

How to Choose a Professional Development Coach

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Maybe you've read or heard testimonials about the career progress that you can make by using a coach. Or perhaps you've hit what feels like an insurmountable barrier in your professional growth, and you want some help with skill enhancements or to explore a brighter future.

Now that you've decided you'll search for a coach, how will you evaluate the candidates you identify? My purpose in writing this article is to help you select a superb coach that fits you well!

I've spent the last twenty years marketing my capabilities as an executive coach, and I have many satisfied clients. Lately, however, I've been referring prospects to other coaches I respect because I imagine that the relationship would likely be more effective for the client.

I want each aspirational individual to experience an inspiring relationship with a well-qualified and caring coach. The profession is growing rapidly for good reason--individuals grow faster and go farther in their careers with a coach. Sadly, however, some individuals marketing themselves as coaches don't have the genuine desire to serve, the required skills, or the commitment to provide the professional challenge and support that growing individuals seek.

Here are five recommended criteria for individuals seeking a coach. I suggest choosing a coach the same way you would hire a critical new team member--with a thorough investigation.

Strong references. [Note: In earlier drafts, this was the first criterion I addressed. I've received feedback that checking references can't occur until at least some initial investigation has been done. Okay, so maybe you read the rest of the article, gather some information, but then come back to this section. I am convinced that checking references will prevent troubling experiences for users of a coach.]

In hiring full-time team members, you typically check references near the end of the interview process. I suggest you ask your coach candidates for references when you begin deeply interviewing them. You'll have to provide information about the improvements you seek so the coach can give you contact information for individuals who have made those gains.

Your conversations with their former clients will help you decide what questions are relevant for you to ask of all your candidates. Additionally, you'll save yourself a lot of time and energy because you'll quickly narrow down to the few candidates you'll want to thoroughly interview.

You should expect that the coach will give you the names and contact information of past clients who will say good things about the coach. That's why it is so important to ask creative questions as suggested in the criteria described below--questions that you generate yourself!

If you do not typically check references, please look on my website, on the "Article Archives" page, and scroll down to "Checking References." Though I wrote the article for leaders of small businesses, it applies just as well to you seeking a coach.

With the information from that article and the four criteria that follow, you should be able to generate some challenging questions to ask the former clients of your candidate coaches.

Competence. The candidates you consider should have extensive experience as successful coaches. Ask when and how they received their training and certification. Ask them to describe the work they've done with individuals like you and how they measured their clients' enhanced skills and confidence. Ask them to describe the key differences between coaching, consulting, training, counseling, and therapy. To what degree did they deliver each to previous clients?

Extremely skilled coaches need not have extensive technical experience in your area of interest, such as sales or leadership. My clients, however, want to tap into my proficiency as a leader. They value my guidance on the kinds of problems they face or expect to face. If that ability to advise is important to you, ensure your candidates have ample practical, functional experience.

Desire to serve. We humans are self-focused, yet the only coach you'll want to use must have worked to overcome that tendency. Your preferred coach will very comfortably demonstrate a desire and ability to focus on your agenda. He or she will listen to understand your objectives and work diligently with you, stretching and supporting you in your efforts.

Look for someone who answers your questions in terms of what their former clients have achieved, not telling stories of their own successes. Ask them how they have overcome their natural human selfishness such that serving others has become their habitual first response.

Reliability. Ask your coach candidates about how they clarified the expectations of former clients. Ask about the system he or she uses to keep track of the commitments made so that they are not forgotten, overlooked, or diminished in priority. Ask for an example of when the coach went out of her or his way to satisfy a commitment established with a former client. As you know, we humans make promises easily. You will want the service from your coach to be delivered effectively and as promised, often even exceeding your expectations.

"Chemistry." Perhaps the most important of the five criteria, this one comes from you having sought out the previous four. As you conduct your extensive in-person interviews, notice your comfort level and rapport with each coaching candidate. Rather than simply feeling comfortable (or not), make notes about what causes those feelings so you can later contrast candidates.

Confidence is a factor here. You want a coach who is competent and confident, yet not cocky or condescending. You will spend intense, vulnerable time with your coach. Challenging your existing perspectives, he or she will invite creative options for alternative behaviors. You'd prefer that they be consistent with your personal and professional values. You need to be assured that your coach will work diligently, cooperating with you to achieve the objectives you identify.

If you don't "feel" optimistic and at ease disclosing to and interacting with your coach, your coaching experience is likely to fall short of your expectations. In my opinion, this "squishy" sense of a healthy, collaborative chemistry is the essence of a good relationship, and you are about to embark on a unique, personal, stimulating affiliation! Make sure your "gut" supports it!

Well, there they are, the five criteria I suggest for evaluating the coaches you are considering. The first and last categories need to be favorable at an absolute minimum. The three middle characteristics should be used to differentiate among the candidates you are considering.

Fees. This is not a sixth criterion. It's a reality check. If you have found a superb coach, he or she will likely be more expensive than you had imagined. Seek to obtain some payment assistance from your employer. Go again to the Article Archives page of my website and look up "Why Leaders Don't Build Future Leaders." Your boss may be very supportive of you having a coach to supplement what the organization (or your boss) is unable or willing to provide.

If your employer is unwilling to pay for your coaching, ask if the organization is willing to contribute even a portion of the cost. After all, the organization will be the major beneficiary of your enhanced skills. Many organizations offer tuition reimbursement for advanced education. Personalized coaching may be the best return on investment the company can make for you!

If your employer will not participate in the cost, then negotiate with your preferred coach for a less expensive rate. Many coaches publicize the rate they will charge an organization. The same coach may be willing to reduce the rate charged for a single individual.

If your experience in considering a coach suggests an improvement to this article, please help future leaders by contacting me and offering helpful feedback! Thanks!

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