A head coach and an organizational sponsor make up the ultimate coaching team.

Ace Coaching Alliances

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As James Anderson and Sharon McDade chatted while waiting for their conference call to begin, they realized how far their organization had come during the preceding six months. When they began talking about instituting a coaching initiative within their organization, no one was quite sure how it would unfold. Now, the implications were staggering: Sixty-five people with supervisory responsibilities within the division were engaged in the coaching process, leaders were using a common language when communicating their coaching experience and learning, and the organization's leaders were pleased with what they were hearing.

Anderson and McDade, who served as internal sponsors of their company's coaching initiative, agreed that clearly defining who the clients would be (the organization and the individual end-users), as well as how information would flow between their organization and the coaching company, were major factors in the successful

Illustration by Alison Seiffer

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outcome. Much time was spent in discussions prior to start, and it was clear that those conversations established a strong alliance between the two organizations. As a result, the initiative was one of the most successful in the history of Anderson and McDade's division. Their executive vice president, usually difficult to please, said the coaching had been the most effective development effort he'd seen in 25 years in business.

When an organization brings coaching into its ranks on a scale that requires more than one or two coaches, it's presumably to increase productivity, improve performance, and retain top talent. Numerous studies—such as those completed by Xerox, Public Personnel Management, Manchester Inc., IBM, and Coaching.com—show that coaching positively influences productivity, quality, organizational strength, customer service, and retention of best employees. Knowing that positive benefits accrue from coaching, the burning question is, Who is the primary client? Is it the client organization because it pays for the coaching? Or is it the individual end-user because coaching requires an environment of trust to be effective? According to McDade and Anderson, the answer is a resounding, "Both." They see the value in the company being the client of the coaching organization and in the individuals being the clients of their coaches.

Ace alliances

The alliance between the end-user client and the coach is the most visible and obvious. Though critical, it's by no means the only important coalition in an effective coaching initiative.

The first key relationship is between the head coach and the organizational sponsor. The head coach oversees the coaches working with clients within the specific initiative and is responsible for managing the information coming in from the coaches. The organizational sponsor is already employed by the company and is responsible for managing the internal aspects of the coaching initiative. Anderson and McDade, who served as the organizational sponsors, view both roles as critical. "Establishing a strong relationship with the head coach was vital to the health of the coaching initiative, as were the relationships between our people and their coaches," they say.

The organizational sponsor and the head coach begin by establishing and articulating objectives for the coaching initiative. The sponsor is responsible for communicating with senior leaders within the organization to ensure that all objectives are clear. Pre-initiative surveys can be done to make sure that the focus can be properly measured. The sponsor and head coach also must create clear agreements regarding roles, responsibilities, and timelines. The coaching recipient needs to know that his or her coaching is confidential. If the end-user doesn't feel that the process is entirely confidential, coaching can't be effective. The people who receive the coaching must be able to say anything they need to say to overcome the obstacles in their path.

In our experience, it's clear that organizations appreciate having a coaching company oversee their initiatives rather than try to manage individual coaches. A coaching company provides a buffer between the individuals being coached and the organization's management team, and that protects confidentiality. McDade and Anderson considered hiring several coaches, which began endless discussions about setting qualifications, managing multiple external coaches, and determining a system for feedback while maintaining confidentiality.

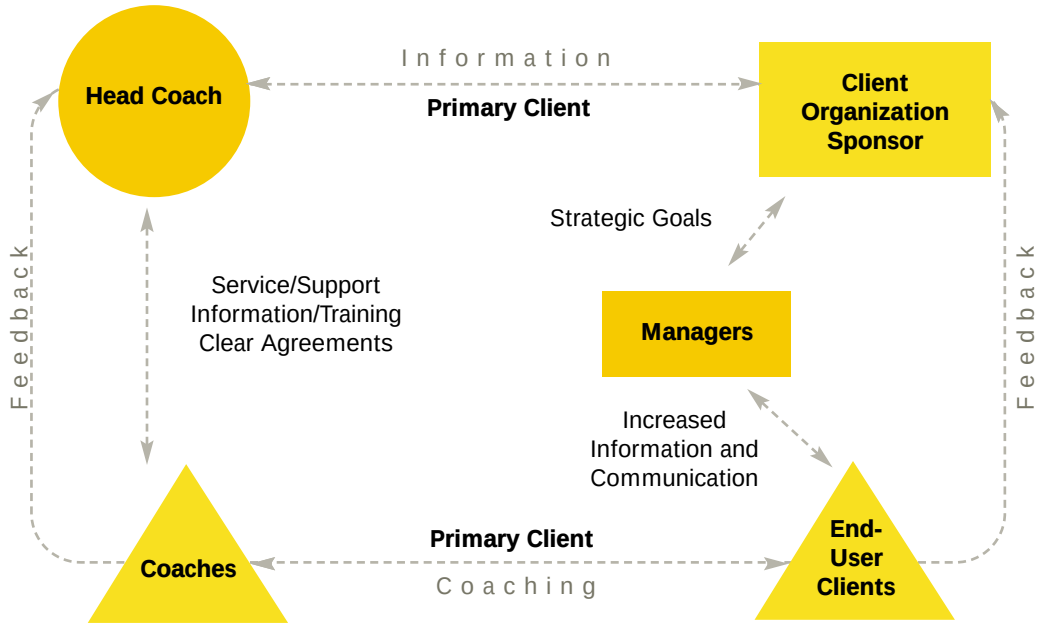
A head coach is in the perfect position to oversee multiple coaches rather than having the organization's leadership be in direct contact. Clear agreements about how information is shared and with whom ensures complete confidentiality.

