

The CEO, the Subordinate and the Coach

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Many healthcare CEOs have a direct report who just needs to change a little. That little change often refers to a behavioral issue that the CEO clearly sees but is unsure how, or is hesitant, to address with the subordinate executive. Oftentimes that executive's behavioral issue is related to decision making, knowing when to be assertive and knowing when to wait.

CEOs often address this kind of issue by hiring an executive coach to help the subordinate executive overcome their concern. At the same time, however, the CEO should ask why that subordinate executive is less assertive or not as venturesome as preferred. Perhaps the CEO could be part of the problem or, from a positive viewpoint, part of the solution.

So often when a CEO hires an executive coach for a subordinate executive, the onus is placed solely on the shoulders of the subordinate executive. Many times there is scant accountability for the CEO prior to the coaching engagement and far too often very little accountability following it. The CEO merely approves the task and assumes minimal responsibility for the eventual outcome.

Reflecting on my years as CEO of two hospitals and now in my sixth year as a leadership coach, I have yet to experience a client organization where the boss also didn't need some level of concomitant coaching. When senior executives need coaching, the CEO is all too often part of the problem. Fortunately, an enlightened CEO can be part of the solution, which can be achieved by doing the following:

Employ reflection and introspection. Then review actions and outcomes. The CEO should consider the circumstances that helped determine a coach is needed and ask themselves what might have been done or not done that contributed to those circumstances. Am I really as hands-off as I think I am? Am I really interested in the long-term career goals of my subordinate?

Identify strengths of the subordinate executive that the CEO hasn't permitted to develop to the fullest. Talk with the direct report about their ambitions and concerns, and be open to their ideas. The CEO should create a written plan of development that includes negotiated performance metrics.

Have the CEO conduct a self-assessment of his strengths and weaknesses and identify who in the organization is complementary so that weaknesses are minimized and strengths are maximized. The CEO should consider relinquishing some current duties so that associates can grow even further.

Now we have come full circle. An executive coach may be needed for one or more the CEO's subordinates. But, the CEO should realize they are part and parcel of the coaching engagement. We can all learn with the formula of acknowledgment, observation, change and evaluation.

Every expectation the CEO has requires their commitment and comes with consequences. Personal accountability on the part of the CEO is paramount.

The most successful CEOs get out of their comfort zone and seek true, meaningful outcomes with no denial. Of course they have fears, but accept accountability and don't spread the blame. The buck not only stops with the CEO, it starts with them!

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