

CONTEXTUALIZING WESTERN COACHING APPROACHES FOR INDIAN MANAGERS

Nature of growth, change & development

The phenomenal growth of Indian economy post liberalization and its continued growth projection for next few years has definitely put India on the global economic map. All the major world economies and big corporations have shown their interests and huge Foreign Investments coming to India is a testimony to it. India is rated as the number one investment destination for the future alongside Brazil in one of the latest studies conducted by Capital MSL and the London Stock Exchange.

The incredible Indian growth story along with all the highlights talked about in different economic and business forums is replete with rise of the middle class, creation of new business/economic centers, creation of greater employability, improvement in the lifestyles, spate of mergers and acquisitions etc . A by- product of this growth in organizational context has been the shortening of time duration spent by individual managers in specific roles coupled with greater complexity and ambiguity in most of the roles.

Leaders today face the challenge of managing high speed of execution, keeping pace with the growth & change, remaining competitive by inculcating the spirit of innovation and developing self & teams to fulfill the current and future requirements.

Effective and successful leaders of today and foreseeable future, require a different nature of leadership fabric than their erstwhile predecessors. In one of the studies done by Centre for Creative Leadership, Leading People, Strategic Planning, Inspiring Commitment and Managing Change are the four critical leadership skills required for the future.

Leading People is the only skill that is retained from the past, the other skills like Resourcefulness, Straight-forwardness & composure and Decisiveness doesn't figure in the top four critical future leadership skills, albeit debatably.

In this context, for leaders and managers, the issue is not simply to acquire a new set of skills for a short period of time. It is about inculcating a new thought and belief patterns and may be replacing few old ones with a degree of consistency and permanence.

Given the context, the idea of alignment of an individual with the overall organizational purpose and a leadership development journey which is mutually meaningful is needed. For leaders, it requires a deep understanding of self, organizational and social contexts and unwavering commitment to continuous development in a changing world.



It is in this context that executive coaching can play a very significant role in leadership development. Studies suggest that if training is combined with coaching, the overall impact gets magnified by almost four times.

The starting point in this direction can be creating awareness around different forms of coaching and the utility of different type of coaching interventions ranging from short term performance coaching, business coaching to life coaching and executive coaching etc.

Definition of Executive Coaching:

A one-on-one development process formally contracted between a coach and a management-level client to help achieve goals related to professional development and/or business performance.

Perceived value of coaching in India:

The value derived from an executive coaching intervention can be looked at in terms of a continuum where one extreme is the “fix it” mentality and the other one is “pure self-development”. The concept is in its nascent stages in India. Some employees feel recognized and appreciated and agree that the process of executive coaching brings out the best in them. On the other hand, some recipients of coaching resist sharing their success or failures as it’s seen to be a stigma in the organization’s culture. Organizations are struggling to make that shift where coaching is perceived as a part of the standard leadership development journey rather than a methodology to intervene and develop bottom performers.

“In India executive coaching is largely viewed as a training & advisory role”

RAMENDRAJIT SEN, AON HEWITT

The association of intelligence or wisdom with someone who has the capability of answering a question or providing possible solutions to a problem also plays an important role in selecting and evaluating an executive coach in India. The mental model of many leaders is looking out for their own 'Oracle of Delphi' in the name of an executive coach. It is therefore a prerequisite to evaluate what an individual or an organization means when they ask for an executive coach because many a times what they are looking for is actually a **business advisor** or a **functional expert**.



"We respect people who know the answers rather than who ask questions"

VIVEK TRIPATHI , LAVA MOBILES

Another area where we seem to have a mixed bag of opinions is the relative value ascribed to the process and the content of coaching. Since executive coaching is a confidential process, it has a lot of enigma attached to it. However organizations have now started looking for some concrete and tangible benefits. This has also increased appreciation for process/structure based coaching approaches although the content and the facilitation style of a coach ends up being the critical differentiator in leveraging real value.

The cultural and social upbringing in India (and India is very fragmented in such respects) adds to the mindsets and paradigms of managers and therefore creates a set of expectations which are very culture specific beyond just the executive coaching process.

This raises a question of how to make western coaching models/approaches more relevant to our leaders and managers. In the west, the idea of going through a systematic and structured process where one needs to (take ownership to) think, reflect and commit to take actions in order to enhance personal effectiveness is nurtured in the formative years. Often one picks up an area of interest or passion, e.g., a sport; and goes through a structured developmental process in it, giving it huge importance and linking personal time, commitment, pride and esteem towards excelling in it. This makes it easier for people to value and appreciate personal development through using structured external help, while taking ownership for their own choices and development. A coaching intervention in the later stages of life when they need professional help is therefore not seen as something alien.

