

COACHING ACROSS BORDERS I

By Meridian Resources

In recent years, coaching has become a widely accepted means of helping U.S. executives enhance their leadership skills. Due in large part to the success of this technique, a number of firms have begun to implement coaching programs in other locations around the world. In Part 1 of this 2-part series on coaching, we examine the issues related to establishing a coaching program abroad.

Setting up a Coaching Program Abroad:

U.S. firms that are setting up coaching programs in overseas locations encounter a number of questions that overlap in part with home country issues but have somewhat different answers. Here are six of the questions we feel it is important to ask in process of establishing an effective coaching program abroad:

1. How do we introduce coaching to our subsidiary employees?

It is critical to position any coaching program (whether in the U.S. or abroad) in a way that garners the support of local management and coachees. We find that the best way to do this is to start with the basics.

Because coaching in its current form is new to many people in overseas sites, it is often necessary to begin with a basic definition. We describe coaching as "a way to draw out the skills and abilities of another person to help him or her achieve key business and professional objectives." However, people tend to respond more readily to metaphors, and have often heard other terms that they have confused with coaching. An accomplished athlete such as Tiger Woods, we suggest, doesn't need an instructor or a trainer, but he does use a coach who can assist him in making continuous improvements in his game. Potential coachees in almost any part of the world also understand and accept the argument that coaching is particularly necessary in a rapidly changing business environment where:

- Top-down hierarchies have become dysfunctional;
- People at various levels in the organization must be entrusted with decision-making authority;
- Individuals with limited managerial experience or people skills have been rapidly promoted.

2. Who should be coached?

Regardless of the location, valuable executive development funds are best invested in high potential individuals who are ready and willing to be coached - not those who are seen as marginal performers the company is trying to rehabilitate. However, in places outside of the U.S. where coaching is less familiar, it may be necessary to hold more than one meeting with potential coachees to describe the nature and purpose of coaching, reassuring them that coaching is not a form of punishment or a sign of weakness, but rather an opportunity allotted to a limited number of employees. Over time, coaching can be positioned within the organization as a valuable privilege through a selection process that consistently draws in managers recognized by peers for their strong performance.

3. In what language should coaching be conducted?

There are a variety of pros and cons to any choice here; we recommend leaving the decision in the hands of the coachee. A lot of people are more comfortable discussing sensitive matters in their native language - without this option, they find it difficult to really open up or to analyze issues in depth. For others, coaching objectives are tied to their ability to express themselves in

the company's official language - typically English - and they find the use of this language a better way to make progress with key skills. Some coachees appreciate the option to switch back and forth between languages in a coaching session, and it is an advantage to have a coach who can make this switch with them.

4. Can we use technology to cut costs?

While face-to-face coaching is normally preferable for both coach and coachee, in some locations it is difficult to identify experienced coaches. The extra expense of flying in an executive coach from another location can be cut down through the use of web-cam technology that enables coach and coachee to supplement face-to-face meetings with "virtual" face-to-face sessions. Telephone conversations are another option, but these are normally not as useful as web-cam meetings because the coach does not have access to the visual cues that are so important to understanding the range of meanings expressed in a coaching conversation.

5. How long should coaching last?

The six-month course of monthly meetings that has become the norm for coaching engagements in the U.S. is appropriate in overseas contexts as well. But because many coachees are relatively inexperienced leaders, having risen quickly in the organization on the strength of their professional or technical skills, some do request and benefit from longer-term access to a coach. The six-month term continues to be a good benchmark for setting and demonstrating significant progress towards achieving a specific set of objectives. After six months, in our experience, fast-moving coachees may have already shifted to a new and more demanding role, with a fresh set of critical objectives to go along with it. Some companies elect to provide their most gifted employees with a second or even a third six-month session.

6. What objectives should we focus on?

The explicit focus of coaching is normally a set of business and/or professional development objectives that have been agreed upon by both the coachee and his or her direct manager. From the company standpoint, another objective that lies in the background is the retention of key personnel. When coaching is properly positioned within an organization, coachees see it as a useful "perk" that becomes a source of prestige as well as something for more junior colleagues to look forward to. An effective coaching program usually brings about tangible upgrades in the workplace atmosphere, noticeably lightening the mood and improving relations between managers and subordinates. Better retention rates are quantifiable and directly related to financial performance.

Perhaps the most vital long-term objective, however, is to bring each coaching relationship full circle and to enable the coachee to become a coach. This objective is of critical importance in developing organizations overseas where the leadership and management talent pool is still shallow. The presence of a growing number of coachees-turned-coaches creates a self-reinforcing cycle that grows the talent pool from within, allowing the entire company to set and achieve more ambitious business goals.

Next month, we will explore a number of common types of coachees we have worked with in Asia and Europe, and coaching strategies we have found to be effective with each type of coachee.

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