

Commentary

Can a top-executive in the chemical industry “survive” without a Business Coach?

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1 Executive summary

Not more than 30 years ago, hiring a consultant was seen by many top executives - not only in the chemical industry - as a sign of “weakness” or of “not being able to cope on my own”. Today, all chemical companies use the knowhow, expertise, innovative strength and manpower of consulting firms to solve their strategic and operational problems, to reduce complexity, to initiate change processes and to develop the company to new levels. And the smarter ones use Business Coaching as a tool to support the executives themselves to cope with the increased demands on flexibility, the endless stream of information and projects generated in fast changing global markets. Highly individualized - provided by experienced and coaching-trained professional managers themselves - Business Coaching turns out to be a very effective tool to support top-executives in the chemical industry. However, it is important that these top-executives work together with Business Coaches, who not only have a deep understanding of the behavioral aspects of a successful manager, but, in addition, have an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the true business and industry issues the manager in the chemical industry is confronted with.

In this article three typical questions, managers from the chemical industry have raised, are used to describe the coaching process with its 4 steps, to elaborate on the differences between “Coaching” and “Business Coaching” and to explain – based on practical experience - how a manager can and will benefit from Business Coaching.

2 Can a top-executive in the chemical industry “survive” without a Business Coach?

In today’s fast changing world, characterized by streamlined processes, optimized resources and unlimited access to information, chemical compa-

nies often do not have enough capacity to solve the company’s strategic or operational issues exclusively with internal resources. As a consequence, it is common practice in nearly all firms to make use of management consultants to overcome these capacity bottlenecks, to avoid pitfalls by relying on the consultants’ expertise and experience, in order to – jointly - develop innovative state-of-the-art solutions and to elevate the company to the next performance level. Twenty/thirty years ago, however, hiring a consultant company was often seen as a “weakness of the management team” and as a “sign of being just not capable enough”.

These days, similar thinking regarding “Business Coaching” can be observed. In sports, whether it is in athletics, swimming, fencing or soccer to name only a few, there is not one top-athlete, not one top-team that is not relying on the experience, the training methods and skills of a professional coach. For instance, even the best soccer players in the world (whether Messi, Ronaldo or Manuel Neuer) follow the tactical guidance, the expertise and match plan of an experienced coach. But how many executives in the chemical industry openly acknowledge that they work with a Business Coach to master new business situations, to learn how to build and lead a team successfully or to adapt their behavior to the expectations set by top-management or customers? Especially managers from leading and very successful chemical companies see the benefits from Business Coaching. They understand that working with a Coach does not endanger their career – in contrary, it accelerates their progress both on an individual basis as well as on being part of a larger management team. The reason for this is straightforward: Business Coaching provides a highly individualized working environment. While specific coaching methods are standard it is, just as in professional sports, the effective usage, combination, and timing that makes all the difference together with the all-important “chemistry” between Coach and Coachee. With the right mixture an improvement process will be initiated that

leads to highly effective changes and quick, tangible and sustainable results.

Typical business situations that have been discussed with Coachees coming from the chemical industry focused on the following questions:

A. "I have been a very successful R&D-manager. Now my company has asked me to take over the full profit and loss responsibility for an entire business unit including sales and operations, areas I have no experience in. How can I quickly learn how to run the business and to meet/exceed the aggressive growth target set by the board?"

B. "I am a chemical engineer with many years of line responsibility. To get to the next management level, the CEO has asked me to lead the strategy department for the next two to three years. What are the key elements to gain strategic insights as quickly as possible?"

C. "In my year-end performance review my boss told me that he is not really satisfied with my contributions and behavior in our management meetings. He specifically mentioned that it is not the content of my input, but how I present my findings and how I react to questions from my colleagues. What do I have to do to improve my personal skills in this respect?"

An experienced Coach with psychological or personnel background can work together with the Coachee on developing his behavior, on changing his presentation style or on improving his communication in leadership meetings. But only a **Business Coach** - with deep understanding of the business and industry issues the Coachee has to solve - can quickly and fully grasp the issues the Coachee has to cope with in a given management and decision situation. Apart from the usual coaching role, this opens up new roles such as that of the "trusted advisor" – a role that is becoming more important the higher the Coachee is in ranking. Becoming a "trusted advisor" requires that he wins the full acceptance of the executive, which is not possible without own long-term experience gained in highly ranked leadership positions.