In India the early idea of coaching is usually associated with 'guided' choices and advice from elders and parents, and not necessarily in directions that are chosen by the self. Formal tutors or 'coaching centers' are very often a part of student life, mainly to get through a competitive examination; often seen as a knowledge and skill source for a short term barrier to be crossed.

India has also had strong 'guru-shishya' (teacher-student) history, where the guru is considered almost superhuman and revered for all the wisdom and knowledge, and answers to all problems. The school and college education system also builds a mindset of dependency and looking for quick-fix answers.



Need for Executive Coaching in India:

With the spurt of growth in almost all the industries in the last few decades, we have seen a huge demand for leaders at all levels within the organizations. Companies in order to retain good employees and to meet the demands of the business have accelerated the process of moving people up the corporate ladder. There are innumerable so called “success stories” of people in certain industries where an individual has moved 4-5 levels of hierarchy in a decade time horizon. The success of such individuals is not only a function of their own competence but many a times a strong economic engine and a broader/global business decision that is the primary force propelling their career trajectories. It is not uncommon to find leaders who have grown in organization hierarchy but need to develop and hone skills or orientations quickly in a safe environment, in order to continue to be effective. Executive coaching becomes a very potent mechanism to address needs of such leaders where the organizations' classical training will likely fall short.

“Need of executive coaching is very strong especially in new industries that are growing fast and face issues of leadership depth”

ANURAAG MAINI, DLF PRAMERICA LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY



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In many industries, leadership roles have undergone humongous transformation. For the same role and job position, the nature of competencies required are very different than what they were perhaps a decade back. There are matrix structures, far more competitive environment, issues of balancing local, national and international demands and greater impact and interdependence of large eco-systems. These factors pose a great challenge of leading and managing effectively at every level with extremely small margin of error, and inbuilt pressures of time and speedy execution. The leader development paths of today's era therefore require focused action taking and continuous course correction interspersed with moments of guided reflection. This is also a reason for executive coaching gaining prominence in the development arena.

“Today’s Branch Managers are handling more than 15 different products; the profile has undergone a complete change. We are actually looking for a person with an orientation of a business manager”

SANJAY BALI, SAMSUNG INDIA ELECTRONICS

Coaching within the Indian Context:

“One of the key points to reflect is that in India we give a lot of importance to age, management and industry background, when we decide on an executive coach”

BIMAL RATH, THINK TALENT SERVICES

India predominantly being a collectivist culture, it has high degree of reverence for seniority which is synonymous with rich experience. However, there are variables like fast changing socio economic landscape, easy access to information, cosmopolitan/metro cities becoming a melting pot of different cultures etc., which are newer phenomena, often not experienced by a previous generation. Looking for an executive coach who can marry experience with an appreciation of the ‘newer’ variables can be a challenging task. While experience helps, it does not necessarily empathize with the modern generation of leaders.

The challenge gets compounded with a lack of knowledge about coaching and a desire to get instant solutions. There are situations where people are looking for “labels” in an executive coach. A pedigree of certain extolled academic/management institution or publication of a book/research paper often becomes a deciding factor. There are different reasons attributed to this phenomenon. It could be because having an executive coach is the latest corporate fad or the fact that having a more experienced ‘well known’ person becomes a status symbol for the coachee. It can also be to hide personal insecurities—‘how can I show my weaknesses in front of someone who is a junior or not as accomplished?’



The appreciation that the coach role does not require the person to have same or similar and more pronounced accomplishments as the coachee, but requires a completely different set of skills will go a long way in dealing with some of these issues.

"There is a huge obsession with the profile of a coach especially at senior management levels . People are interested in the industry, academic and management background of the coaches"

VIVEK TRIPATHI, LAVA MOBILES

The notion of linking rich and relevant life experiences with gray hair is another reality that HR people often encounter while initiating an executive coaching intervention for senior leaders. In the eyes of a lot of senior leaders, age, experience and maturity are bundled into one package and the confidence level of a coachee in deriving value out of a coaching assignment significantly goes up when they see all of the above elements present in an executive coach. However in certain cases age factor doesn't matter for an executive coach, it's just a matter of initially breaking the ice with the coachee and striking a rapport that instills confidence in the mind of the coachee about the value that can potentially be derived out of the intervention. This orientation is largely dependent on the culture of the organization and its history of deploying different development interventions across levels.

" With fairly senior leaders, acceptance of young professionals as a coach or a facilitator may be tough initially; however what eventually matters is the real difference one can create."

