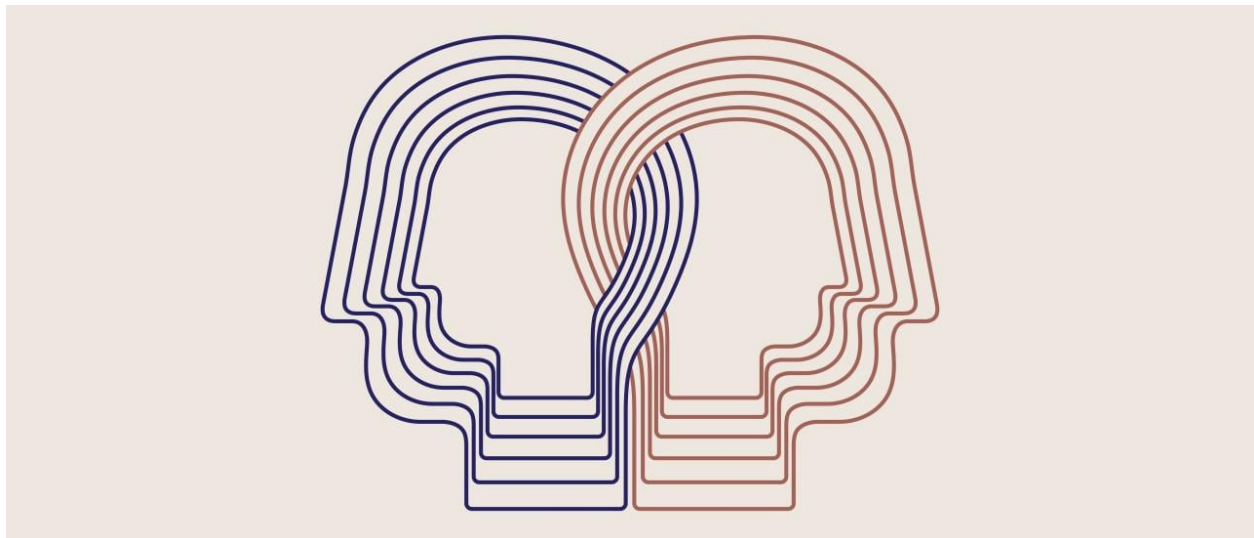


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# So, You Have a Coach, Now What?



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## **How leaders can get the most out of an effective coaching relationship.**

Having a coach these days is almost a given, an essential part of any senior executive's career portfolio. But while some leaders swear by their coaches, there are others who just can't seem to find the "right one". What causes these wildly different experiences?

While there are multiple approaches and practices, at its core, coaching is about emotional and intellectual support. It's about providing a space for the coachee to develop and expand their mental model of understanding the world. Coaches communicate that support through the questions they ask, inviting the coachees to pay attention to themselves and contexts that they might otherwise miss. Coaches provide space and fill it with their intention and attention.

One common misconception is that the coach will "lead" the conversation or provide some magic solution to the challenges the coachee faces. In reality, both parties must invest in the relationship for the experience to be truly effective.

A coachee's role is to be clear with themselves about their expectations. They need to assess if they have the incentives, resources and support to enable the change they desire. If they don't have a genuine willingness to make shifts in their behaviour, or are just there because their manager sent them, then change can be challenging, even with resources and support.

## **Redefining success**

For many high potential and highly successful individuals, their sense of self and ambition could actually impede their capacity to reflect, process and change. Take the MBA students who we work with on the INSEAD Personal Leadership Development Programme (PLDP). They are constantly told they are special for getting into INSEAD, but they might not feel it, leading to a misalignment between who they are and who they are told they are - this promotes impostor syndrome.

It is important to offer them a space to revisit these assumptions and sentiments. To do this we break down leadership development into three key dimensions: (1) understanding themselves; (2) their relationship with others; and (3) how those elements influence, and are influenced, by the culture of the group.

Success means having an awareness for these dynamics and integrating them into your decision-making processes as a leader. Effective leadership depends on accurate diagnosis of the relationship between self, others and context. This is not something that can be calculated via an Excel spreadsheet or presented in bullet points. It only comes with experience and reflection, and a willingness to learn and **explore**. If the coachees are not willing, then coaching sessions will at best be very boring. At worst, they will be irritating, tedious and a waste of time for all parties and money for the coachee.

In some cases, this results in a coach getting unfairly blamed for being ineffective and the exercise branded pointless. But if individuals have a genuine motivation to change and develop, then coaches can be highly influential in helping them expand the ways they understand the world, and hence lead.

## **Attunement is vital**

As with most relationships, communication is key to shared understanding. Effective communication occurs when each party is attuned to each other: the vocal, emotional or social message given is the one received.

Attunement is the adjustment necessary within the context of the coaching relationship. It's about how the coach and coachee discuss how they are working together, share their expectations and concerns and get to a point where expectations on both sides are at least understood, and hopefully met.

This allows for the learning and support to take place with less resistance. An effective coaching relationship requires constant attention to whether it is working. And if it's not working, what needs to shift. Attunement between the coach and coachee attends to the why, the what and importantly the how of the coaching relationship.

For the coachee, attunement means: "How do I evaluate whether this is an effective developmental relationship for me?" They need to be clear on the kind of development they are working towards and their evaluation criteria, and then share these with their coach. If the relationship is not going the way they envisioned, then they need to bring this up. They need to communicate their preferences for the relationship, whether that means more action-planning driven, or more reflection-focused. They could set realistic markers for themselves and revisit these markers with their coaches if expectations are not met.

## **The coach's obligation**

For the coach, attunement means: "How do I seek to understand my client's relational preferences and adapt accordingly?" They need to explicitly invite the coachee to express their concerns, however minor, of how the coaching is going. They should not ask leading questions such as "is this helpful?" but instead look for more constructive feedback. "What am I doing or not doing that is less effective for you in this coaching space?" This is not a conversation to simply gratify the coach's internal sense of worth or to reaffirm that they have been useful. The purpose is to find the most attuned way to adhere to the coachee's developmental aims and agenda.

There are cases where the coachees do not get to choose their coach. For example, during leadership development programmes, or when a firm offers a coach to its executives. In these cases, this attunement conversation is all the more important to reduce doubt in the relationship. We recommend coaches invite this conversation explicitly and review it often.

Setting expectations and being willing to change is only the foundation. Attunement is key to maximising the coaching support.

## **Selecting a coach**

Because of this, finding the right coach is an important first step. We recommend meeting at least three different coaches, understanding their approaches and discussing how they work with coachees. Try and find the one whom you feel can hold you responsible for your own developmental agenda, not just make you feel good or “perform well”. This is why your boss’ coach, who was sure to have been amazing for them, does not necessarily translate as being the best fit for you.

Learning, development and change takes time, no coach can wave a magic wand. To get the most out of a coaching relationship you must bring your curiosity and questions, have the courage to take a risk to ask those questions and have the honesty to explore these curiosities with your coach, whilst continuously attuning the coaching relationship.

As a leader who wants to develop and change and be a better leader for their teams, working with a coach can be a valuable tool. But for it to be an impactful experience, an individual must be honest with themselves. Without the inner motivation and incentive for starting the relationship, and the resources and support to do so, then even the best coach in the world can’t deliver the change you desire.

### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/so-you-have-coach-now-what>

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