

Opportunities and Applications for Executive Coaching in the Army



by BG Brett Funck

It's likely "coach, teach, and mentor" is a familiar phrase for those in the Army. However, understanding and differentiating the three items is less familiar. The Army is growing its exposure to executive coaching and learning along the way. The focus of this short article is executive coaching, how it differs from mentoring, and possible risks.

A leader most commonly selects a mentor to provide guidance, advice, support, and insights based on their years of experience. Simply put, the younger leader asking questions of the more seasoned leader. The mentor provides insights and most commonly a path to solution. This is the most common form of mentoring, but not the only way. Mentoring still belongs in the Army; however, leader growth is more significant with a complementary mixture of mentoring *and* executive coaching.

Why do we need executive coaching? The Army has worked effectively for decades; is there room to improve and strengthen the profession? I believe the answer is yes.

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Many are familiar with sports or activity coaches. This type of coaching is focused on the instruction and training of individuals and teams. More specifically, this type of coach tends to break down action into its simplest form to master the foundational techniques from which to build greater competency. These coaches are most likely experts on the techniques, training, and strategies of the specific sport or activity.

In contrast, executive coaching is led by a trained and certified individual that focuses on the person and performance improvement, while not focusing on the problem. The executive coach is normally not a part of the organization and does not have a vested interest in the organizational outcome. The coaching is confidential, so the items discussed do not leave the room. The coach helps the individual come up with their own path, solution, and outcome. How is this accomplished?

The proper environment is imperative. It must be confidential, unbiased, and in a place of trust. Trust is critically important. Trust and confidence between the coach and leader are prerequisites prior to entering vulnerable areas. For leaders to grow, they must open up and allow themselves to be vulnerable. Vulnerabilities lead to growth. No one is perfect, and we all have faults. Keys to the proper environment are trust, confidentiality, and in certain circumstances a coach from outside the organization.

When the leader sees other possible outcomes, perceptions, perspectives, and beliefs, growth begins. Perspective is key. Recognizing that one cannot see every angle or aspect of a problem is vital. A way to develop this is through probing, open-ended questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. The coach asks the leader questions and, in turn, follows the leader, flows in the direction of the answers, and probes deeper to assist the leader visualize or hear their new approach. Simply stated, coaches must talk less, ask more, and listen deeply.

So why do we need executive coaching? If we agree that leaders and soldiers are the decisive advantage we have against our adversaries, then we need to see and understand how to improve and what to evolve in our leadership approach. What have we learned, what has changed, what are we doing today to prepare for tomorrow, and what is happening around us in the global operating environment that poses a significant challenge?

Not every leadership situation is a coaching situation; situations will exist where assertive leadership is needed. But, the Army's investment in executive coaching indicates the importance of continued leader development and new methods of delivery.

Risks exist. Early recognition and control measures assist in mitigation. Current risks are

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the lack of proper accreditation standards, high turnover of key leaders overseeing the program, lack of senior leader acceptance, failure in properly training coaches, and a design where the Human Capital Enterprise owns and runs the program. However, the risk of doing nothing is far greater. The Army Coaching Program in the Talent Management Task Force is the current oversight arm ensuring risks are addressed and mitigated.

To be clear, executive coaching is not therapy. By design, therapy focuses on deep-seated emotional areas to assist in healing or trauma recovery. Therapy is led by a trained and licensed Behavioral Health provider. Similar traits may exist between coaches and therapists, but with different skills and outcomes. Over the last decade, most of the executive coaches in DoD were operational psychologists that became trained in coaching, but in recent years we have seen the advantage for the Army to have trained executive coaches from across branches and specialties.

The Army is familiar and comfortable with mentoring. Mentors provide solutions to similar problems encountered in their careers. Conditions regularly change, so it's possible the solution provided by the mentor will not fit for the leader. Executive coaches rely on drawing out the leader's description of the area they want to focus on. Coaches provide the opportunity for the leader to speak, think, and focus on their approach to problem identification and a solution. This allows the leader to verbalize the next step, and commit to taking action. The leader owns the solution, focusing their energy on a personalized solution, vice focusing energy and time to implement someone else's solution.

Brigadier General Brett Funck is the Director of the Army Talent Management Task Force and the Executive Director of the Command Assessment Program. He participated in executive coaching, is an executive coach, and his portfolio includes the Army Coaching Program.

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