AADESH GOYAL, TATA COMMUNICATIONS

Initiating executive coaching within organizations in India:

“It is very critical to set the context of coaching and deal with the entire process of coaching to make it more valid, relevant and acceptable”

ATUL CHUGH, ROLLS ROYCE

To initiate executive coaching in India the first and foremost requirement is bringing in “simplicity and transparency into the process along with the ability to relate with individuals. We don't want to get into complexities” says **Deepak Bharara, Director- Corporate HR, LANCO Infratech Ltd.** The idea of creating awareness around executive coaching and its similarities and differences with associated services like advisory, mentoring, counseling etc is critical if we want to successfully establish this practice in India. A clear understanding of the nature of executive coaching process and the outcomes associated with it can be the first step to initiate executive coaching as a developmental mechanism within organizations.

Another way of creating a coaching culture in an organization is by taking a long term view, cascading from the top and introducing it in a phased manner. What needs to be understood is that this process of change requires time and therefore “it is imperative that organizations look at the long term perspective of coaching. Coaching should be used as a tool to create succession pipeline and grow talent internally across levels to meet the business demands in the long run. It is ludicrous to start expecting returns from day one” says **V.P Singh, Executive Director,**
Devyani International Ltd.

“We want to select a few leaders to go through executive coaching and create success stories to inspire people. The selected leaders can create a zone of influence where we can move towards using coaching at a wider scale.

RAMENDRAJIT SEN, AON HEWITT

Conclusion

Organizations in India need strong leadership capability to sustain the growth momentum and reach the aspirational level in the future. Identifying, developing and retaining leadership talent has now become a strong business need.

Executive coaching, as a development mechanism is in its incipient stage in India. There is a strong need to include it in the development charter of the organizations, however the first step is to educate the corporates about the process, benefits and value associated with it.

Awareness and appreciation of cultural angularities can be a game changer in initiating and successfully implementing any executive coaching intervention in India.



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While a lot of companies are ready to invest in executive coaching, one needs to be cognizant of the fact that this is not a panacea for all the issues faced by leaders at different levels. It is a gradual process of development, therefore to expect immediate or short term returns out of it can result in derailing the whole idea of change and transformation at a personal and organizational level.

Organizations need to appreciate the difference between a coach, business advisor, trainer, functional expert etc. and only then proceed based on specific needs.

In order to create a coaching culture, the strategy of deployment plays a key role. Does one want to invest in a coaching intervention for leaders who are in the higher echelons of management or would you get greater long term benefits by investing in young high potential leaders?

There are no black and white answers to these questions. This will depend on business and talent strategy. What one needs to dwell upon is how coaching processes can be leveraged in order to develop and nurture individuals across organizational levels to create a pipeline of strong leaders.

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Participant List

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Ramendrajit Sen joined Aon Hewitt in December 2003 and has supported the Aon Hewitt business during its explosive growth phase over last couple of years. He is currently the HR Leader for India Outsourcing and Corporate Shared Services at Aon Hewitt and has more than 22 years of experience in the areas of consulting in talent development, implementing learning technologies and solutions, and human resource management.

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Deepak Bharara is Director – Corporate HR of Lanco Infratech Ltd and takes care of people processes across the Group. With over three decades of experience with multinationals and big business Indian groups, he has held leadership positions at Eicher Tractors Ltd, Indian Express Group, Samtel India Ltd, Whirlpool India Ltd, Bharti Group, Jindal Steel, Aditya Birla Group and GMR.

ATUL CHUGH

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Atul Chugh has been with Rolls Royce since May 2009 and working as an Head HR. Atul was associated Nokia Corp, GE Consumer Finance Servicing, GECIS, Thermax Ltd. and Almarai Trading Co. Prior to working with Rolls Royce as Head HR, he was Head-Resourcing & Diversity at Nokia Corp. He has worked with various industries – Telecommunication, Information Technology, Services and Aerospace industry. He studied in Symbiosis Institute of Business Management.

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Vivek has over 17 years of experience in generalist and specialist roles in Human Resources. The last 13 years, he has been with leading companies in the Hi-Tech sector and in Human Resources Consulting. He has worked with Bharti Airtel Enterprise Services, Corporates, Adobe Systems India, Motorola India Limited, Cadence Design Systems India, Daewoo Motors India, Crompton Greaves India Limited. He is a post graduate diploma in Personnel Management from XLRI Jamshedpur, India

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Aadesh Goyal is Global Head, Human Resources of Tata Communications, part of the \$83.5 billion Tata Group. Mr. Goyal has over 25 years of experience in P&L Management, Human Resources, Operations, Information Technology, Corporate Communications and Program Management and has held global leadership roles in these functions across multiple geographies. He has also been involved in over a dozen M&As as well as playing a key role in the integration of these companies spread across multiple countries.