

Executive Coaching in Higher Education

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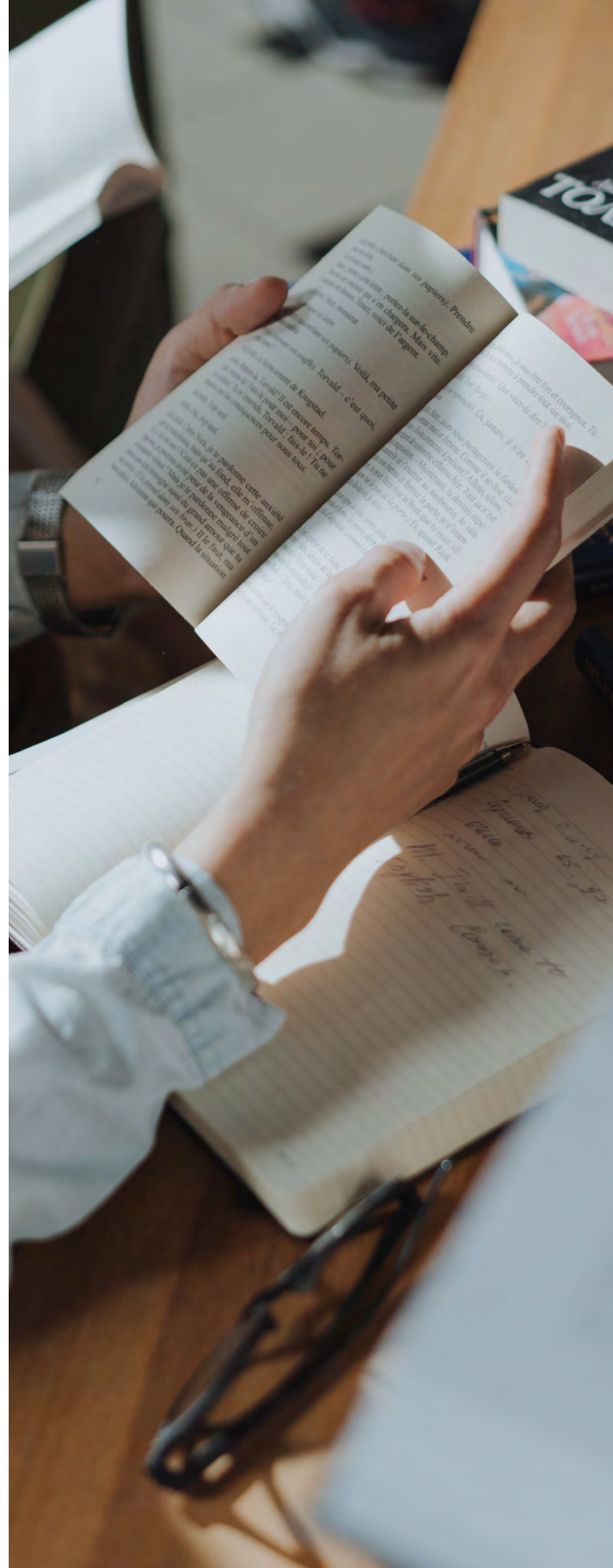


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Executive coaching has provided benefits to leaders and organizations outside of higher education for decades.

The current, dynamic moment for higher education requires the best of institutional leaders. Executive coaching is a proven, powerful tool for strengthening leaders and their institutions.

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Introduction to Executive Coaching

Colleges and universities are complex organizations with distinctive missions and unique societal and cultural roles. Organizational life is replete with challenges related to communication, decision making, team/work group functioning, supervision, and individual and group behavior, to name a few. Principles of shared governance and the demands of multiple internal and external constituencies can complicate college and university leadership in fundamental ways. Such matters can be particularly thorny for leaders with limited preparation and support.

Leadership transitions occur with regularity in higher education, and often come with little sustained support for learning a new role or a new environment. The learning curve for new leaders can cost time and good will if their support is insufficient. Motivated colleagues may have limited opportunities for professional growth as leaders, which constrains what the institution can achieve overall.

This is a pivotal moment for many institutions and leaders. The coalescence of a global pandemic, a precipitous drop in the number of traditional-aged college students, racial and economic justice imperatives, and persistent regulatory requirements, is unprecedented. Many institutions are facing an existential crisis. Leaders are under enormous pressure and often have limited resources for individual support and for professional development. The future of institutions depends upon the competence of senior leaders and of those in the leadership pipeline.

Executive coaching is a powerful tool that lends itself to these and other unique features of higher education because it is highly individualized — to specific leaders in specific institutional contexts.

What Is Executive Coaching?

Executive coaching in higher education is a disciplined, inquiry-based process of identifying and achieving institutional and individual goals.

It helps institutions and individual leaders solve problems that inhibit their work, and does so in a way that accelerates progress and has measurable results. Coaching is data-driven, individualized, draws on the resources of the individuals and organization, and has a singular focus on action — to strengthen leaders and to improve work.

Executive coaching is not consulting or advising. The expertise provided by coaching is the disciplined process of assessing, identifying, clarifying, and moving effectively and efficiently forward. Client accountability for action is fundamental to the coaching process.

Though relatively new to higher education, executive coaching has been successfully used by organizational leaders and leadership teams in both corporate and non-profit settings for decades.



When Is Coaching Engaged?

Executive coaching can be used at any time in a variety of situations, and can be engaged by an individual for their own professional growth, or by an institution to pursue organizational improvement.

