

## Should You Go For Life Coaching?



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In her illustrious career spanning over four decades, Mita has held key responsibilities across organizations such as State Bank of India, Nucleus Software Exports, Grow Talent, Shri Ram New Horizons, and Bizmentor Consultancy Services, to name a few.

The first use of the word coaching dates back to nineteenth century England. At that time, it was slang for tutoring a student to help her clear her exams. In India, the words 'coaching industry' still refer to the business of helping students towards competitive examinations for entry into prestigious colleges, or for sought-after jobs.

Today, outside the business workplace, the term coaching is commonly associated with sports. This is a positive association. Thanks to intensive coverage of sports on electronic media, even a layperson understands that – coaching helps improve performance; sports bodies go to great lengths to find & hire a coach who helps teams perform; and even the best and the brightest of performers use coaches. It is not only the weak performers who use coaching. A coach helps in maintaining and improving performance for the entire team. Coaches need not always be better performers than their wards. However, they should have had the experience of performing reasonably well in the kind of role their ward is playing. Outstanding performers do not necessarily have the ability to coach others. They can be inspirations and role models, but may not be able to help others in specific ways to become better performers. Coaches are usually specialists. To take an example from Indian cricket, the team has separate coaches for bowling, fielding and batting. Coaches work with one person or a limited number of people working towards a common goal. Coaches work for an extended period with their wards to deliver results. This is not a quick process, but a long-time relationship. Champions hang-on to their coaches.

All the above requirements hold for coaches in the business workplace as well. However, several misconceptions prevail amongst managers at the workplace. Many believe that weak performers need coaching more than good performers. This is not true. Weak performers may often need more of counselling, training, supervision and role change. Coaching is in fact an investment in someone who has the potential to do much more than he/she is currently doing. Coaching for higher performance is ideally for people in the C-suite or those being groomed for the C-suite. The coaching process can be expensive and it may make better sense to invest that money in someone who will have a large impact over all or most of the organization. Coaching is also useful for all those employees who have potential to do more and are being held back because of some specific behavioural issues.

While most leaders agree that coaching can help people realize their potential, it is not a widespread practice. There are several reasons for this. Coaching ability is an expensive and scarce resource. The number of certified and experienced coaches is however increasing by the year, and digital technology is making it possible for them to reach more people and to function in a remote manner.

The 'coachee' at the workplace suffers from several issues. Some employees see the assignment of a coach as reflecting poorly on them. They feel that if they were seen as better performers, they would not need coaching. This issue has to be addressed through better internal communication and also by assignment of coaches to those employees who are perceived as high performers in the organization. Selection for coaching should in fact be seen as a sign of commitment by the organization and as an appreciation of one's potential.

***“A more holistic and satisfying life journey makes employees better human beings as well as more productive in fulfilling the organization's own mission”***

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There are problems too with the performance appraisal process in organizations. In most settings, the evaluation focuses on how well an individual has performed in the recent past and not so much on potential for high contribution in the future. Once potential assessment becomes more common and dependable, the need for focussed efforts like coaching will be self-evident and widespread. Another issue is that in these turbulent times characterised by the VUCA label, some organizations wonder whether they should be making long-term investments in people who may moveout or may be redeployed because of strategic acquisitions, mergers, divestments, or a change in the business model. One can only hope that organizations continue to do the right thing by their people in keeping with their current vision and business plans. Investment in people pays-off all the more in uncertain times.

Sometimes it is difficult to help an individual achieve his/her full potential at work if she is not doing a good job of managing challenges outside the workplace. These challenges appear in different forms at different points in one's life journey. Sometimes, this may even require examination of one's expectations from life beyond one's career and a clear evaluation and resolution of work-life conflicts and trade-offs. This is where a more comprehensive coaching support helps. This is best called life coaching because it goes well beyond developing a new approach to work and includes developing one's life vision and skills to negotiate all that stands in the way of realising that vision.

Progressive organizations are providing life-coaching resources to their staff. Unlike business coaching, an employee who is willing and preferably asking for it can best leverage life coaching. Providing everyone with diagnostic tools that help them ascertain their strengths, clarify their expectations from life and enumerate dysfunctional behaviours that stand in the way is generally the first step in this process. Providing time to employees for regular coaching sessions would be the next step. The key challenge found in organizations is to get sufficient engagement and buy-in from the coachee. Some organisations go the next step and make those changes in policy and practice that help people blend work and life in congruence with their emerging vision, post the coaching sessions. Typically, some employees want more entrepreneurial avenues at work, some want to make a greater social impact, some others want to explore their creativity, and so on. A more holistic and satisfying life journey makes employees better human beings as well as more productive in fulfilling the organization's own mission.

There are no standard templates about how to do this for organizations that want to provide life-coaching support. Unlike in business coaching, the ecosystem in terms of selfdiagnostics and specialised coaching is just about developing. A good start is for leaders to undergo analysis themselves. An exercise of selfreflection and introspection helps clarify to oneself the life goals. A life-coach aids this process of selfdiscovery, evaluation of options and personal growth. As leaders experience life coaching, and the resultant clarity of purpose, passion and engagement at work, they are bound to enable it for their teams.

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