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How HR Can Help Coaching Be Successful

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I was with a group of HR professionals the other evening when the topic turned to Executive Coaching. One kind gentleman asked me, “isn’t it true that Executive Coaching is typically used by companies as a last step to cover themselves before they fire someone?” It’s sad to hear of this perception.

However, in my experience the vast majority of businesses will not spend time and money on Executive Coaching unless they truly value the candidate and/or they believe that he or she can benefit from the process. I noted that in many cases it is important for the firm to be clear and candid about the specific behavioral shifts the candidate must accomplish if he/she expects to enjoy a long and successful career at the company. Such clarity is important because it helps all parties (candidate, coach, and the company) develop a shared understanding of what direction the coaching project should take. But it doesn’t necessarily mean that the company is ready to terminate the individual if the coaching goals are not attained.

I’ve even seen instances where the person made only modest progress during the coaching engagement, but then continued to consolidate their gains the following year – resulting in a promotion rather than a termination. This leads me to another question one of the HR professionals asked me that evening: “What can we in HR do to help the coaching process?” I replied, “remind people to be patient.” I explained that behavior change is a long, difficult process that is rarely linear. Coaching candidates typically take two steps forward and one step back. All too often the backward slide is immediately pounced upon as proof that the person cannot change and that the process is bound to fail. HR professionals can help reinforce the message that the growth trajectory is neither a straight line nor a short one.