Information flow

From the start, it's imperative that the organizational sponsor is clear about what information the organization is looking for to assure that the coaches and clients are working toward specific goals. The clearer the goals are, the easier it will be for the sponsor to measure the results quantitatively and qualitatively. Together, the sponsor and head coach decide the frequency and type of meetings they'll have so they can monitor whether the goals are being achieved.

Prior to start, the head coach works with the sponsor to understand the key elements of the organization's culture. Understanding culture includes, but isn't limited to, use of language, qualities that are particularly valued, workload norms, and level of teamwork achieved. The head coach needs that information to orient and prepare the coaches for their assignments.

Organizational Coaching Alliances



We recall a nightmarish moment when, serving as head coaches on a large initiative for an international investment banking firm, we were called into the office of the vice president of learning and development and asked "Which one of your coaches told one of our managers that titles were going to be eliminated?"

With fear in our hearts, we set out to get to the bottom of what happened. It turned out that during a small-group information session led by one of our coaches, someone in the hallway overheard a question about titles. Although the coach had responded appropriately in the meeting, the damage was done. The person in the hallway heard only the question, and the rumor that titles were going to be eliminated raced through the building like a brushfire. Within hours, the VP heard it and determined that it was our fault. Had the coach understood the culture in general and its sensitivity to titles, there might have been a better outcome.

We learned from that incident and others that it's important to understand an organization's culture before going in to do coaching. Part of the role of the head coach is to understand the culture so that pertinent information is shared with the other coaches.

Updates and debriefings

The head coach partners with the designated organizational sponsor throughout the initiative. The two conduct regular updates and briefings, discuss areas of focus that surface in the coaching, and get a sense of how people are progressing with goals.

Anderson and McDade met with their head coach throughout and formed a strong alliance. During those meetings, the head coach shared information about attendance and general feedback from the other coaches, while the sponsors kept the head coach abreast of key developments and changes in the organization.

Part of the role of the head coach is to share predetermined, high-level information about what topics and concerns end-users are addressing and the trends that coaches are hearing. Part of the head coach's work is to sift through the information that the coaches provide about the work being done, flush out the trends, and pick up information about strengths and weakness in the organization. That information is consolidated and related back to the sponsor with no risk to confidentiality.

Coaches and the head coach

The next crucial alliance is between the head coach and coaches on the project. The job of the head coach is to orient other coaches to the organization's culture, educate them about special training and objectives, and support them in doing their best possible work. The coaches must know where to go for information and must feel informed about trends and the general organizational climate. The head coach keeps a finger on the pulse of the end-user group, staying alert to dissatisfaction and unspoken questions while looking for opportunities to sharpen effectiveness. It's essential that an open and honest dialogue be maintained between the coaches and the head coach.

Coaches are encouraged to come forward when they have any concerns or challenges with their clients, thereby ensuring that the client is well served. If the coaches are well informed and supported in their own development, they become models for excellent communication and constant learning for their clients.

Before You Coach

You won't go wrong if you answer these questions *before* you get started:

- What are your objectives for bringing coaching into your organization?
- How will those objectives be communicated to participants?
- How will the objectives be communicated to the coaches?
- How will you track how the coaches are doing?
- Who will receive coaching?
- How will you guard their confidentiality?
- How will breaches of confidentiality be handled?
- How clear are you about the distinctions between coaching, counseling, and consulting?
- How will you close the gaps in your knowledge quickly?
- Who has been identified as the internal sponsor(s)?
- Who is the senior-level champion?
- Who needs to know about the coaching initiative for top-level buy-in? What information will they get?
- What exactly do you want measured?
- What surveys or assessments will you use?
- How will you use the data to show whether the coaching was worth the investment?
- How will you make sure the coaching will be leveraged best?

During the Anderson and McDade project, one of our coaches was feeling unsettled about one of her coaching relationships so she called her head coach to ask for a reality check on her approach. During their brief conversation, she realized that in an effort to generate a short-term win with her client (which was paying off), she was neglecting the big-picture strategic approach that her client needed to develop as a leader.