It is important, too, to set the right expectations for the Coachee. A Coach will not provide the "best solution" for the issues of the Coachee. The Coach will, however, sharpen problem awareness, discuss various possible solutions, develop together with the Coachee criteria for making the "right" decisions and support the Coachee in implementing the actions derived from the decisions made. The

Coach guides the process of finding a solution by using proven questioning techniques, which stimulate the Coachee's process of developing a solution himself. And it is exactly this process that leads to sustainable success of coaching compared to other approaches: **Finding the best-fit solution by himself guided by the experienced Business Coach.**

3 What are the key steps of a coaching process?

Some Coaches, especially those with American education, exclusively rely on "their" coaching methodology – independent of the Coachee's individual strengths and weaknesses and independent of the specific issues to be discussed. This "one-size-fits-all-approach" may deliver fast results in about 50% of all cases. But especially when the Coachee is an experienced manager with leadership responsibility the Coach should open his "toolbox" of coaching methods a bit further and carefully select the most suitable method(s) for the coaching sessions. Each coaching should be tailored to the individual needs and requirements of the Coachee in a given situation and, therefore, it is impossible to describe "the" coaching process. However, in more general terms the coaching process usually comprises the following steps:

Step 1: First meeting between Coach and Coachee

An executive should never sign a contract with a (Business) Coach he has not met before – even when the personnel department, colleagues or his boss strongly recommend this specific Coach. In a brief meeting between the Coach and Coachee, both sides should get to know each other and at the end of the meeting, the Coachee should honestly answer the question "does the Coach really understand my business situation and am I prepared to accept the guidance provided by this Coach" with "yes". On the other hand, especially the Business Coach should carefully reflect the questions "do I really have enough expertise and knowhow to support this Coachee in finding the best solution for his issues, will the Coachee accept my guidance and is he prepared to make changes in his business life". Only if both parties are convinced that they will trust each other and that the coaching sessions can deliver tangible results, they should enter into contractual arrangements. Experienced Business Coaches, for instance, typically do not accept 20-30% of all requests they receive mainly due to the impression they get during initial meetings – mostly so because the potential Coachee is not really convinced himself that he does need

Coaching at all (but “all the others”), or because he has only accepted to work with a Coach as this was part of his career development plan or as this was decided by others in the performance reviews.

Step 2: Core principles for and objectives of the Coaching

At the beginning of the coaching process, the Coachee and the Business Coach should agree upon the rules for their joint work and clearly define the objectives the Coachee wants to accomplish. Ideally, they identify ways to measure the coaching success.

In all coaching agreements two important core principles – among others - should be included, namely **“to act on a voluntary basis only”** and strict **“confidentiality”**. It is important that the Coachee truly owns the coaching process and, therefore, he should have the possibility to end the Coaching at any time regardless of prior agreements. Coaching should never become an obligation, but should always feel like a voluntary activity to get new insights and to develop creative and innovative solutions.

The second rule, “confidentiality”, is even more important: there should be a clear understanding that the Coach keeps everything that has been discussed or that has been observed strictly confidential. Even the name of the Coachee should not be disclosed or even used as a reference. The only exception being the Coachee agreeing explicitly to any form of disclosure.

In the first session, the task is to precisely define and agree upon the objectives of the Coaching. The better the objectives are described the better the Coach can select the adequate methods and select the process that will lead to the desired results. However, the objectives should be reviewed on a milestone-basis during the coaching process as the focus of the Coaching may shift over time due to better insights, other business situations than those discussed at the beginning of the Coaching get higher priority or the Coachee’s management tasks have changed.

In addition, a detailed schedule for the upcoming coaching sessions including the main topics of each session should be developed.

Step 3: The coaching sessions itself

Typically, the coaching process aiming for behavioral changes consists of about 20 coaching hours in total, divided into 10 sessions with 2 hours each. At the beginning, the frequency of the sessions is quite high (e.g. one session per week), but there should always be enough time between two ses-

sions to enable the Coachee to reflect the envisaged changes, to try out new approaches, and to experience the results of his/her new behavior. Then – after 4 to 6 sessions – the frequency should be reduced, e.g. to one session every two, three or four weeks. In total, the entire coaching process should thus be finished in less than six months. Experience shows, however, that it makes a lot of sense to plan for a brief review session after 12 and 24 months to evaluate the progress made and to give feedback to the Coachee once more.

Coaching is not a theoretical exercise; starting point should always be a real business situation the Coachee is confronted with. The Coachee should describe these situations in detail with special focus on how he and all other participants acted/reacted, how he would assess his behavior and how would the others potentially assess his performance from their perspectives. Quite often, a significant discrepancy between the self-assessment of the Coachee and the impression the Coachee made on others can be identified at this early stage. In agreement with the Coachee it is, therefore, very helpful to get direct feedback from the next higher management level or his colleagues. Coach and Coachee may even decide that it is useful that the Coach may join (team) meetings to observe behavior and reactions real-time.

For instance, in the third example (C) described above, the Coachee showed two significantly different behaviors: in the management meetings under the leadership of his boss, he demonstrated from the very beginning of the meetings that he is not in-line with the more top-down-style of his boss (the Coachee used the word “dictatorial” style). With all his gestures and his facial expressions he gave the clear signal that he does not accept the way his boss is organizing and leading the meetings. His entire attitude was negative and he permanently criticized both his boss and his colleagues or worked on his computer not paying any attention to the contributions of all others. However, when it was his turn to report about the progress made in the chemical unit he was in charge of, his behavior was impeccable. In meetings with his own team-leaders, the Coachee turned out to be “a different person” – he was alert and polite, accepted different opinions, and was results-oriented. Not one of “his” meetings finished without an action plan with clear responsibilities and a precise timing.

