



The Ten Inflection Points of Coaching:

Navigating the Successful
Leadership Coaching
Journey

By Ian Ziskin

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Chapter 7

The Ten Inflection Points of Coaching: Navigating the Successful Leadership Coaching Journey

By Ian Ziskin

Several years ago, I was sitting in the office of a new coaching client, a CEO who had been hired from outside the company only a few months before. He was telling me about his mission: To transform a highly successful organization with a strong engineering and technology heritage into an even more successful global enterprise. I listened to him describe how flattered and excited he was to be sought after and recruited for this role, his first CEO level opportunity. He shared how energized he was by the challenges he had encountered early in his tenure, and the ideas he had for leading the large-scale changes required to address the challenges he was anticipating.

It didn't take long, however, for his voice to change and his demeanor to shift from an air of self-confidence and enthusiasm to one of self-doubt and uncertainty. He had received feedback that his leadership style was getting in the way of achieving the mission the Board hired him to execute. That's why the Board asked me to begin working with him, and he knew it. As we talked, he acknowledged that he was becoming increasingly con-

cerned that this CEO role might not really be what he thought it was, and that perhaps he might not be the leader he thought he was either.

Fortunately, the fourteen months we spent together during our coaching engagement yielded positive outcomes – the business strategy and transformation well underway, with this new CEO well regarded and embraced. This experience, as with so many others like it before and since, is characterized by a series of ten critical inflection points during the coaching journey. There is a pattern to the coaching process, a way of seeing around corners to anticipate what key coaching decision makers, purchasers, and clients should expect from their coaching experience. This chapter is intended to help the key decision makers, particularly the first points of contact, such as operating or HR leaders who are buyers of coaching services, think through what they might expect from an effective coaching engagement.

1. Setting the Tone (Expectations)

The first step in the coaching process is where you, the operating or HR leader who purchases coaching services, can add significant value to the coaching engagement. This is the time for you to ask essential questions:

- What are the business and leadership effectiveness challenges we are trying to address?
- Is coaching the best solution relative to other alternatives?
- What is realistic to achieve and in what timeframe?
- What does success look like? What does failure look like?
- Who should be involved, and what do they need to do to contribute to the coaching client's success?
- What information will be kept confidential between client and coach; what will be shared with others?
- Does the coaching client need remedial help to improve their effectiveness and/or developmental support to be prepared for their current role, or bigger, more complex roles?

Any good coach should be setting the tone for the coaching engagement by establishing shared expectations among themselves, the purchasers, and clients of coaching services. Likewise, as the purchaser of, and key point of contact for, coaching services, the ultimate power and responsibility are yours for setting expectations and helping your coaching clients get the most out of their coaching engagements. Ask the right questions and help set the tone up front.

2. Seeing the Wind (Feedback)

Feedback is like the wind. It's there, even when we can't see or hear it. No matter how committed a company is to providing candid, quality feedback to their talent, virtually every coaching client I have worked with wonders whether they are really getting the straight story from their bosses, peers, and direct reports. Likewise, these coaching clients can be confident that they are being talked about.

Not surprisingly, candid and meaningful feedback becomes increasingly rare the higher up the organization leaders rise. Everything is busier, tougher, and more complex. Time and emotional bandwidth for this kind of conversation at senior levels are scarce. Still, it is so needed.

Coaching is about seeking the truth through focused, intentional, and active gathering of feedback, and then, helping the client deal with it constructively. Qualified coaches are skilled at bringing out relevant and often unspoken feedback that most benefits the client and their colleagues, in a confidential and safe manner.

Your job, as the main point of contact and the buyer of coaching services, is to ensure that this process happens.

3. Finding Buried Treasure (Strengths)

In the spirit of gathering constructive feedback, coaches often overlook client strengths because they find it easier to focus on what needs to be improved. Ironically, strengths are what have helped successful clients be successful in the first place. Therefore, understanding and capitalizing on strengths are often more important than understanding development needs. Strengths represent not only what coaching clients are good at now, but also what they could be good at later based on passion, priorities, learning, development, resources, time, and even the chance to go back into the past to reclaim forgotten or underused talents. Sometimes, strengths do not jump out at us, we need to find them and nurture them.

Clarifying and developing strengths will position clients for continued upward trajectory in their careers. As long as their strengths outweigh their weaknesses, the clients' chances of success remain excellent. But if their weaknesses start to overshadow their strengths, that's when they face the potential to derail.

