



Coaching Dominant Executives: taking the tiger by the tail

It seems that, after a decade of coaching and developing coaches, everyone wants to be an Executive Coach. They invest five figures into a quality training program; fill their coaching toolkit with strategies, programs and assessments; then work their way into the VP and C-suites. Many are high-end consultants, credentialed HR or LD leaders, or executives themselves – all with years of C-level experience. But even they can still hit the wall when it comes to coaching dominant executives. The old rules don't apply and the shift from expert to coach can be tough to make.

We don't need an assessment to tell us who qualifies as a dominant executive. No nonsense, no fluff, 'get the job done or get out of the way'. If you are in the way of their target, you can *become* the target. Integrity and good communication skills can soften the blow, but you will never mistake their intent to win. The higher you go in a company, the more prevalent they become. Their drive to succeed propels them upward everywhere they go.

The challenge for coaches comes from the high expectations and powerful personalities dominant executives bring to coaching. Fortunately the ICF Coaching Competencies are still the gold standard for coaching dominant executives. The secret is in how we apply them.

Establishing the Coaching Agreement: Dominant executives are target-oriented, focused on a goal. It is important for coaches to use the coaching agreement phase of the session to clearly understand what the client's goal for the session is. "What specifically do you want to leave with today?" is a good place to start. Letting them dive right in to the coaching conversation is a recipe for failure.

Establishing Trust and Intimacy with the Client: This competency is all about creating rapport with your client. Dominant people judge competency of others by how direct their communication style is and how effective they are at getting things done. Bringing a soft, supportive style to the call isn't going to accomplish this. Match their tone, pace and focus. Keep chit chat to a minimum.

Coaching Presence: Let your confidence shine through and be an equal partner with your client. Don't take a back seat or take the lead. The first they won't respect and the second they won't tolerate. They want a coach that is as willing to take risks and "tell it like it is" as they are. Not a battle of egos but an interesting challenge of the minds.

Active Listening: Dominant executives are used to doing the talking and their coaching relationships are no different. Ask some powerful questions and turn them loose! Use this listening time to gather information below the content: their idiosyncratic phrases, meta programs and strategies, the story beneath the story. *They* will give you all the information you need to coach them effectively.

Powerful Questioning: This is the competency you must excel in with your dominant executive. Stick to safe, action-oriented or formula questions and you'll be back on the bench. Each question should make them think, challenge the status quo and rock their world. Take risks. This is what is missing in their world; people willing to stand up to their power and ask the hard questions.

Direct Communication: Now it's time to use all that information you gathered in Active Listening. Reframe what has been said in a new way. Be a bold mirror for what you see going on. Use their language and language patterns for maximum impact. Explore new territory using their metaphors and existing strategies. With curiosity and non-judgment, you can go where others can't.

Creating Awareness: For dominant executives, *this* is the value of coaching. They are smart cookies, which got them where they are today. They don't need your ideas or plans or even weekly accountability. They need the "AHA!" moments that they can run with. Powerful questions and challenge for thought are what creates awareness, so put all your efforts there.

Designing Actions: If you find yourself spending much time in action design, you probably haven't made an impact in awareness. Few dominant executives pay a coach to co-design an action plan; their staff is full of people who can play that role. Once awareness is achieved, the dominant executive will generate action so fast you'll have to jump out of the way.

Planning and Goal Setting: It is your job to keep an eye on the overarching coaching plan while the client drives the course of each session. This is about beginning the coaching program with specific goals and measures and taking checkpoints along the way to measure progress. Dominant executives usually have their targets top of mind so the real value is in the coach furthering clarity and staying on the same page with them!

Managing Progress and Accountability: Don't let these powerful executives delegate responsibility for their progress (to you) or ignore their commitments. While these dominant clients like to maintain control of their direction and use of their time, they appreciate the coach holding up the mirror for what they said they wanted to achieve. The occasional look-back and progress recognition is also helpful for these forward-focused leaders.

By recognizing the unique needs of powerful, dominant executives, you can use these competency tips to be an equally powerful coach-partner. May the force be with you!

Teresa J. Pool MCC, the President and founder of Transitions For Business, helps her clients achieve their full potential. A human behavior and communication specialist, Teresa's work as a coach, consultant, speaker, strategic facilitator, and workshop leader has motivated thousands to be their personal best. In addition, she inspires change through her published articles, television and radio appearances, and two leadership guides: Focus in the Midst of Chaos and Communication DIScovery. Teresa is an executive coach in UTD's Executive MBA program and serves as an instructor, supervisor and examiner in their Executive Coaching program. Teresa is dedicated to serving the coaching community as a former President of the ICF North Texas Chapter and provides coaching competency training for ICF credential advancement.

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