

Organizational Executive Coaching

For Extraordinary Futures

Joe Beel ■ Lois Harper ■ Brian Marsh





A theme that frequently emerges during coaching engagements is that the Extraordinary Future is beyond the capacity of its leader acting alone. No one is an island, and it is through those they lead that catalytic actions are achieved.

Building a strong “board of directors” composed of those who can influence attainment of the Extraordinary Future also is an essential ingredient. The members of this “board of directors” should be united to support each other, yet be willing to have difficult conversations rather than yield too quickly just to “get along.” High-performing “boards of directors” express their ideas generously and are free to disagree. It is this construct that acted as the genesis for Defense Acquisition University’s (DAU’s) Organizational Executive Coaching (OEC).

In 2013, two Department of Defense acquisition leaders were interviewed to gain their perspective on outcomes resulting from DAU Executive Coaching for an article published in the September-October 2013 issue of *Defense AT&L* magazine. The participants discussed how Executive Coaching provided a “strategic confidant” that allowed the leaders to candidly discuss and explore the challenges they confronted. The coach helped the leaders formulate the actions to create a navigable pathway for even greater leadership success.

DAU’s executive coaches work one-on-one with these high performers to help them realize an “Extraordinary Future” for themselves and the organizations they lead. For these two leaders, as well as other DAU clients, entering into an executive coaching arrangement gave them just the right impetus to achieve more than they previously thought possible. From the viewpoints of both clients and coaches, this current article addresses how a leadership team transforms their thinking and subsequent actions to achieve an Extraordinary Future.

From One-on-One to Organizational Executive Coaching

For most executive coaching clients, the relationships with their coaches endure well past the end of the formal coaching phase. As an accountability partner and sounding board, a coach can be available for informal progress checks and problem solving. A shift in organizational mission or a change in a client’s previous position can afford another opportunity to evolve a new Extraordinary Future and coaching relationship.

A client also could require an alternative coaching approach that warrants more leadership team cohesiveness to define and implement an Extraordinary Future. The OEC’s particular approach has given DAU

Beel is a strategic programs manager at Cisco Systems, Inc. He retired from the Navy in 2014 and served last as the commanding officer of Space and Naval Warfare Systems Center Pacific. **Harper** is the director of Major Defense Acquisition Programs and Executive Coaching Champion at Defense Acquisition University’s West Region. **Marsh** is the assistant chief engineer for Mission Assurance and Certification at the U.S. Navy’s Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command in San Diego, California. The authors would like to thank Rear Adm. John Ailes, Carmela Keeney, retired Rear Adm. Jim Rodman, and Rob Tremaine for their contributions to this article.

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the opportunity to extend its Executive Coaching reach into coaching an organization’s leadership team toward a collective Extraordinary Future. “Shared leadership” constructs and even the sheer size of an organization may necessitate an OEC approach. The expectation is that OEC would move outside the normal strategic planning process, capture an extraordinary vision of the future, and align the leadership behind it. Questions about roles, mission, functions and alignment across the enterprise make for an ideal time for organizations to obtain a DAU executive coach.

A key principle of executive coaching is to visualize the possible, in the absence of certainty, and work backward to achieve it. Envisioning what the organization could look like without constraints affords more metacognition (i.e., thinking about thinking) and can lead to a variety of breakthroughs. This is a new way of thinking for many leaders and their teams who may fall into groupthink. This approach reduces or eliminates many of the common barriers to change. The tendency is to reshape the executive coaching process and the development of an Extraordinary Future into what the teams already are working on—primarily a strategic plan. The leadership team needs to change its thinking, and an executive coach will challenge the leaders to accomplish this.

Organizational Coaching Delivers Quality Long-Term Thinking

Widely accepted as an organization imperative, strategic planning serves as an organization’s compass and is tightly aligned with organizational goals, performance targets and reward systems. Strategic Plans function as a touchstone and typically contain standards and benchmarks that guide an organization’s day-to-day operations. Most strategic plans remain static because of the temptation to spend most time on urgent and important (Stephen Covey’s Quadrant I) activities. However, a strategic plan cannot be implemented without concentrating on those things that matter in the long term—matters that are not immediately urgent and important (Quadrant II). Unsurprisingly, setting aside the today’s urgent tasks to spend critical thinking “QII” time is uncommon. While leading a large organization, finding QII time becomes exponentially more difficult. Leaders usually resort to a yearly offsite gathering where strategic planning becomes a “one and done” less valuable proposition. Clearly, addressing critical strategic goals once a year is less than ideal. DAU’s OEC process helps address organizational strategies on a regular and recurring

basis. The team realizes its individual and collective behavior had to change, and the quality of time in the strategic planning process vastly improves.

In addition, coaching also develops the skills of the leadership team. Leaders tend to implement the initiatives of the strategic plan without stepping back and learning from the experience of doing so. Coaching allows the leadership team to continually keep an eye on what is vital to deliver the Extraordinary Future outside the constraints of what they execute, monitor and measure day to day. The team members build off each other’s ideas and approaches in a highly interactive manner. OEC provides a “space to think” vice an “over the fence” sharing of ideas via quick e-mails between meetings or at the end of a long day.

Finally, one question from the coach frequently causes the clients to challenge their own assumptions and those of others. The moments of silence, uneasiness and glances between the team members, generated by the right question, most often leads to new insights. Guided by a coach, it is a fresh look, unencumbered by what others believe matters the most when it may not really matter at all.