Your role as the buyer of coaching services is to make certain that potential coaches utilize a strengths-based approach to working with clients.

4. Polishing the Lens (Development)

Despite their towering strengths, coaching clients usually have a few developmental needs that get in the way of their maximum effectiveness. Often these needs are blind spots they're not even aware of. Sometimes they are painfully aware of their developmental needs, but they don't know what to do about them. Or they may simply not be convinced that they should care about these areas that need improvement.

Developmental needs may or may not be weaknesses. They may instead be considerations that leaders need to focus on to best position themselves for greater success in their current or anticipated new positions. The key questions to address at this inflection point are:

- Which few development needs matter most to achieve success?
- What can the client do to improve or develop?
- Are they willing and able to try?

There are various tools available to help the coach and client gain clarity, to polish the lenses through which client capabilities can be seen. These tools may include 360 degree feedback reports and other assessments that the organization already has in place or expects the coach to use. Personally, I prefer to interview clients and their key constituents using three very basic questions:

- What are the clients' top few strengths that make them particularly successful?
- What are the clients' one to two biggest development needs that, if addressed, would make them even more successful?
- What advice do you have for the clients that would give them the best chance possible of being successful in their current and future leadership roles?

I also like to use a tool called the *personal leadership profile* to help clients envision the kind of leaders they ultimately want to be, and what they want to be known for as a leader. This profile helps clients think about issues, such as:

- Their personal leadership philosophy or brand.
- Situations when they have been at their very best as a leader, when they felt really great about the role they played.
- What key leadership lessons they drew from that experience.
- Their hot buttons and strongly held beliefs that influence how they behave as a leader.

One unexpected discovery from using a *personal leadership profile* is that clients are often uncomfortable talking about themselves. The *personal leadership profile*, therefore, serves multiple functions. It:

- Helps clients envision and define what they want to be by the end of the coaching process, and become more comfortable in expressing those aspirations.
- Informs the design of the coaching engagement from beginning to end.
- Establishes a foundation through which clients consider their own life's experiences via their own set of lenses.
- Builds client storytelling skills that will ultimately help them lead by inspiration and example.

No matter what tools a coach chooses to use to support a client's development, your comprehensive role as the buyer of coaching services is to ensure that the coaching client will receive a well-informed set of lenses through which they can see themselves in the eyes of other key stakeholders – and then learn what to do about the things that matter most to success.

5. Building Self-Confidence (Belief)

Self-confidence is created when belief and hope are accompanied by reason. Self-confidence is essential to effective leadership. But counter-intuitively, coaches often discover there is a lot of work to be done to help their clients close the gap between who they believe themselves to be today – and who they need to be to perform effectively in current and future roles.

One of the most valuable outcomes of any coaching engagement is helping the clients walk away with higher self-confidence about their fundamental value and ability to do good work, as well as clarity about obstacles and developmental needs.

Trust in the coach is a key component to fostering self-confidence in clients. To that end, it's essential for the purchaser of coaching services to understand the coach's operating philosophy (some coaches believe in tearing down their clients, to build them back up again – an approach I personally do not agree with). Self-confidence in clients largely comes from being surrounded by others who believe in them – not blindly or abjectly, but enough to make the clients feel good about themselves.

There is a fine line between self-confidence and arrogance. That's why cultivating self-confidence is an essential inflection point for success in any effective coaching relationship. As a buyer of coaching services, look for coaches who have the ability to build confidence while unmasking arrogance.

6. Raising the Bar (Aspiration)

Self-confidence breeds belief in one's ability to accomplish more, and to aspire to bigger and greater things. Once a solid foundation of confidence is established, coaching clients are ready to start considering how they can raise the bar on their performance and dreams – what they want out of life, their careers, and their relationships with other people and with their companies.

This is the time when coaches help clients sort through all the aspects of the question, “Is this the path I want to be on after all, and am I prepared to do what it takes to get to where I want to go?” Circumstances change, dreams change, self-direction can change. This inflection point in the coaching process is therefore an excellent time to double-check to ensure that the clients' aspirations are well-aligned, not only with their own expectations, but with their companies' expectations for them.

As I like to tell clients, “The closer you are to the sun, the hotter it gets.” More senior-level jobs often have complexity, politics, scrutiny, risks, and consequences that are not fully anticipated by leaders until they actually get into those jobs. By then, it's too late to learn how to navigate these conditions. It's therefore imperative that, as a key decision maker in the coaching process, you understand the coach's approach to helping clients define, understand, and prepare for raising the bar.

