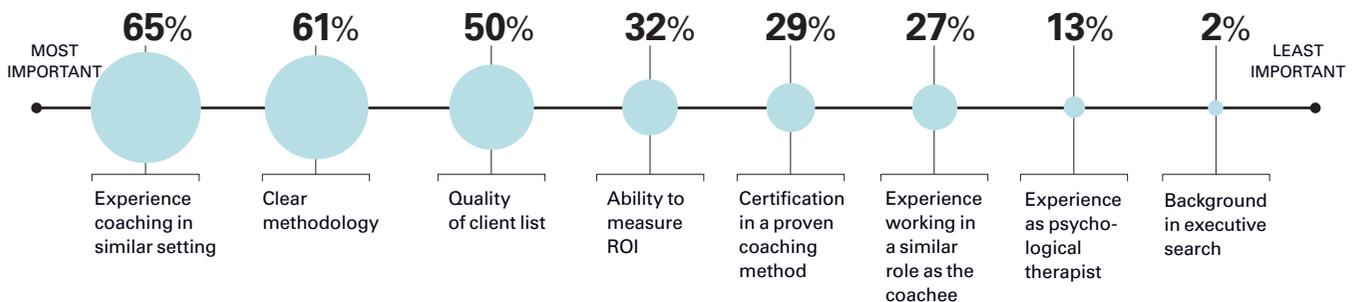
for someone who had experience coaching in a similar situation, but hadn't necessarily worked in that setting. Organizations should also take into account whether the coach has a clear methodology. According to the survey data, different coaches value different methodologies. Some coaches begin with 360-degree feedback, for example, while others rely more on psychological

said that the field is filled with charlatans, many of them lack confidence that certification on its own is reliable. Part of the problem is the number of different certificates: In the UK alone about 50 organizations issue certificates; buyers are understandably confused about which ones are credible. Currently, there is a move away from self-certification by training businesses and toward *accred-*



## WHAT THE SURVEY SAYS Buyer's Guide

We asked the coaches what companies should look for when hiring a coach. Here's how various qualifications stacked up.



(Percentages of respondents who ranked these qualifications as "very important.")

# Coach or Couch?

BY ANTHONY M. GRANT

**COACHING DIFFERS DRAMATICALLY** from therapy. That's according to the majority of coaches in our survey, who cite distinctions such as that coaching focuses on the future, whereas therapy focuses on the past. Most respondents maintained that executive clients tend

coaching those who have unrecognized mental health problems can be counterproductive and even dangerous. The vast majority of executives are unlikely to ask for treatment or therapy and may even be unaware that they have problems requiring it. That's worrisome,

ety. This raises important questions for companies hiring coaches – for instance, whether a nonpsychologist coach can ethically work with an executive who has an anxiety disorder.

Given that some executives will have mental health problems, firms should require that coaches have some training in mental health issues – for example, an understanding of when to refer clients to professional therapists for help. Indeed, businesses that do not demand such training in the coaches they hire are failing to meet their ethical obligations to care for their executives. 



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to be mentally “healthy,” whereas therapy clients have psychological problems. In the respondents’ view, coaching does not seek to treat psychological problems, such as depression or anxiety.

It’s true that coaching does not and should not aim to cure mental health problems. However, the notion that candidates for coaching are usually mentally robust flies in the face of academic research. Studies conducted by the University of Sydney, for example, have found that between 25% and 50% of those seeking coaching have clinically significant levels of anxiety, stress, or depression.

I’m not suggesting that most executives who engage coaches have mental health disorders. But some might, and

because contrary to popular belief, it’s not always easy to recognize depression or anxiety without proper training. An executive is far more likely to complain of difficulties related to time management, interpersonal communication, or workplace disengagement than of anxi-

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## THE SURVEY

### Methodology and Respondents

The analysis presented here is drawn from an online survey developed by senior editors at *Harvard Business Review* and Carol Kauffman of Harvard Medical School. They compiled a list of potential participants through their direct contacts, referrals from senior executives and HBR authors, and executive-coaching training organizations. Nearly 200 survey invitations were distributed by e-mail, and data were compiled from 140 respondents.

- Respondents were divided equally into men and women.
- The coaches are primarily from the United States (71%) and the United Kingdom (18%).
- 66% of respondents disclosed that coaching is their primary source of income.
- The group is highly experienced: 61% have been in the business more than 10 years.
- 50% of respondents come from the fields of business or consulting
- 20% of respondents come from the field of psychology

## WHAT THE SURVEY SAYS

# Coaching borrows from both consulting and therapy