Clients value the diversity of the participants OEC provides. While a single leader may have an Extraordinary Future and can be coached on how to convey that future, it’s often difficult to convert this conceptual future into action. Leadership influence and vision of the team is far greater than summing that of the individuals. That greater outcome is achieved by bringing together a diverse set of organizational leaders and

Figure 1. Stephen Covey’s Time Management Quadrants

I	Important and Urgent	III	Important but Not Urgent
II	Urgent but Not Important	IV	Not Urgent and Not Important

asking them to stretch for a set of unifying themes, goals and strategies.

Built Upon Proven Practices

Extending DAU's initial "individual" executive coaching model for leadership teams through OEC proves equally beneficial. These proven process elements include an Extraordinary Future "blueprint," key stakeholder identification and strategies, feedback from those stakeholders, and tools that enhance the leadership team's ability to implement the Extraordinary Future. All of this is accomplished through powerful questioning techniques and by giving the team time to reflect and develop its own solutions.

The coach explores how each individual (attributes, attitudes and behaviors) contributes to and impacts the team. A diverse team also results in a diverse number of stakeholders. The effectiveness of reconciling those who are influenced by and could influence the leadership team's Extraordinary Future allows them to pinpoint those from whom they desire feedback.

To get the most out of DAU's OEC process, the coaching products should become an integral part of the organization's leadership process. The Extraordinary Future blueprint allows the leadership team to break the Extraordinary Future into increasing levels of detailed actions and measures, moving from theory to the real world and transforming what can be overwhelming into doable pieces. Breakthroughs are measurable, tangible objects or events that must be achieved in order to realize the Extraordinary Future. What is missing that would satisfy the Extraordinary Future? Strategies are the plans to follow to achieve each breakthrough. A coach will challenge the team to assess their current reality in terms of attaining the breakthroughs and gain insights to formulate strategies that will frame the actions to achieve each one. Finally, setting 30- to 60-day catalytic actions will get the team moving to achieve success quickly. The coach helps the team move its focus from the entire situation in all its overwhelming complexity and to find a catalytic action that will produce real and significant results now.

Obtaining feedback from stakeholders that are key to the organization's Extraordinary Future requires deviating from the method for an individual client's 360-degree feedback from all parties interacting with and affected by the client.



Rear Adm. John Ailes, Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command (SPAWAR) chief engineer, takes part in an executive coaching session led by the Defense Acquisition University's Executive Coach Lois Harper. From the left are Mark Reinig, chief of staff; Ailes; Harper; Greg Shaffer, assistant chief engineer; Brian Marsh, assistant chief engineer. Mike Spence, SPAWAR's deputy chief engineer, also was involved in the coaching session but was not photographed.

U.S. Navy photo by Rick Naystatt/released

Feedback is obtained through interviews that enable the coach to probe into situations, behaviors and impacts expressed by the interviewee. Behaviors of an organization and/or team are not single faceted, and there is an opportunity to explore organizational culture beyond a single leader.

Gathering feedback across the organization could confirm whether the organization has taken on the culture of its leader or vice versa. Exercising two different interview methodologies accommodates the external (one-on-one interviews) and internal (focus group) stakeholder feedback collection needs. Questions to the external stakeholders center on organizational value and the leadership team's ability to provide this value. For example,

- What do you see as this organization's priorities and how is it meeting them?
- What are the strengths of this leadership team?
- What strengths might turn into liabilities if leveraged too much or incorrectly?

The internal "focus" team questions assess the organization's strengths, gaps and how to look forward. Examples:

- What are the questions leadership should be asking to effectively prepare for the future?
- What does the leadership team do best?
- What should this leadership team stop doing?

The focus group method of collecting internal feedback leads to a healthy, nonattributable dialog across functional,

project, and hierarchical lines. Enlisting the assistance of a DAU executive coach who is independent of your organization will provide more candid feedback than can be obtained from someone within the organization. That advantage becomes clear as your team and coach assess stakeholder feedback. Picking up on themes will help further define breakthroughs that truly matter.


Throughout the entire coaching process, the leadership team uses a variety of tools the coach possesses that assist in identifying and mitigating barriers to attaining the Extraordinary Future. Many of these tools help the leadership team members work better with each other. The coach may also conduct a one-on-one session with team members to explore their individual perspectives, time management methods and organizational makeup to assist with breaking through barriers that may individually hinder achievement of the team's Extraordinary Future.

Making Organizational Executive Coaching Work



To deliver favorable results, it is essential to work with the DAU executive coach and tailor the coaching process that best fits an organization. Some of the factors to consider include: (1) the state of the organization, ranging from one seeking to

improve performance in current missions areas to an organization undergoing radical change to take on new missions/responsibilities; (2) the organizational environment—ranging from supportive to hostile stakeholders; (3) the ability of the organization to accept and implement change; and (4) the individual and collective strengths/weaknesses its organizational leaders.

The DAU coach guides you through the process to deliver the results you codify on your Extraordinary Future Blueprint. The coaching process creates increased loyalty and deeper trust between individual team members. Better understanding and synchronization of thoughts develop, as well as a personal attachment to create synergy around the Extraordinary Future. Leaders who committed themselves to the coaching process at the OEC level map and find their way to their Extraordinary Future.

Make OEC work for your leadership team, too. Think about your future differently like never before and enlist an experienced DAU Executive Coach to transform your organization, your leadership team and yourself. 

The authors can be contacted at jbeel@cisco.com, lois.harper@dau.mil and brian.marsh@navy.mil.



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