

# Buying coaching: A short practical guide for organisations

Jonathan Passmore

These days, many organisations are using coaches to support manager development, transition or management performance. However the process of appointing coaches remains relatively unsophisticated in comparison with other services. Many organizations have moved from a system of allowing coaches/managers to appoint their own coaches, to appointing organisations to provide them with a bundle of coaches. Some HR managers have argued that by 'bundling' coaching contracts in this way, they can achieve better value for money and also provide a clearer framework within which coaches will operate.

We take the view that organizations should take as much care in selecting and appointing an individual coach as they do in recruiting a new manager. Selecting a coaching organisation is not enough unless they also select the individual coaches from within the bundle.

So how can organizations get better at selecting the right coach? If you are involved in the coach selection process here are ten questions which might guide your way.

## Stage 1: Moving from long list to short list

The following questions will help you to select a short list of potential providers.

- 1. What experience of coaching does the coach have?** You could measure this in terms of the average number of hours of coaching experience. Coaching is a practice-based skill and there is a rough relationship between hours of practice and expertise, although this is not the full story. We would suggest you expect organizations coaches to have 500 or more coaching hours. Beyond this we think there is limited change in competence.
- 2. Are the coaches able to demonstrate an understanding of the leadership challenge?** Review the specific experience of the coach. Can they demonstrate a deep understanding of the sector, or personal experience of holding a senior role? Have they had experience of coaching several senior people at the same levels as the individual who you are being put forward for coaching.
- 3. Are they trained coaches?** Most coaches have had no formal training, and many organizations still consider this to be acceptable. But the growth in the market and development of training courses, means that organizations can now be more demanding in their expectations. Most of us would not go to an untrained counsellor or invite an unqualified electrician into our home. There is now no need to do this with coaches. The two UK trade bodies, the Association for Coaching (AC) and the European Coaching and Mentoring Council (ECMC) have both developed accreditation. We would suggest this is not enough. If you are looking for top 10% of coaches look for those with a post graduate level qualification as well. This might be a masters degree in coaching or qualifications such as the ILM level 7 Coaching Certificate.

4. **What ethical standards do they work to?** Ethical practice is an important part of coaching, as it is for particular professions such as doctors, therapists and counsellors. At present, coaching is unregulated, so there is no requirement for a coach to follow any particular standard or practice. In the UK, the Association for Coaching (AC), the EMCC, plus the British Psychology Society set out ethical standards for their members, which means organisations and individuals can hold them to account.
5. **What supervision does the coach have in place?** Coaching can be a challenging area of work. Supervision has now been seen as a key requirement for accredited coaches with the BPS, AC and other coaching membership bodies.

Using the above questions as a guide, you should be able to reduce your list of potential coaches to a more manageable number.

## Stage 2: Getting down to the last few

6. **Can they explain their methodology clearly?** A good coach will be able to describe the model that they use in their coaching work. Most will be using a behavioural or cognitive behavioural model, both of which are well suited to executive coaching. If they are offering a different model, ask them to outline the evidence base for their techniques (such as specific randomized control group studies which show that their approach works). With the exception of behavioural and cognitive behavioural methodologies, the evidence from impact studies is very limited. Try to avoid the more mystical methods such as NLP, which claim positive outcomes but lack any real evidence.
7. **What price do they charge?** There is sometimes a view in business that when it comes to executive coaching, expensive must be good. Some coaching firms' prices reflect this view. Compare prices, alongside the evidence you have collected in Stage 1. Be prepared to pay more only where you can see the benefit of deep experience in the sector and a well qualified coach.

Answers to these questions should enable you to reduce your list to the last few coaches.

## Stage 3: Final selection

8. **What do they believe they can achieve for the individual coachee?** Some organizations invite coaches in, but are vague about what they want to see coaching achieve for individuals. The organisation needs to ensure the potential coach is willing to agree specific goals for individual performance for which they will be held accountable.
9. **What do they believe they can achieve for the organisation?** Commissioning managers may also be reluctant to set high expectations about the organization should expect. If coaching is being paid for by the organization then the organization should rightly expect benefit not just for the individual, but also for the organization. This might also include feedback from the coach for the organization on their coaching work, without breaching agreed confidentially aspects agreed in advance with the coachee and the organization.

10. **Will the coach and coachee get on?** The key question, of course, is whether coachee and coach will get on with each other. Allow coachees to select their own coach from the pool you have appointed. This will increase the chances of success of the relationship and thus of the outcomes which the coach achieves.

Organizational coaching has changed, and it is now possible to find coaches with the right experience, qualifications, training and understanding. It's time for commissioning managers to be more demanding and improve both the quality of the coaches they use and the outcomes they achieve from their investment.