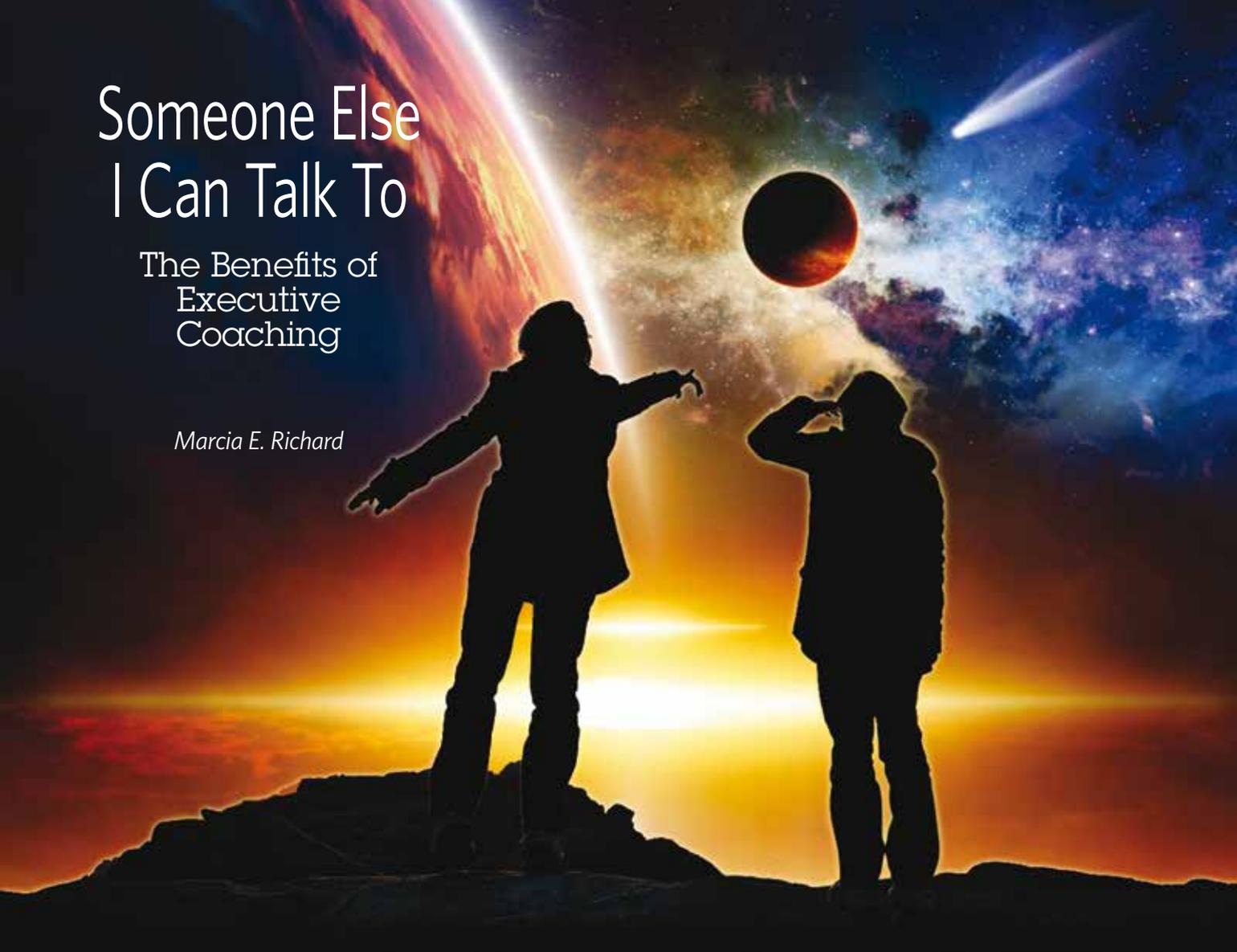


Someone Else I Can Talk To

The Benefits of Executive Coaching

Marcia E. Richard



Executive and leadership coaching currently is a growing business worth \$2 billion a year. Chief executive officers and senior executives increasingly solicit the assistance of executive coaches. This naturally leads to two follow-up questions: Why are so many people in leadership positions turning to executive coaches for assistance? And how does executive coaching benefit the client and his or her organization?