7. Making Practice Perfect (Preparation)

As coaching clients lift the bar on their aspirations with a coach's help, they soon come to realize that reaching for broader, more complex leadership roles will require radical preparation for new, unfamiliar, and often uncomfortable responsibilities. This process requires understanding and then practicing to handle the scenarios that clients are likely to face on the job – much like an athlete or musician would practice to prepare for a game or performance. Key questions that an effective coach might lead a client through include:

- What does the current or anticipated job entail – including the fun and not so much fun elements?
- What might a typical day, week, month, or year look and feel like – and how should you best spend your time?
- What would an effective game plan be – what would the clients actually do if they got the job? What would they change? What would they preserve? Who would they rely on? And who might they need to replace?

Preparing to address key decisions and situations that coaching clients might face, before they actually have to face them, helps them develop the mindset and “leadership muscle memory” they will eventually need under real life conditions.

Making practice perfect is often best done by coaches who have direct experience making that leadership transition themselves. While I believe that effective coaches come in all shapes and sizes, with varied backgrounds that range from I/O psychology to former executive roles and everything in between, the preparation inflection point is best handled by coaches who have “been there and done that.”

The coach who has had first-hand experience in leadership roles can best take clients through a process of imagining, preparing for, and executing on the game plan required for success before the clients even step into the role – because the coach has been there before. If you are making a purchasing decision to bring in a coach on behalf of an executive client, and believe that a major component of the coaching engagement will need to focus on preparing the client for bigger, more complex, or more senior roles, give special attention to whether the coaches you are considering have the personal experience base to address this critical inflection point.

8. Visualizing Success (Optimism)

As clients imagine what their future roles will demand from them, they have to answer the question, “Can I actually see myself in that role, meeting those demands, and am I excited or scared by that possibility?” Even if others see potential in the client leaders, the clients must see it in themselves, and develop the optimism that makes for success.

Are perfection or complete readiness for a job prerequisites for optimism? Of course not. But, with optimism, clients can more easily visualize the success that is within their reach, and they can see themselves achieving it. Coaches can help clients develop an appropriate level of optimism by teaching them to imagine scenarios and to master the self-talk that accompanies successful visualization.

They can also teach coaching clients to mentally draw circles of isolation around challenges, to compartmentalize problems in a way that helps clients see the rest of their universe is basically okay, or will soon be okay. These coping mechanisms to build optimism can be further enhanced based on past experiences that coaching clients can readily call to mind, situations in which they have demonstrated the capability to drive desired outcomes from difficult challenges.

It is the coach’s role to help clients develop what I call *brutal optimism* – the ability to see things as they really are, while seeing the possibilities of what could be, what will be, as a result of their influence. Similarly, it is the role of the purchaser of coaching services to test for and ensure that coaches and their clients will have the chemistry required to strike the right balance between optimism and hallucination.

9. Staying in the Moment (Realism)

It’s essential for both coaches and their clients to know where the line is drawn between optimism and realism. As coaches encourage their clients to achieve the appropriate level of optimism, they also must help clients come to grips with what’s truly realistic. Can they tell the difference between a stretch goal that is tough but achievable, and a grandiose aspiration or misinformed belief about themselves that might be holding them back or damaging their credibility?

Most coaching clients come into engagements with a long track record of success. And, past performance is usually the best predictor of future success. But, potential is still anticipatory and somewhat imaginary. It involves future expectations based on a trajectory that the person has already achieved to date. However, potential is also influenced by factors that are not entirely within the control of the coaching client, such as strategic changes in direction or a change in boss, coupled with factors they do control, such as their leadership behavior or willingness to learn from mistakes.

Therefore, coaches are expected to help clients understand the difference between their performance and their potential, and to maintain a realistic and balanced view about both dimensions. As a buyer of coaching services, make sure the coaches under your consideration understand these differences, and that they know how to build an appreciation for this dichotomy in their clients.

10. Deserving to Win (Inevitability)

The pursuit of personal growth and career success is a competitive endeavor, even if clients are competing only with the aspirations they have for themselves. And, as any athlete would advise us, the belief that they deserve to win is crucial to actually winning. Therefore, winning is first a state of mind before it can become a reality for highly successful talent. A belief in the inevitability of winning stems from devoted preparation, good decision making, strong execution, and hard work. Winners believe that success is inevitable because they have the wherewithal to make it happen – and they deserve for it to happen.

