THE VALUE OF EXECUTIVE COACHING
One thing is true for all organizations: Leadership matters. Regardless of the type or size—large corporations, small family businesses, educational institutions, or governments, to name only a few—they won’t prosper, or even long survive, without effective leaders.

**Leaders** who paint a compelling vision of the future, helping people to clearly see why the organization’s activities are important and how they relate both to collective success and to the well-being of individuals.

**Leaders** who are trusted by followers not to abuse their authority and who exercise good judgment, making sound and timely decisions, particularly in the midst of crisis and ambiguity. They are credible and competent, providing expertise upon which the organization can draw in achieving its goals.

**Leaders** who are self-aware, monitoring and managing themselves so that they read and respond appropriately to a wide range of people and situations. They reflect on their experiences, learning the important lessons contained in them and continuously growing as a result.

**Leaders** who are equal to the challenges created by the relentless pace of technological change, the rapidly increasing complexity of macro- and micro-environments, and the interconnectedness of a global world.

**Leaders** who are agile, balancing the competing demands of being strategic and operational (what has to be done) with the paradoxical need to be forceful or empowering as appropriate (how it is done).

**Leaders** who build strong teams that work together effectively across interpersonal, organizational, functional, and global boundaries.

No one is born with all these abilities. That’s why executives must engage in a process
of leader development, which addresses the behaviors, mindsets, and practices that underlie the abilities through a continuous process of learning from experience, refining one’s self- and social-awareness, and growing, both personally and professionally.

Perhaps the most well-known means of leader development today is executive coaching—where an individual works one on one with a seasoned consultant who is an expert on human behavior and organizational dynamics. Executive coaching can notably accelerate leader development, but in order to do this most effectively, two fundamental principles must be followed.

First, it must be highly customized to address the specific needs of the person being coached. This requires a thorough understanding of the environment in which the executive works. For most, coaching begins with a rigorous assessment process, grounded in empirical research and tailored to one’s situation and circumstances. Typically this includes conducting a personality assessment (so that the executive can better understand his or her motivations and behavioral tendencies) and collecting 360-degree feedback from key stakeholders (through a survey or by one-on-one interviews) to identify the strengths, shortcomings, and blind spots that others experience in an executive’s leadership. This approach helps the coachee set appropriate and realistic goals, create effective development plans, measure progress toward goals, and assess change at the end of the coaching engagement.

Second, it must be a confidential. Although coaching serves an organizational purpose—promoting better leadership—the substance of the developmental conversations is known only to the coach and the person being coached. Confidentiality promotes trust in the relationship and provides a safe, supportive environment in which learning can occur, making it possible for the individual to take the risks inherent in change and to grow as a leader and as a person.

In other situations, coaching can focus on helping a new or newly promoted executive successfully onboard, facilitating a mutual assimilation process with a leader and
key stakeholders (for example, members of the board of directors, one’s manager, subordinates, peers).

In order to address the array of strategic and operational challenges presented by an increasingly turbulent environment, leaders must master a range of behaviors that paradoxically seem to be in opposition, assisting teams in simultaneously considering the long term while also taking care to execute necessary course corrections in order to deliver superior results in the short run. And for executive coaching to accomplish this development, it must follow a clear process.

**EXECUTIVE COACHING PROCESS**

In order to be most effective, executive coaching should be evidence-based and systematic. We conduct the following four-step process:

**LEADERSHIP COACHING PROCESS**

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**Step 1: Collect Data**

Setting expectations—Client, coach, and key stakeholders: look at focus of work and desired outcomes; consider boundaries and confidentiality; answer questions; and agree on next steps and timeline.

Performing customized assessment—Coach: conducts co-worker interviews or a 360-degree survey, or both; administers a personality assessment to client; reviews with client his or her life and career history, all in order to gather data on leadership strengths, overused strengths, and shortcomings.

**Step 2: Process Feedback and Create a Plan**

Providing feedback and insight—Client and coach: review the assessment data; distill the key messages in the feedback; and increase self-awareness.

Consolidating and planning—Client and coach: consolidate understanding of key themes; identify key adjustments and set specific goals; and create a customized development plan.

**Step 3: Take Action**

Assuring stakeholder alignment—Client, coach, and key stakeholders: discuss key messages in feedback; align on goals and development plan; and agree on timeline and metrics.

Continuing the coaching—Client and coach: execute development plan; monitor progress; and make course corrections.

**Step 4: Evaluate Progress**

Measuring change—Coach: conducts follow-up interviews or administers follow-up survey, or both; then, with the client, evaluates data on behavior change; assesses progress on development plan; and identifies opportunities for continued improvement.
Producing progress report—Client, coach, and key stakeholders: review results; evaluate goal attainment; and plan for going forward.