At a time when the Department of Defense (DoD) is required to do more with less, and senior leaders are asked to come up with new and improved ways to do things (see *Implementation Directive for Better Buying Power 3.0—Achieving Dominant Capabilities through Technical Excellence and Innovation*, April 9, 2015), executive coaching helps smart people clarify their thinking. Dr. Marshall Goldsmith, a world-renowned author and coach, in his best-selling book, “What Got You Here Won’t Get You There,” demonstrates through practice and research how “executive coaching helps successful people become more successful.”

The Defense Acquisition University (DAU) launched its executive coaching (EC) program in Fiscal Year 2009. Its customers are DoD Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics (AT&L) personnel such as general/flag officers and O-6s and their civilian counterparts, members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) and GS-15s, whose responsibilities and decisions affect acquisition outcomes. By design, the DAU EC program provides support for senior

Richard is a professor of Acquisition and Contract Management and an Executive Coach at the Defense Acquisition University. She has more than three decades of acquisition, acquisition-related and executive coaching experience.

leaders who are recognized for making significant positive impacts in their current positions. They also have the vision and drive to go beyond where they are and to do more. The DAU EC program, usually 9 to 12 months in duration, follows a six-step coaching model developed by the Cambridge Group Worldwide, Inc. (See Figure 1.)

During this process, often referred to as a Journey, a coaching relationship is established between the coach and client—a relationship based on trust, confidentiality, mutual respect and accountability. A commitment letter, listing expectations for both the client and coach, is agreed upon and signed by both client and coach (Step 1). At the beginning of the journey, the client identifies and develops an Extraordinary Future that becomes the foundation and the ultimate objective of what the client plans to accomplish at the completion of his or her journey or at a specified time in the future. This often is done after completion of the actual coaching engagement (Step 2).

The Extraordinary Future usually is a vision outside the normal trajectory of what the client would obtain if she simply continued to follow the current path and maintained the status quo. In the DAU EC certification training program, one of the tools is *The Washington Post* exercise, which provides an excellent way to help a client focus on what she would like to accomplish for herself and her organization if, for example, she did not face her perceived constraints. Under the assumptions in this exercise, in 12 to 18 months, readers pick up *The Washington Post* and find an article about the client’s organization on the front page, above the fold—because against all odds, the organization had accomplished certain goals that the client had set for herself. According to Cindy Readal, director of acquisition for the Naval Engineering and Facilities Command and a current participant in the DAU EC program, “I must admit as a new SES I went into coaching as a complete sponge to the thoughts (concepts) of guidance of a coach. My expectations were exceeded, as my coach was able to help me take a lot of different ideas and bring those into focus and ensure I had the right level of effort for an actionable plan. Continuing the sessions is enjoyable and ensures I stay on track to achieve my goals.”

Charting stakeholders (Step 3) allows the client to think about individuals who influence and may impact the accomplishment of the Extraordinary Future. This step requires the client to develop a strategy for working with stakeholders so they will more likely become champions for the Extraordinary Future—or at least neutralize unsupportive stakeholders so that they will cause no harm. As a part of this step, the client must decide how best and how often she will need to communicate with her stakeholders. In the acquisition workforce, no one works in isolation, and it is necessary to build relationships and solicit support in order to get things done. As we are forced to work with fewer dollars and must master the art of effectively sharing and leveraging resources, it becomes more essential that we identify and collaborate with both internal and external stakeholders.

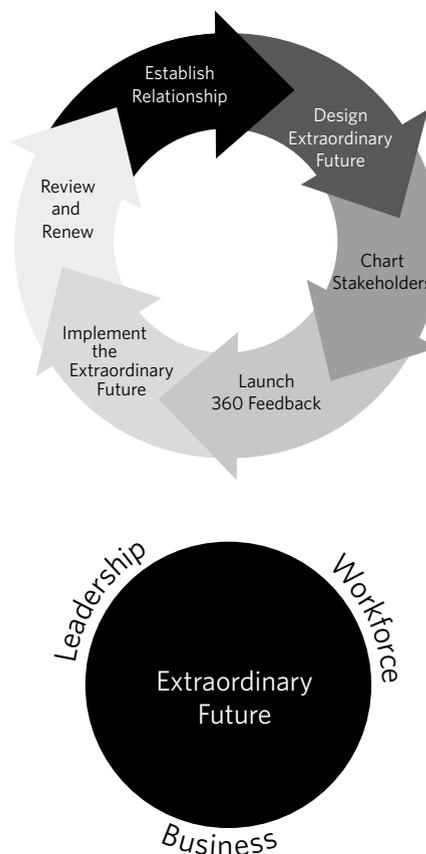
Figure 1. The Coaching Process and Focus

Extraordinary coaching relationships happen by design and effort.