At this final inflection point in the coaching process, the big value a coach can provide is helping clients reach the point where they identify with being a winner who deserves to win, who deserves to successfully deliver on current commitments, who deserves the promotion, who deserves the tough assignments, who deserves the respect of their colleagues, who deserves the self-satisfaction that comes from working very hard and competing.

It's not about the trophy. It's about enjoying the development journey as much as the destination. And appreciating the ride. Athletes and musicians learn to love playing before they learn to love winning. So do the best coaches and the best coaching clients. As a key decision-maker in the buying decision, make sure your coaches and their potential clients likewise enjoy all the elements and actions that go into the "game."

With these ten inflection points in mind as a foundation for successful coaching engagements, it's important to note that coaching is a continuously evolving process – just as leadership is a continuously evolving capability. Issues change. Organizations change. People change.

This evolution underscores the need to think of coaching as a cyclical, non-linear experience, rather than an episodic, linear one. First, the ten inflection points described in this chapter all need to happen. But they rarely occur sequentially. Think of them as a recipe for effective coaching rather than a checklist that must be followed in precise order.

Second, consider coaching as an organic process to help clients reflect, refresh, retool, and revitalize their effectiveness – much the way athletes and musicians work with coaches to rebuild their swing or refine their technique. Coaching may not always have a defined beginning and end. Rather, it may ebb and flow, begin and begin again, as circumstances warrant.

Third, bear in mind that coaching is only as good as the people involved in the process – the buyer, the boss, the peers, the direct reports, the client, and the coach. The work environment in which the coaching engagement takes place actually does matter.

In light of the above conditions, the nature and scope of coaching will inevitably transform over time. I see five trends on the horizon that will most significantly drive changes in coaching.

Episodic to career-long relationships

We will move from six- or twelve-month coaching engagements that address specific needs within specific timeframes to more career-long coach-

ing relationships that mirror those of athletes or musicians who rely on constant challenges and performance tune-ups from their coaches.

In-person to virtual engagements

As the economy is going global, so is coaching. Thanks to technology, purchasers and clients have more power over securing the right coach for the right assignment, independent of where that coach is physically located in the world.

Coach to coaching staff

As coaching becomes more career-long and virtual, it will also lend itself to being more customized to specific needs at critical inflection points in the client's career – therefore supported by members of a coaching team who can be brought into the coaching process where appropriate.

Executive to high-potential

Company-sponsored coaching has largely been reserved for select individuals at the executive levels. But this approach is counter-intuitive. This is like reserving coaching for budding athletes until after they reach world-class status. We should expect to see a shift toward using coaching as a development tool for promising talent much earlier in their careers when it can make an even more significant difference to career success.

Individual to team

Clients don't operate in a vacuum, and their effectiveness is highly dependent on the performance of and interactions with others. Individual coaching is like working only with the quarterback, and then letting the rest of the football team figure out the plays on their own. Individual coaching will be augmented with team coaching to keep organizational performance at a high level at all times, with coaching processes coordinated to enhance the strengths of the entire team.

Conclusion

Coaching has been held in increasingly high regard now for about fifteen years. But that sentiment is anything but universal. An important part of enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of coaching involves the process of assigning the right coach to the right coaching client in a way where all participants can reasonably expect a productive outcome.

Even though coaching has become an increasingly accepted, and sought after, leadership development tool, there is still likely to be a stigma asso-

ciated with it. Coaching clients might ask, “Am I getting a coach because I need to be fixed? Is my own leadership criticizing me behind my back? Am I falling short of expectations in some way?” Purchasers of coaching services may ask, “Is this investment really worth it? Will it make any difference at all to an individual’s success? How will we really know whether the time and money involved produce any tangible results?”

So it’s essential that the entire process of matching coach with client start off on the right foot – possibly before the coaching clients even know that a coach is about to enter their lives. As we have seen through the ten inflection points addressed in this chapter, they are not only essential for helping keep the coaching engagement focused and productive, they are also valuable for you the purchaser to use as a guide for identifying and matching the appropriate coach with the coaching client.

You can use these ten inflection points as a set of guidelines for finding the right coach for your leaders who will receive coaching. And you can use them as a set of talking points to guide your conversations with the coaching clients and their bosses.

While you are interested in a coach who has a track record of success – and who may even have all the right credentials and certifications – they may not necessarily be the coach with the best approach, philosophy, and process for the particular coaching client at hand.

This set of ten inflection points will provide you a framework to establish confidence in the entire process – from selection to outcome. You deserve to know that coaching engagements will be worth it, and so do the leaders in your organization.

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