

# **Strengthening the Leadership Pipeline through Internal Human Resources-based Executive Coaching: A White Paper**

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*Executive coaching is both an individual developmental process and a strategic initiative for organizations committed to strengthening their leadership pipelines. Many companies use external executive coaches, and primarily for their highest-level executives. Other companies develop a cadre of internal coaches whose work and influence extend well beyond top executives.*

*This White Paper describes how a Fortune 100 company, Lockheed Martin, developed an extensive internal coach certification program for Human Resource professionals so they could optimally support leaders in a two-year high potential executive development program. While this was a multidimensional, multi-year endeavor involving over 275 coach trainees, this paper focuses specifically on the decision process for investing in training internal HR professionals as executive coaches for developing the corporation's high-potential leaders as well as the unique construction of the program itself.*

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## **Strengthening the Leadership Pipeline**

As part of an extensive, in-depth examination of its leadership competencies and organization's mission, Lockheed Martin re-affirmed its commitment to an exemplary leadership culture, now formalized in its new leadership imperatives. These leadership imperatives explicitly represent the importance of business results embedded within a deep behavioral commitment to personal integrity, accountability and excellence as well as strong skills of critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. They are also in alignment with Lockheed Martin's overarching commitment to be an exemplary organization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

When Lockheed Martin turned to the question of how to best grow and strengthen its leaders within its leadership model and organizational commitments, one important strategic answer was establishing its Executive Coach Certification Program (ECCP). Whether your organization is refining its leadership framework or is in an earlier stage of considering your strategic leadership direction, key questions to consider for reaching your answer include:

**a)** Do our current and high-potential leaders currently possess the core leadership skills and competencies required to fulfill our organizational commitments?

**b)** How do we best grow and strengthen our leadership pipeline within our leadership model, articulation of core leadership competencies, and organizational commitments?

c) To what extent is our organization committed to creating a culture that will grow and sustain the required leadership competencies?

d) What executive coach training models are best suited for what we want? Who can best provide these training services? What kind of partnership will best help us meet our goals?

This paper shares the considerations and lessons learned during this decision-making and implementation process at Lockheed Martin. These include: the business case for executive coaching as a key developmental strategy, the decision to use external or internal coaches or both, the rationale for developing an internal coaching capacity through Human Resources, the reasons for selecting an inquiry-based coaching program, determining the readiness of an organization's HR department for providing executive coaching, and key considerations when implementing an internal coaching program within an organization.

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## **The Business Case for Executive Coaching**

In addition to strengthening the skills of current executives, executive coaching is increasingly used as a strategy for developing future leaders. According to the Hay Group, a major HR consultancy, between 25-40% of Fortune 500 companies use executive coaches for increased performance, satisfaction and results. Manchester, Inc. determined that six out of 10 organizations offer coaching to their executives and managers.

Executive coaching is a valuable one-on-one development approach for busy executives who rarely have time to attend week-long executive development seminars. Even with the expense, recent return-on-investment (ROI) data indicates that executives working with executive coaches report greater productivity and sizeable financial gains for their companies. For example, according to the consulting firm MetrixGlobal, a study (Anderson, 2001) conducted at a Fortune 500 firm indicated that coaching produced a 529% return on investment (ROI) and significant intangible benefits to the business. This figure did not include the additional benefits from stronger employee retention.

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## **Executive Coaching: External, Internal or Both?**

Some organizations may have a cultural bias toward hiring external executive coaches, particularly for very senior executives. That being said, an organization has to weigh the benefits and costs of hiring external coaches as distinct from developing their own cadre of internal coaches or using some combination of internal and external resources. Some companies have a strategy of using external executive coaches at the very senior levels of an organization and use internal coaches at middle management or lower levels. Key considerations include: a) cost, b) availability, c) reputation and credibility of the coaches, d) necessary skills and e) in-depth knowledge of the organization and the industry.

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## **Human Resource Professionals as Executive Coaches**

HR professionals are a logical choice when an organization considers developing a cadre of internal coaches. (Note: In some organizations, coaching functions may be shared between HR and OD/OE.) HR professionals bring important resources to the table. They typically have the well-developed interpersonal skills that are fundamental to solid coaching relationships. Many HR professionals have specialized skills training, such as in change management, communication and problem-solving; these are also foundational skills for coaches. In addition, HR professionals have in-depth understanding of the immediate system in which their executives operate, along with knowledge of their corporate culture and specific industry.

There are benefits for the HR department itself when an organization embraces the strategy of developing HR professionals as internal coaches. Not only does this strategy build the skills of internal HR professionals, it also enhances the credibility of HR within the organization as these professionals become more successful and visible as strategic partners with the organization's leaders.

