

*Coaching high achievers*

## 360° Executive Coaching

Coaching has been around for decades, but under a number of guises. I first came across it as a young manager in the Ford Motor Company in the 60s, when my then boss “took me under his wing”. He was my mentor, and many other “young hopefuls” were similarly lucky to be mentored by senior executives.

Gradually, as the pressure on business increased, this form of informal mentoring died out. It began to be replaced, in the 90’s, by what we now call coaching, carried out not by internal mentors, but by external coaches.

Initially, the coach was offered, by the company, to an executive. Basically they were left to get on with it, with little involvement or, afterwards, interest from the company.

The next significant development was in the late 90’s. By this time the company did get involved and interested, and expected the coaching programme to have clearly stated objectives with an attempt to measure success against those objectives. All good stuff, but frankly missing out a lot of the potential benefits of coaching.

And so, now we have 360° Executive Coaching.

### 360° Executive Coaching – What is it?

May I ask you, as senior executives, to imagine that you have concluded that a number of the high flyers in your business would benefit from coaching, and you have asked, amongst others, Pitkeathley & Partners to present to you. You understand that P&P offers 360° coaching, and you want to understand what that is.

So how might the conversation go between us?

**You** – So, tell me about 360° coaching. I always thought coaching was one-on-one, coach and executive. Where does this 360° stuff come in?

**Bill** – OK. Happy to talk you through 360°. However, firstly, if I may, I would like to make sure that you and I have the same understanding about the purpose of coaching.

We see two fundamental reasons for coaching:-

- *To help the executive to perform in his/her current role to their full potential.*
- *To enable the executive to develop skills and behaviours suitable for possible future roles.*

Do those statements fit with your understanding?

**You** – Yes. I can see that the emphasis between those two would differ from one executive to another but I’m comfortable with those statements.

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**Bill** – Good. Now let me talk you through our approach to coaching. And rather than me talking to you generally, what I'd like to do is talk to you as though you were the person that I will be coaching.

**You** – Yes, that's fine.

**Bill** – OK. Now we are going to be working together over the next 12 months. We will form a partnership which will have some clearly defined objectives based on your development needs. So, over the next month or so, we'll agree a specific target date, two things need to be achieved:-

- *Firstly, you need to decide what your objectives for the coaching partnership will be. Probably no more than six, and probably two of these will be to do with developing your leadership behaviour. We'll talk more about those when we next meet.*
- *Secondly, I would like to meet with your boss, two or three of your peers, and two or three of your subordinates, say seven or eight people in total. I will need up to an hour with each of them, the conversations will be confidential and will essentially be about "why you are good at what you do", and "what could you do better".*

**You** – Interesting. How does that help?

**Bill** – Well, if I only talk to you, and that's how coaching used to be, I get a uni-dimensional view of your strengths and weaknesses. Your view of your relationships with your colleagues, and so on. If I talk to people around you, then I get a much more multi-dimensional view of you. And let's face it, very few of us see ourselves 100% as others see us, and how others see us is very important in corporate life!

**You** – OK. Who gets to choose who you talk to?

**Bill** – You do. But I recommend that you ask your boss for suggestions and I strongly recommend that you include colleagues who you see as "strongly pro" you, and some who you believe are less so, i.e. don't just pick your friends!

**You** – All right, but what do you do with all of this confidential information?

**Bill** – I will produce a summary of what I learn about you from the 360° team, and I will give it to you and we will discuss it and use it. By the way, it may well contribute to your thinking about your objectives.

**You** – I thought you said the 360° interviews were confidential.

**Bill** – They are. The summary will be written in a non-attributable way. Its purpose is to let you know how your colleagues as a group see you. What I will say, however, is that in most cases (about 9 out of 10) the 360° team say something like "Bill, I have no problem with you telling him anything that I have told you, and using my name." Frequently, I find myself saying, "Why don't you tell him/her yourself?". "Yes, why not", is the usual response.

**You** – Sounds good, if a little scary.

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**Bill** – Yes, I understand the “scary” comment, but others’ perceptions of you shouldn’t be “scary” provided that they are put across constructively, which is where the skill of the coach comes in. Observing the coach giving feedback to you, and learning from this, should give you a valuable role model when you coach others. And it should be productive for you in other ways which may not immediately be apparent.

**You** – Oh, and what are they?

**Bill** – Firstly, the 360° team have now become involved willingly in your coaching programme, and you now have the opportunity to ask them to support you in achieving your objectives. You can, if you wish, give them a copy of the summary of their comments, and also of your objectives. You can ask them to give you feedback, periodically ask them “how am I doing?”. If you do that you now have, not only a coach, but also a supporting team of coaches.

**You** – Mm. Does it really work?

**Bill** – Yes – emphatically yes – if you let it! Which means being open to other people’s opinions and being willing to do something about them as necessary. If you ask for support and every three or four months, ask “how am I doing?”, then you will benefit.

**You** – OK. Anything else?

**Bill** – Yes. One other important way in which benefit accrues from this approach, is that the 360° team have learnt something about coaching and how it works. They have been coached, if you like. And that helps to develop a culture of supportive behaviour around the organisation.

One final comment. The most important member of your 360° team is your boss. He or she is in a better position than anyone to support your development and, incidentally, the person who will benefit most, other than yourself, of course. So, ‘boss buy in’ to the 360° summary, to your objectives, and to answering the periodic question “how am I doing, boss?”, is really important.

**You** – One more question. Under what circumstances is 360° coaching appropriate, and are there any situations in which it is inappropriate?

**Bill** – Let me start with the inappropriate time. Clearly the 360° team need to have worked with the executive for a certain period. An executive new to the company, or perhaps the division or subsidiary, cannot usefully be subjected to 360° immediately. I believe strongly, however, that a 360° team process often around three months into the new company, can be enormously beneficial to the “new boy/girl” and his/her colleagues. Incidentally, if you have read my “On Boarding” paper you will know my view that “new” executives can benefit greatly from coaching during their first three months. So a 360° approach at the end of that period links in well.

Quite honestly, apart from the situation above, I believe that 360° coaching is the most effective approach to coaching for the individual, and the business, that I am aware of.

*Bill Pitkeathley*