Coach and client/end-user alliance

According to most clients, the magical partnership in organizational coaching is between the coach and client end-users. The coach's first job is to help the client design a partnership from which he or she will benefit. A masterful coach will know how to generate a connection with the client during the first call, and the client will get a glimpse of his own potential and realize the benefit of spending time regularly with a professional coach.

In a recent first session with a client in a company where we were coaching several leaders, including the client's direct manager, we started by discussing operating guidelines. They included confidentiality, reporting of information, structure of calls, and how his manager would receive information about the effectiveness of the client's coaching. From there, we moved into the focus for our coaching.

Before concluding the initial session, we asked whether the client had any final questions or comments. He replied, "So, how will my manager know what we discussed? Will you be talking to her?" As evidenced by this client's question, it's vital to establish how confidentiality will be handled. Only then can a client feel secure enough to reveal what needs to be addressed in coaching. The confidentiality of the client is a sacred trust between coach and client. It should be violated only in cases of breach of law and fraud, and clients must be apprised of those special circumstances before coaching begins.

The environment in which coaching is conducted should be informal yet thoughtful, with a focus on increasing intentional action. People who have the opportunity to work with a coach are encouraged to step out of their comfort zones, experiment with new behaviors, communicate who they are and what they need more clearly, and generally become more effective with colleagues and clients. Anderson and McDade got this feedback directly from a coaching recipient:

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"I got keener insight into who I am and who I want to be. I know that what I am is OK. No reservations now. I have a greater awareness of my strengths and weaknesses and what the liabilities are and how to work with them. I was in a state of status quo and complacency before coaching. I'm not as comfortable now, don't have the same swagger. There's more work to be done.

"I looked forward to the meetings. The intimacy was a surprise. I told the coach things I don't tell others. That was the big value of the coaching experience. The telephone allowed me to cut right to the chase. No emotional ties, no distractions. I made an almost immediate leap of faith across the transom with a total stranger. I wouldn't have expected it, but it was amazingly easy and effective."

Client/end-user and manager alliance

Coaching has the potential to benefit existing relationships. One such relationship that's positively affected is that between the client and his or her manager. The flow of information increases both ways, along with crucial communication about expectations, needs, and results.

During a recent initiative within a large telecom company, one manager shared his story:

"Every year, I meet with the direct reports of a regional director who reports to me, He'd received coaching for about five months but hadn't been perceived as a problem. Well, after the coaching initiative was over, I went to the director's office and conducted my usual interviews with his eight direct reports. Imagine my surprise when to a person, with no prodding or direction from me, everyone spoke of the manager in glowing terms. They said things like, 'I was ready to quit, but he changed all of sudden. He's much more communicative. He suddenly seems to care about me. He's much easier to talk to.'

"I was stunned that I hadn't realized what a liability he'd been and his ability to manage improved before I even knew there was a problem."

One of the greatest concerns that organizational sponsors have about bringing coaches in is that the coaching relationship will supplant the relationship between the client and his or her manager. Ample evidence **triadperform.com** suggests that relationships improve considerably when people receive coaching.

That was a point of several discussions Anderson and McDade had with their head coach, especially at the beginning. By the end of the initiative, they were convinced that coaching had increased all levels of communication, especially with managers. Client end-users tend to be vocal to their managers or HR professionals about their coaching, about what they're getting from it, and the way they're changing. The head coach can also share clear, generic information about the effectiveness of coaching with the leadership team and key organizational stakeholders. The clearer the organizational sponsor is early on about what's being measured, the clearer the results will be.

Avoiding gridlock

Throughout a coaching effort, the organization receives information from the head coach that provides valuable insight into what leadership behaviors are effective, what training is needed, and the effectiveness of the current resource allocation. It's crucial that organizational sponsors remember that they won't be receiving confidential information. Under no circumstances is it right for a manager to try to speak to a coach about one of his staff needs. It's not appropriate for the coach to share the manager's message with a client. Coaching encourages and supports increased communication between the manager and his or her direct report.

When measuring the results of a coaching initiative, it's key to know in advance and measure the

predetermined organizational objectives. Productivity numbers and turnover are obvious indicators, but so are quality of life issues, attendance, and perceived quality of relationship with the manager. Past articles in *The Gallop Organization* and *Harvard Business Review* reinforce that people leave managers, not companies. For employees to be their most productive, it's equally important to look for measurable differences and perceptible differences.

Many organizations try to solve the wrong problems. They continually try to increase productivity without accessing the heart of their people or understanding what's most important to them. There's a paradox: How do you keep the organization's goals in mind *and* increase the productivity of its people? It's known that driving people harder isn't the answer. More can be expected when people can access what's most important to them and are encouraged to grow. For Anderson and McDade, getting to a deeper level of understanding of their people and creating an environment for growth and development meant increased retention of key leaders during a time of great turnover in their industry.

Research and recent articles show that motivated employees are productive employees and productive ones are motivated. Clear information flow and powerful alliances are pivotal to people development. As employees are served, the organization is served. Coaching does both. TD

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