EFFECTIVE INSTRUMENTS

Supporting the process of executive coaching with valid and reliable instruments is crucial. Together with interviewing key stakeholders, we frequently use the Leadership Versatility Index (LVI), a 360-degree instrument that is the product of more than thirty years of action research with managers and executives across a broad range of organizational types and sizes. It has been thoroughly documented to be accurate in what it measures and consistent in its measurement.

In addition, the LVI is especially helpful in executive coaching because it is built around a practical model of leadership and it features a distinctive (and patented) approach to measurement.

The model recognizes that a fundamental challenge of leadership is the need to maintain a wide range of abilities so that the complexities and contradictions of the organizational environment can be dealt with effectively. It understands this versatility as involving two fundamental concerns, each defined by characteristic approaches. The core behaviors for each approach, apparently paradoxically opposed, are specified.
Figure 1. Model at the heart of the Leadership Versatility Index.
Figure 2. Core behaviors assessed by the Leadership Versatility Index.

This model assumes that effective executives have the ability to balance these behaviors. And it measures them not with a traditional 5-point scale, which indicates how much an executive is doing something, but with a unique scale that indicates
whether the executive is doing something too much or too little. No other instrument has this patented measurement.

![Leadership Versatility Index scale](image)

**Figure 3.** Patented *Leadership Versatility Index* scale.

We use an associated 360-degree instrument, the *Progress Report*, to track how well executives are doing on selected behaviors. This instrument, which uses the same measure as the LVI, is rater-friendly (with typically between five and ten questions) and customizable. We have found it to be extremely helpful in the executive-coaching process.

**EXAMPLE OF EXECUTIVE COACHING**

The following is brief presentation of an executive-coaching assignment carried out by Darren Overfield, the founder of Overfield Leadership Group.

The client was Frank, a senior vice-president for product management with a Fortune 500 financial-services organization. The objective of the coaching process was to increase Frank’s executive presence and influence across the organization.

Frank was considered an industry expert and a “superstar” in the company. His superior believed that Frank had “untapped potential; he is wicked smart, very competitive, and impresses me with his innovation and creativity.” At the same time, he had reservations about promoting Frank into a top executive position—”He is very good one on one but
people don’t feel it unless they get to know him. It’s a ‘presence’ thing. He needs to learn how to capitalize on his strengths if he is going to be a player in the C-Suite.” Given his aspirations to become a CEO, Frank took to heart this assessment of his current leadership style.

**Step 1: Collect Data**

Setting expectations: Frank’s HR business partner recommended three potential executive coaches who had been vetted by the company. After “get to know you” interviews with each candidate, Frank selected me as his coach. At this point, he and I met to discuss his goals and to outline the process we would employ. Next, Frank and I sat down with his superior to understand his expectations, review the coaching process, discuss confidentiality, and respond to any of his questions or concerns. We also agreed on which colleagues we should ask to provide feedback to Frank. The three of us decided to meet again once Frank reviewed his feedback and had begun to create an action plan.

Performing customized assessment: I interviewed Frank and 15 colleagues about his leadership. He and his co-workers also completed the LVI 360-degree survey. This combination of qualitative and quantitative data provided detailed information on Frank’s strengths, strengths overused, and shortcomings that are evident in his leadership style as well as in his ability to make strategic and operational decisions. In addition, I interviewed Frank and his spouse to better understand what motivates him, important influences related to his life outside work, and how he balances the demands of his job.

To complement this behavioral data, Frank completed assessments that provided information on three aspects of his personality. First, we gained an understanding of his core values, goals, and interests and how they drive what he focuses on and his perceived priorities at work. Second, we looked at his typical approach to work and interactions with others—how he behaves “at his best.” This involves considering both performance facilitators (personality strengths) and potential detractors (shortcomings and strengths
overused). Finally, it was important to examine performance risk factors—likely blind spots and problematic interpersonal behaviors that can disrupt relationships, corrupt judgment, and interrupt Frank’s ability to build and lead his team. These “dark side” tendencies are often difficult to detect because they coexist with well-developed social skills and make a positive impression on others in the short run.

**Step 2: Process Feedback and Create a Plan**

Providing feedback and insight: After collecting this large trove of data, Frank and I met for a one-on-one session to debrief the data, discuss themes and insights, and explore the consequences and implications of the feedback.

Consolidating and planning: A few weeks later, Frank and I met again to consolidate the feedback and distill the key themes. Together, we created a profile of his strengths and limitations, and a development plan that included specific goals and desired results from coaching.

**Step 3: Take Action**

Assuring stakeholder alignment: At this point, Frank and I reconnected with his superior to share his learning, insights, and development plan. Frank’s superior was pleased with Frank’s progress. He offered some helpful suggestions, confirmed his buy-in for the plan, and pledged to support Frank in accomplishing the goals he had set. In addition, Frank shared some of the feedback themes and his action plan with other key stakeholders, including his direct reports, peers, and select members of the senior leadership committee.