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## **Designing the Coach Training Program**

Lockheed Martin recognized the need and value of developing an internal cadre of executive coaches to coach high potential leaders in their Executive Assessment and Development (EAD) leadership program. It was decided to select HR professionals identified as having the cognitive, interpersonal and

behavioral skill potentials to provide the leadership coaching. In order to prepare this group for their roles as coaches, an internal executive coaching certification training program was crafted based on models of strategic inquiry. The program was also designed to be compatible with the coaching competencies of the International Coaching Federation (ICF) so that Lockheed Martin-trained coaches could potentially apply their coach training hours toward ICF's professional coaching certification. Over 275 HR professionals have completed this training.

The training program includes a 3-day workshop and a practicum consisting of eight "telelabs". The practicum is scheduled over four months following the workshop so that coaches can further refine their skills and progress. Each telelab covers a content area (e.g., contracting the agreement, coaching assignments, executive derailers) and includes practice of coaching skills and tools. A ninth "bonus" telelab ensures that coaches have an opportunity to make up a missed session in order to complete the practicum.

Between telelabs, participants test out new skills or concepts in their coaching engagements or with a pre-arranged Learning Partner (an individual who was also going through the certification program). Learning Partners work together to reflect on and learn from their experiences. Participants also report and reflect on lessons learned from their "assignment" when they join the telelab group again on the following call. Coaches are certified upon successful completion of all components of the program.

In addition to the body of executive coaches, a small cadre of Senior Coaches was established. They are responsible for advancing the effectiveness of the executive coaches in their business areas. The Senior Coaches were provided 45 hours of advanced training over and above the initial training program. These 45 hours consisted of a 20-hour workshop and 25 hours of practicum experience that included feedback on audiotaped coaching sessions provided by an external, ICF-credentialed coach.

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## **Strategic Inquiry: A Powerful Paradigm for Coaching**

There are many approaches to coaching, so the selection of an executive coach training program is an important strategic decision. Lockheed Martin chose a program (see side bar) that was explicitly based on the principles and methods of strategic inquiry. "Powerful questioning" is cited as a core coaching competence by the International Coaching Federation (ICF), the primary credentialing and standard-setting organization of the coaching profession. As Bossidy and Charan note in *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*,

“... The skill of the coach is the art of questioning. Asking incisive questions forces people to think, to discover, to search.”

This inquiry-based training program emphasizes three areas of coach development. The first area is the *mindset and attitudes* of successful coaching and questioning. The second is the development of inquiry-based coaching *skills*. Third is the practice of *methods and tools* of questioning that support an optimum coaching process to deliver the best results for high-potential leader/coachees.

### **Strategic Inquiry Coaching Programs**

This inquiry-based coach training covers three areas of coach development.

#### **1. Mindset and attitudes**

Learning to distinguish and reinforce the optimum mindset for both coaching and leadership is the cornerstone of this coach development model. The Learner-Judger Mindset Model focuses on Learner-based attitudes and questioning (e.g., open-minded, curious, discerning, and collaborative) while also identifying limiting Judger-focused attitudes and questioning (e.g., close-minded, self-righteous, judgmental and win-lose).

#### **2. Development of inquiry-based coaching skills**

The program emphasizes the primary coaching skill of facilitating through questioning. This skill can be challenging for HR professionals whose role typically requires an “answer and advice” orientation. Trainees learn inquiry-based ways of listening and responding to coachees’ concerns and goals, reinforced by extensive skill practices and working with case studies.

#### **3. Inquiry-based methods and tools for coaching**

Two primary learning models/tools provide structure and focus to the training. *The Choice Map™* is used to reinforce awareness of Learner and Judger attitudes and questions, including how to switch from Judger to Learner. A *Question Map™ for Coaching Conversations* organizes the phases of a coaching conversation along with the goals, interventions, and most useful kinds of questions for each phase.

Lockheed Martin’s HR leaders recognized that a coach training program organized around skills of inquiry would be congruent with their own reformulation of leadership competencies required for a world-class organization. A leader, by definition, produces results through others. Therefore, the more that leaders develop coaching skills themselves, the more predictably they will be able to empower those whom they lead.

Being the recipient of effective inquiry-based coaching, and experiencing that modeling, helps leaders develop their own leadership coaching abilities. Marquardt reports that a study by the Center for Creative Leadership found that the ultimate key to successful leadership was an executive’s ability to ask questions and create opportunities for others to ask questions. As management guru Peter Drucker opined, “The leader of the past was a person who told. The leader of the future will be a person who asks”.