- Monthly face-to-face meetings, biweekly phone calls, 6 to 9 months

The Leader’s 100 Percent: Design and implement an Extraordinary Future

The Coach’s 100 Percent: Thinking/Being Partner, Sounding Board, Nudge Manager



Top Four Improvements:

- Strategic communication
- Change implementation
- Stakeholder relationships
- Leadership/people interactions

Top Four Business Results:

- Increased self/group capability
- Increased customer satisfaction
- Increased resources
- Reduced cycle time

Extraordinary leaders develop the process of producing extraordinary results

Based on Step Coach Model as modified for Defense Acquisition University by Cambridge Group Worldwide.

Based on the stakeholders identified by the client, as well as anyone else identified as influencing the client's success, the EC will conduct executive interviews (Step 4), similar to 360-Degree performance evaluations that take into account the assessments of all parties interacting with the person being evaluated. But the EC executive interviews will be done by conversing either in person or via telephone if a face-to-face meeting isn't feasible rather than by canvassing via an electronic or e-mail survey. Information will be gathered about the client from the perspectives of superiors, peers and subordinates. To be most effective, providing client feedback from executive interviews will be the one time during the coaching journey that the coach is not the client's advocate

After completing an 11-month executive coaching engagement, I asked Rick O'Neil, director of acquisition at the Office of Naval Research, "What was the greatest benefit he received during his Executive Coaching experience? Why?" Rick said, "My coach served as a fantastic sounding board, which afforded me the opportunity to freely explore a number of management challenges and corresponding options within a confidential environment. Having an experienced confidant to help you think through a number of delicate and complex issues before taking action is invaluable to an executive's development. These days, we operate in a highly politicized and often unforgiving environment. Senior executives have to get it right the first time or risk losing precious

The Extraordinary Future usually is a vision outside the normal trajectory of what the client would obtain if she simply continued to follow the current path and maintained the status quo.

and must instead act as a "messenger" to ensure that the client receives unfiltered information from the participants, including any identifiable trends. This feedback is intended to provide the client with honest information on how she is viewed by others—from multiple levels and perspectives in his or her work environment. Once internalized, it is up to the client to determine if corrective action or a change in behavior is warranted.

The implementation step (Step 5) is where the rubber meets the road. During this phase, the Senior Leader deploys specific actions to achieve the defined future outcomes—the Extraordinary Future. While growth and development, as a result of seeing issues and challenges from different perspectives, will occur throughout the entire coaching process, the actual completion of the Extraordinary Future—i.e., achieving results—often may not be realized immediately but may occur well beyond the coaching journey.

In all processes, and this includes executive coaching, we must pause to check out how we are doing and to recalibrate our efforts if we find that is required. At the beginning of each coaching session, the coach normally will inquire how the client is doing and allow him or her to reflect on where they are as it relates to moving toward the Extraordinary Future and to decide on any additional or alternate actions. This also is done in a more defined and strategic fashion at the end of the coaching journey. Client reflection is built into the coaching process to ensure that "busy" senior leaders take the time, in a safe environment, to review and renew (Step 6) their actions and inactions and determine how to move forward as planned and/or how to make the necessary changes to achieve their Extraordinary Future.

credibility. I was extremely fortunate to have a great coach that helped me get it right."

DoD AT&L senior leaders do not have to talk to themselves regarding their vision and ideas. The DAU EC program offers them trained and experienced thinking partners to take an intense and meaningful journey with them. Using active listening, the EC helps to generate thought-provoking and very often difficult questions that should be answered. The EC helps the senior leader to think bigger and broader, aiming for an Extraordinary Future as opposed to a predictable business-as-usual approach. This process can result in more thoughtful, challenging and innovative outcomes for the AT&L community and the DoD as a whole. After the completion of the EC engagement, coaches usually will offer their clients the opportunity to reach out to them on an "as required basis." Often, this is done just to bounce an idea off of someone they trust and get an outside opinion prior to moving forward. In other words, the coach does not have to vanish at the end of the engagement.

As a DAU EC, I personally have witnessed the growth and sense of freedom my clients developed as they have moved through the program. Once they fully understood that coaching sessions are like incubation sessions and that they could speak freely to their thinking partners, who are listening, they grew exponentially in terms of ideas and self-assurance about obtaining an Extraordinary Future rather than a predictable one. I am honored to be a part of this dynamic program that is helping our DoD AT&L senior leaders move from good to great! 

The author can be contacted at marcia.richard@dau.mil.