Executive coaching may be provided for by the institution (a Board of Trustees may provide funds for coaching to a new president, or a president may provide coaching services to key institutional leaders, for example), or may be engaged by individuals as part of their own professional development.

Many college and university leadership roles are unique within their institutions, and finding true positional peers can be difficult. Executive coaching provides a confidential way for unique positional leaders to explore ideas, develop new skills, and respond to challenges.

Some natural points when coaching might be engaged:

- At the start of a new role, within the same institution or a new one
- When preparing for new responsibilities – to which one aspires as part of a career plan or when new responsibilities are assigned
- When interested in individual, professional growth and development, ongoing or episodic
- When improvement is needed by an individual or by a work group or team
- As a response to known and identified problems or skill deficits
- To support leadership for new institutional initiatives
- When time for professional development is limited



Common Issues for Higher Education Leaders

Higher education leaders come from a variety of backgrounds, some of which include robust leadership development preparation and some of which do not. Higher education leaders whose professional socialization focused on individual work (faculty members, for example), may struggle with the more collaborative nature institutional leadership requires. Leaders with strong administrative backgrounds may struggle with nuances of shared governance. The relationship between governing boards and executive leaders may be a challenge. Finally, higher education leaders may struggle with variations of issues that are common to all organizations — communication, interpersonal skills, self-regulation, team work, and accountability.

Executive coaching can provide significant support and tangible positive results as leaders face these and other issues.



Coaching Research

Executive coaching combines elements of and is informed by research in psychology, neurobiology, and change management, among others.

Outcomes of executive coaching documented in research literature include:

- significant positive effects on performance and skill development, well-being, coping strategies, work attitudes, and goal-directed self-regulation (*Journal of Positive Psychology*)
- increased goal attainment, enhanced solution-focused thinking, greater ability to deal with change, increased leadership self-efficacy and resilience, decrease in depression (*Journal of Change Management*)
- generalized application of professional gains to non-work areas of life (*Harvard Business Review*)

Current research areas include the cultivation and value of social and emotional intelligence for leader effectiveness, and the connections between the body, brain, and behavior for coaching clients.

In short, research affirms that executive coaching is effective for motivated leaders who have a commitment to their own development. Executive coaching is not an effective strategy for leaders who are unmotivated or uninterested in their ongoing growth.

How Does Executive Coaching Work?



Executive coaching starts with determining the fit between the coach and the client. This includes a discussion of the client's goal(s), their motivation for coaching, and assessing compatibility between the coach's approach and what the client seeks. Once engaged, some form(s) of client assessment will typically be completed, depending upon the issues at play. Goals for the engagement will be determined, along with measures of progress and success, and a schedule of regular meetings will be developed. The meetings will focus on the client's goals and may include interim work and goals, determined by the client. Plans, strategies, and tactics for achievement of goals will be part of each session, as will accountability practices.

Inquiry is the core of effective executive coaching. The client's insights and resulting self-identified plans, strategies, and tactics keep the client at the center of responsibility for progress. Coaching engagements typically last several months (depending upon the goals and the coach's approach) and provide sustained attention to

improvement. This is what makes coaching so effective. Many clients choose to extend their initial engagement as a way to accelerate their development.

The coach-client relationship is a confidential one. Institutions that sponsor coaching for a leader as part of a performance improvement plan will clarify, with the coach and the client, expectations for communication.

While coaching is highly personalized and tailored to the goals of an individual client, coaching can also occur in team or work group settings. The principles are much the same, though the focus is on the work of the group rather than the work of an individual. Team coaching includes a mix of group and individual assessment, individual work with the coach, and work as a group. Group and team coaching can address a wide array of issues including team-building, support for new initiatives, culture change, and conflict resolution, among others.

How Do I Decide on a Coach?

Executive coaches come from a variety of backgrounds. Familiarity with an individual's role or professional aspirations may be relevant to the client, as may familiarity with the context of higher education. The most important factor is the fit between client and coach.

Executive coaches may or may not be professionally certified. Educational and professional background may also be

relevant. Coaches should be able to provide background information that is of interest to potential clients.

Clients seeking executive coaching services will want to identify a coach who can articulate their approach and framework for coaching, who can answer questions about the process, and with whom they can build a trusting partnership.



What Is the Cost for Coaching?

Costs vary based on the length of the engagement, the coach, and the method for billing. Some coaches charge an hourly rate and some charge by the engagement. Coaches may offer different types of engagements or “packages”, depending upon the client’s needs.

The return on investment in coaching can be calculated in a variety of ways. Individuals may benefit financially due to promotion, taking on new responsibilities, moving onto increasingly important roles in new organizations, and accelerating the timeline for their desired career trajectory. Organizations can realize savings (both time and money) from solving costly problems, the retention of valuable colleagues, and cultivating internal talent. Both individuals and organizations can enjoy qualitative benefits from enhanced self and institutional awareness, improved work and skill development, higher morale, and increased effectiveness overall.

Key questions to ask when considering an investment in executive coaching:

- What is the value of individualized, sustained professional development to me personally?
- How does it compare to attending a conference or professional meeting? To professional reading?
- What is the value of focusing on specific areas of growth and improvement, tailored to me and my institutional context?
- What is the cost of ongoing challenges or problems that I face or that face the institution? What are the time, morale, progress, retention, and financial costs of ongoing challenges or problems? What is the value, individually and institutionally, of solving those problems?
- What is the cost of limited professional development for people in key positions? What is the organizational value of investing in current and next-generation leaders?

