

Coaching high achievers

High Fliers and the Plateaued

Seventy-five per cent of those whom Pitkeathley & Partners has coached over the past 12 months have been in the age range 38-52. Only seven per cent were 55 or over, and fifteen per cent were 34-38. This highlights the importance of people in that 38-52 age range, which for the purposes of this paper I shall call 'the forties'.

It's my belief that coaching for those in their forties can and should be of higher value than for any other age group. This value is as applicable to the employing organisations as it is to the individuals concerned.

A typical corporate executive career falls into three phases, or decades. An understanding of these is significant in the process of making the best choice of executive coach..

Twenties – Learning Decade

During their twenties, corporate executives are in 'learning mode'. They're finding out what business is about and to learn what they are good at and not so good at. They're discovering what they have to do to be successful and which type of environment best suits them.

Some get it right quickly; some need to move around a few times, but mostly, by the age of 30, they're pretty clear about which areas and environments present their best opportunities. Importantly, most of them will have a self-perception that isn't too far removed from the perceptions their colleagues have of them.

The Thirties – Going For It

In their thirties the executives won't yet know quite how far they will go up the corporate slippery pole, but they will have a good sense of their best direction – and they are hungry for success. That's why I call this the 'Going for it' decade. Our executives will have acquired good corporate savvy; they've got plenty of energy, ambition, drive and opportunity. If the opportunities don't appear in their current company, they have that 'can-do' attitude which enables them to search out a better role even if it means up-rooting the family and taking on higher levels of debt.

The Forties – Realisation

The forties, the decade of realisation, is a time when our executives divide into three quite separate groups.

In the first group are those who recognise that this corporate life is not for them. We don't need to linger too long on them! Suffice to say that these are people who may or may not have the potential to go further, but who decide that they would rather spend 8-10 hours a day doing something else; running their own business, writing a book, being the parent who stays at home and looks after the children, become a teacher or university lecturer, or whatever.

They are smart enough to recognise that they are not sufficiently fulfilled by corporate life, and have enough guts to do something about it. In my experience this decision tends to be made in the very early forties.

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There are two further groups: those who have ‘plateaued’ – that is, they’ve reached the level beyond which they will never rise – and those who have further to go up the corporate pole – and want to.

If they examined themselves and their careers carefully enough, most of our executives should know in their heart of hearts by their mid forties whether or not they are going to be climbing higher up the pole by the age of 50. But many of them do not carry out that examination.

A very straightforward way to assess whether they are in the plateaued or high flier groups is to do what head-hunters do: check out salary against age. The actual numbers vary considerably according to sector, but most know their sector well enough to know what is a top decile salary for their age, and what is not. It’s a crude measure, but if they are not in the top decile at the age of 40, the odds are that they will plateau in their mid to late 40s. This isn’t a rule set in stone, but it’s a good guide. Companies, of course, can do this even more accurately than their executives!

One thing is for sure. Our typical executives need to recognise that if they are not in the high flier group they are quite likely to be ‘down-sized’ by or near their 50th birthday. (For more about this take a look at another paper on this web site: the 20-30-20 lifestyle formula). The sooner our executives determine whether they are going to plateau in their 40s, or keep going up well into their 50s, the better.

So we’ve now arrived at two groups of executives in that all important forties phase. The style of executive coaching they need will vary considerably depending on which of the two groups they are in.

Coaching the plateaued

There are some who would say that coaching cannot be justified at all for “the plateaued”. I don’t agree. Coaching the plateaued can add real value if it is done in a way that helps the executive do their job to their full potential. Coaching can provide a range of real benefits in this group of executives:

- *Better performance in the job and therefore better performing colleagues.*
- *Greater ability to develop subordinates.*
- *A happier and more fulfilled individual.*
- *Better leader with a greater range of leadership skills, needed to meet the ever-changing situations that we all face these days.*
- *Clearer view of career/life options.*
- *Individuals who will be more comfortable and confident in discussing his or her career options.*

Finally, coaching has the potential, in some cases, to help an individual move off his or her plateau and climb up to higher things.

Executives who have recognised that they’re not in the top decile of salary for their peer group will be facing some uncomfortable questions. How, for example, do they come to terms (both psychologically and financially) with “peaking early”? How do they continue to be motivated to perform well whilst fearing that their shelf life is not more than another 10 years or so? And, most worrying of all, what are they going to do after they are ‘down-sized’?

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An important tool in helping people to deal with these big issues is the use of an executive coach. There are those who would argue that executive coaches are only supposed to be about improving performance in the current role and/or developing skills and behaviours for another (bigger) role. Indeed they are, and should be so. Nevertheless, I suggest that coaches also have a real role to play in helping the plateaued to understand and deal with the implications of their situation. This role may stray inevitably into the sphere of career coaching.

Pitkeathley & Partners carried out a small survey of 15 high-fliers being coached and asked how their coaching time was spent. The answers were much as we would expect: they worked mainly on areas such as developing leadership behaviours, working more effectively with their boss and peers. 'Personal issues' accounted for no more than 7% of coaching time for these high-fliers. However I would expect this figure to rise to at least 12 per cent in the plateaued.

Are corporate clients happy to pay for executive coaching that includes time spent on career/life issues? Here at Pitkeathley & Partners we believe they are.

Do executive coaches have the skills to handle the career/life issues?

Well, some will, some won't! I believe that one of the challenges for Corporate HR people – the selectors of executive coaches – is to make that important selection of individual coaches.

I see a coach working with the "plateaued" to be:

- *Non directive.*
- *Seeking to help the individual to find the solutions through more and more in depth questioning and probing.*
- *Helping the individual to find the solutions and opportunities that the person already has inside them at some level.*

Coaching High-Fliers

The 'still high fliers' have their own set of issues. They may have major career or life changes to deal with and will be wrestling with how to improve their performance in their current role; how to develop their leadership skills and behaviours to meet even larger challenges; how to maintain an acceptable work/life balance.

Perhaps one of the most difficult things for them to learn is that the leadership behaviours that have got them to whatever level they have reached probably will not be sufficient to enable them to move on. They have to move into the discomfort zone of doing things differently and perhaps leaving behind tried and trusted ways of behaving. (I'm thinking here of a very successful Sales Director I coached, who had to learn new skills and behaviours for his move to Sales & Marketing Director, and in addition had to leave behind some of the sheer aggression that had served him so well in his rise through the ranks). The 'still high-fliers' need an extra dimension from their coaching. A coach to high fliers, of course, needs the qualities I mentioned above. But importantly they also must have the knowledge, experience and understanding of corporate life to be able to challenge, inform, pass on experience, and help the individual to understand the meaning of life at a higher organisational level.

So, think very carefully about what the 'right' coach will look like for any given situation. And then call Pitkeathley & Partners!!