As the Coachee was not aware of this discrepant behavior, a whole session was videotaped. At the beginning of the meeting, the Coachee was very positive and provided valuable contributions, but then he forgot about the camera and both his body language and his comments generated an unnec-

essary and growing tension the longer the meeting lasted. After watching the video and pinpointing key scenes, the Coachee understood his negative impact on the meeting and how easy it was for all the others “to realize that he tries to make life for his boss difficult”. In the following sessions with the Coachee, the work clearly focused on uncovering the trigger points for his behavior and, more important, how to actively overcome it.

Experienced Business Coaches use various techniques/elements of systemic Coaching and modern technologies to make Coachees aware of their behavior and the signals they send out. If necessary, it is common practice to accompany the Coachee an entire day to experience first-hand how he organizes and handles his working day. This “shadowing”-approach provides valuable insights as it is especially the interaction with other managers, colleagues or team members that provides examples for successful behavior, hindering actions, missed opportunities – all in all valuable food for thought for the Coachee, truly illustrating examples from daily life rather than theoretical exercises.

This is especially the case the higher the executive is in ranking. In theory, people are well aware of what constitutes desired and adequate behavior. Readings, past trainings or feedback from others have all left their mark. Long-time experience and success leading to top positions added to that behavior and especially top executives quite often wrongly assume everything is fine. It is the more reflected of them who are purposefully looking for Business Coaching to offer new insights, a new perspective and – most of all – an independent view. They are looking for someone who has no stakes to discuss openly areas of weakness, of question marks, and uncertainty. Deep business and industry knowledge and understanding of management processes are extremely helpful in these sessions when underpinned with profound Coaching methods to provide guidance and meet high expectations.

In the case of the above described middle-management R&D-manager (A), the Business Coaching started to support him in identifying the critical success factors of the business, evaluating in detail the customer requirements of today and tomorrow, analyzing the competitors and expected competitive moves, getting a better understanding about the key regional and global markets, assessing and organizing the own resources and finally finding ways how to motivate his teams. This program took six months in total with two-hours-sessions every second week plus “home-work” for the time between sessions.

The tasks for the line-manager who was sup-

posed to take over the leadership of the strategy department for the next two years (B), were different: this chemical company had a well-established strategy process and every five years the company hired one of the leading global consulting firms to review and adapt the company’s strategy to meet the current and future market trends and requirements. In the past, the manager was already heavily involved in the strategy process by providing input and delivering the required data for the unit he was responsible for. Therefore, the task of the Business Coach focused on discussing with the Coachee the strategic toolbox, reviewing the strategy documents of the last five years, identifying strategic deficits and potential data sources. The objective of the executive clearly was to bring the strategy department to the next level (world-class level). The biggest obstacle he had, however, was not a lack of understanding of the strategy methodologies or insufficient knowledge of the chemical markets, but the way he was “thinking”. As a line-manager he was used to think very operational, mainly bottom-up. Now he was required to think “out-of-the-box”, mainly top-down. After six intensive sessions with him in less than 1.5 months, the entire management felt him to be a much better fit in his new role.

A final example where Business Coaching can be an effective tool was a young woman who for the first time took over a management responsibility. Here, the Coaching was two-fold: supporting her in terms of developing the required leadership skills and behavior as part of her new role. And, at the same time, the newly appointed manager was expected to bring about a major change in her department. Accomplishing both was a tough task. Proper guidance, great support by the entire management team and her ability to quickly pick up on learnings and insights already led to top results after six months. Today, 24 months later, the Coachee’s department is being viewed as extremely well-led, having managed the desired turn-around and the manager herself is again on the list for promotion within the next two years.

Step 4: Ending the coaching process

In the last session, Coachee and Coach should critically reflect whether all objectives have been fulfilled and the Coachee’s expectations have been fully met. If follow-up sessions are viewed as being helpful, they should be agreed upon now (in form of meetings or telephone calls). In addition, most Coachees find it extremely helpful, if a Coach offers a “hot-line”, the Coachee can call, whenever there is an “urgent” issue coming-up.

4 Summary and “what will happen in the future”

More and more companies in the chemical industry (and in all other industries) work together with Coaches and Business Coaches. Some companies make it even mandatory that a “high potential” gets a Coach as part of both his personality and business development program. Other companies systematically use Business Coaches to accompany an executive, for instance, for the first 100 days after he has taken over a new role/responsibility. And even entire boards hire Business Coaches to provide independent guidance for the company’s way to the future. And this trend will continue. Consequently, the demand for excellent Business Coaches will increase and may even generate a bottleneck.

Currently, companies in other industries – especially those in less product- and more service-oriented sectors (for instance, insurance, telecom etc.) - have already established “their pool” of certified Coaches and Business Coaches of significant size. These companies have installed a rigid evaluation process to become a preferred partner in this coaching pool, too, and review the performance of the Coaches in the pool at least twice a year.

Clearly, the concept “Coaching” is recognized as an effective tool especially for managers because of its voluntary and highly individualized set-up. Key for success is the selection of the “right” Coach. As in consulting, the wide field of so-called Coaches will sort itself out based on true professional background and certified knowledge. Properly sourced and adequately utilized for the different management levels, Coaching is in terms of the cost-benefit relationship preferable compared to standard trainings.