Continuing the coaching: Frank and I began 12 months of coaching, biweekly at first, and then moved to monthly sessions.

**Step 4: Evaluate Progress**

Measuring change: As a way of monitoring his progress, Frank completed a customized
survey every Friday. Although it only took him about five minutes, the discipline of completing this survey helped keep his goals top of mind, introduced accountability, and carved out “reflection time” on a regular basis.

Producing progress report: Twelve months after our coaching sessions began, Frank and I created a customized, targeted survey to gauge the amount of change others had experienced in his leadership. I also conducted follow up interviews with each of the initial raters.

**Results**

The results were encouraging. Both the qualitative and quantitative data showed that Frank was taking a much broader leadership role and was no longer perceived as just a product leader. He was successfully building relationships and interacting more with colleagues.

**Select Comments from Follow-up**

“Much more focused on his command presence, willing to be out front. He is more certain of himself.”

“He is becoming more assertive, more direct in meetings, and does a better job taking a leadership position and a firm stand around controversial issues, which in the past he would have avoided or talked around.”

“He is now engaged in all aspects of the business, not just his area. He also has a broader, more enterprise-focused view.”

**Summary**

As this phase of our work together drew to a close, Frank and I met again with his superior. He noted, “Tremendous change. I’ve seen him get out there more and initiate contact. He is much more forceful in meetings. More strategic.” Around this same time,
the CEO announced a major change to the structure of the organization. One result was a large increase in span and responsibility for Frank. Frank’s superior and the executive vice president of human resources indicated that the changes in Frank’s leadership were key factors in their decision to promote him into this larger and more strategic role.

CONNECTING LEADERSHIP TO ITS CONTEXT

You can’t help executives improve their leadership without providing them with concepts to guide them—ideas that assist in understanding and organizing their experience and taking action. In collaboration with our colleagues at Kaiser Leadership Solutions, we have developed a comprehensive model of the processes and intervening factors that explain the link between individual leaders and organizational performance. It features an evidence-based framework, the Leadership Value Chain, that traces the characteristics of individual leaders to their leadership style; leadership style to impact on team and unit processes; team and unit processes to team and unit results; and team and unit results to effectiveness across a broad range of organizational-level performance measures. The point of the Leadership Value Chain is to identify the sequence of key variables and considerations that relate individual leaders to organizational effectiveness. Of all the things we could consider, these are the things that we must pay particular attention to in order to determine the value of leadership. This framework can provide a heuristic for thinking strategically about key leadership-investment decisions and organizational-development interventions.
A recent Stanford University study found that nearly two-thirds of CEOs do not receive outside leadership advice but nearly all want it. Therefore, frequently as an extension of executive coaching, we can serve as confidential leadership advisors, acting as a sounding board and providing counsel on wide range of situations in which an impartial outside perspective can help inform an executive's behavior and decision-making. This has led, for instance, to notable improvements in conflict-management, mentoring, talent development, sharing leadership, and delegating to subordinates.
BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS
We build relationships based on trust and integrity. We don’t cut corners, operating with transparency, ensuring confidentiality, and delivering on promises. Candor is only possible in a completely confidential environment.

KEEP SCORE
As Peter Drucker stated, “Effective leadership is not about making speeches or being liked; leadership is defined by results not attributes.” With this spirit in mind, two types of metrics are a critical component of each development initiative: Process metrics monitor progress along the way, and outcome metrics evaluate end results to help deliver on the promise of becoming a more effective leader. We begin by clearly defining with a client what would constitute a “win” and then collaborate to deliver this outcome.

APPLY SCIENCE
There are three areas of applying evidenced-based best practices. First, there is the science of goal setting and behavior change. Thirty years of research has identified what is effective (and what is not) when it comes to making the behavioral changes required for a person to grow and develop as a leader. We tap into this vast literature and provide practical ways for clients to benefit from its findings without getting lost in the minutiae. Second, there is the commitment to learn how to learn. As Eric Hoffer said, “In a time of drastic change it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists.” Consistent with this message, we help clients apply research-based insights from the burgeoning fields of learning agility and growth (in contrast to relying on fixed mindsets). Third, there is the awareness that one must manage paradox in order to become a versatile leader. As F. Scott Fitzgerald observed, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” In a similar vein, the literature on developing mental complexity provides useful approaches for growing as a leader in the midst of an increasingly turbulent environment.

KEEP IT SIMPLE (BUT NEVER SIMPLISTIC)
Oliver Wendell Holmes said, “I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.” In this spirit, we help clients crystalize the key messages in their assessment results and clearly articulate compelling development goals.

MAKE IT PERSONAL AND PRACTICAL
We offer truly custom-built solutions, rather than an off-the-shelf, one-size-fits-all approach to development.

PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH
We are concerned with our own growth, requiring of ourselves the same level of learning, risk, and vulnerability that we ask of clients.