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## Readiness of HR to Provide Executive Coaching

The decision to invest in developing HR professionals as executive coaches is multifaceted. The authors share the following lessons learned to determine the readiness of your organization to develop HR professionals as internal executive coaches:

Consider the current *credibility* of your existing HR population to work with executives or high potential leaders in this capacity. Based on your analysis, you may decide to start with a small group of HR professionals who can build that credibility and then expand the program rather than train your whole HR staff.

Identify one or more *champions* at multiple levels of the organization for the coaching program. Champions can speak to the value of coaching and the coaching program and support the credibility of your HR coaches. They can also address misperceptions or skepticism about coaching and the coach training.

Shape a realistic perspective regarding the *time and resources* necessary for the development of coaching expertise. This includes time that the coaches must devote to training and coaching, as well as the time necessary for the program to grow and develop. HR professionals who add coaching to their current role functions need the support of their managers to dedicate the time necessary for training and for coaching.

### Nine Questions to Determine Readiness of HR for Executive Coaching

There are numerous questions to ask to determine if your organization is ready to advance the skills of HR professionals by developing an internal cadre of executive coaches.

1. **Strategic HR Direction** – Does the idea of having your HR professionals develop themselves in a way that is more consultative match your strategy? If so, what is the best way to promote inquiry skills in an “advice” and action-oriented profession like HR?
2. **Internal Credibility** – Does your existing HR population have the credibility to begin to work with executives or high potential leaders in this capacity? Do you have a small group of individuals you could start with to begin to build that credibility?
3. **Champions** - Do you have one or more champions for the program? How could you develop a person to serve in this capacity?
4. **Time** – Are your internal HR professionals committed to the time it takes to build their individual and the organizational capability of executive coaching? Coaching is a recognized profession; hence most professionals just focus on this area. Realistically, is your company committed enough to allow coaches to take the time to coach?
5. **Expectations** – Who is the client – the individual manager or the organization? What perceptions of coaching are already established or entrenched in your organization?
6. **Positioning** - What type of “**educational marketing**” might be needed? How do you integrate coaching with existing leadership or consulting models?
7. **Sustainability** – Are you prepared to sustain the coaching program including ongoing skill development, education, and feedback?
8. **Accountability** – Are you prepared to take coaches out of the coaching pool for ethical violations or lack of effectiveness?
9. **Measurement** – Does your organization require a link to ROI? How will you determine the effectiveness of the coaching program, the executive coaches, and the leaders of the organization after this effort is complete?

Be aware of challenges in asking HR professionals to fulfill these two distinct, though aligned roles. HR professionals are generally considered “go to” people for answers. Yet coaches usually do their best work when they’re asking thought-provoking questions and serving as thinking partners for their coaches. Consistent with this, executive coaching takes place at a slower pace than the usual speedy life of work. Coaches must learn to support the philosophy that “slowing down” (i.e., leaders taking time for self development, reflection, and leaning) allows for “speeding up” (i.e., enhanced leadership effectiveness).

Consider the integration of coaching within your organization, particularly how coaching fits with your organization’s leadership model. Determine current perceptions of coaching within the corporation and to what extent “*educational marketing*” is necessary to support the acceptability and successful integration of coaching into the company’s culture.

Finally, consider your corporation’s requirements for linking coaching to ROI. Decide how the *value and outcomes* of coaching will be measured as well as communicated to the rest of the organization.

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## **Implementation Considerations**

Once you decide to move forward to implement an internal executive coaching program in your organization consider the following recommendations:

Seek out the perceptions and expectations of all *stakeholders* early in the process. This includes corporate leaders, high potential executives, HR leaders and current external coaches.

Acknowledge any *skepticism or negative past experiences* with coaching or coaching initiatives. Address these directly in the new implementation.

Link the coach training to the organization’s cultural model and leadership framework.

Underscore the benefit of coaching to *business results*.

Recognize that a 2-3 day training program will not sufficiently support the development of your coaches. An *ongoing practicum* of at least several months following the training workshop allows for refining skills and tracking the coaches’ experience and progress in “real time”.

The establishment of a *coaching community of practice* reinforces the development of these skills. Community building events can include ongoing telecons, guest speakers, conferences, and training of a senior level of coaches to forward the development of coaches in their business area.

Ask stakeholders for ongoing *feedback* and suggestions and integrate these into continuous improvement of the program.

Companies must constantly balance their need to grow leadership talent with the realities of corporate resources and effectiveness. Investing in one's HR professionals to provide critical coaching services can be an effective strategy for strengthening the leadership pipeline while promoting HR professionals as strategic partners within the business.

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