

Being an Internal Coach

More and more companies are hiring internal coaches and creating a coaching culture within their organization. The term “internal coach” describes a coach who is employed by an organization to coach fellow employees. As with all things, there are both benefits and challenges to being an internal coach. We’ve outlined some of them for you in this section. Whether you are considering being an internal coach, or you are one already, this section will give you an overview of what it takes and some things to be aware of along the way. Each company has its own culture and politics, so in addition to the information shared here, be aware of how that impacts you and your clients in order to work effectively and successfully within the organization.

Success TIP: Find a champion in a position with some authority who can back you and help set you up in the organization — someone who will see the merits in coaching and fund it. They will help you formalize your opportunities and your role in the organization.

Designing Your Alliances

When you are an internal coach, you are paid by your employer rather than your clients. The benefits to being an internal coach include a regular paycheck, company benefits, and no need to market your services outside the company. Don't imagine you will not have to market yourself and your services. Marketing to internal clients is a different animal, but it's still marketing. Being paid by your employer rather than your client is one of the biggest differences from being a coach with a private practice and it also presents some of the greatest challenges. It's critical to be rigorous about defining who your client is, and to design and redesign the multiple alliances in every coaching relationship.

A formal role and structure within the company to contain the coaching relationship may or may not exist. Because the company is paying you and not the client, it's important to design your alliance with the company up front when you first start your position so you are clear on what the priorities are, and what is and isn't confidential with your clients. Be clear right from the start who the client is — is it the individual you are coaching, or the company, or your boss? You'll need to set up multiple alliances with each client you work with, including the company, the client, and possibly the client's boss. Also be clear about who you will coach and what you will coach. As you set yourself up as an internal coach, be sure you have the company's blessing to work with the client's whole life, and/or do your best to get that. The company needs to know that clients may go one of two ways as a result of the coaching — become more committed and productive or quit and go to something different.

If a manager does come to you with the request to coach their employee, clearly define the boundaries of the coaching relationship with the manager. A possible trap for you as an internal coach is when a manager approaches you to coach an employee with a performance problem. That's actually a managerial problem, not a coaching issue. If an employee comes to you wanting to be coached, find out whether or not there are company or department guidelines for establishing a coaching relationship. Check in about what their manager would think and ask the employee to let their boss know about it. Sometimes the boss needs to be consulted first and sometimes they don't, especially with senior employees in the organization. It could be the company or department has guidelines already or they may want you to help set them up. The bottom line is, don't make any assumptions. Be clear about the culture, the organization, and the expectations. Stay within those company guidelines and design your alliances from there.

Working internally, you'll need to be attentive to the demand of the other job responsibilities on the client. A boss may require your client to attend a meeting or finish up a project on deadline rather than attending his or her coaching session. Be really clear in designing your alliances with your client especially around travel, vacations, scheduled appointments, and other responsibilities. It can be tricky territory for you as the coach. You'll need to be flexible, and yet avoid the trap of getting too loose about appointments, because coaching will fall off the radar screen. Overwork can be a client's Saboteur helping them to avoid the coaching. Set parameters. Really nail down their commitment to the coaching. Be willing to check in with them often about it. So set up accountability with your client in a way that takes all this into consideration and redesign it as often as is needed.

Coaching Teams

Working in an organization, you may get the opportunity to coach an intact project or management team. We are seeing more and more of a demand for this in organizations. Again it's critical to establish who the client is. Is it the team itself as a whole entity, or the manager of the team, or the person the team manager reports to? Design your alliances clearly. When designing initially with the team manager — ask what are the outcomes they are looking for over time? Will it be most effective to coach the team as a whole or each individual team member? Set a length of time for the commitment to the coaching — 3, 6, 9 months, etc. Make sure all parties are involved in designing your alliances so everyone is clear about what information is going to be shared with whom.

When coaching teams, something to watch out for is the number of alliances you are designing and holding. If you are coaching the team as a whole, then each individual member of the team is held as an expression of the team. If you are asked to coach the team as a whole, the team manager(s) as well as the members of the team, you could be holding 10 or more coaching relationships within the same group and it can get very messy. Because you are coaching so many different pieces of the same group, conflicts of interest are likely... at least in the perception of your clients. If you are coaching the team as a whole, it is best to have another coach for the individual members of the team and vice versa. Then you can be in the corner of the group or individual that you are coaching.

Sometimes it's not possible to have more than one coach. In that case, look for the way to have the most impact on the group. For instance, coach the team as a whole and the team manager or managers. It's critical to frequently review and redesign your alliances with all parties, and at the end of each session ask, "What about today's session can be taken to the rest of the team?" and "What about today's session is confidential?" Then take good notes about it in every session, and remind yourself and those you're coaching often, who the client is and what the designed alliances are.

Risks and Pitfalls

Politics and collusion are potential traps for the internal coach. Handling multiple relationships and designed alliances can be tricky. Self management and confidentiality are crucial. You have to take a stand for your client even if it rocks the boat of the organization. To be effective, you have to be willing to risk your job for the sake of the client. One way to set a professional standard as well as support your own development and prevent burn-out, is to receive regular coaching supervision. Because of confidentiality issues, this is frequently arranged via supervisors outside of the corporation.

Don't let the "story" of the company run your coaching — whether it's "we all have too much to do" or something else. Learn what the organizational Saboteurs are and be conscious of them in your coaching.

Do not fall into the trap of giving advice. Many organizations are used to consultants, so you may need to educate them about what a coach does and doesn't do. They so want advice, it can be very seductive. If you get into the habit of giving it, pretty soon you may not have any advice left to give and the client will not have developed their own research and decision-making skills. If you are in a coaching relationship where you are also a mentor or consultant, be clear about what role you're in at any particular time, and keep the coaching alive.

Other Opportunities for Impact

Be a model and educate others by using coaching skills in every conversation and interaction in the organization.

Create informational brown bags for employees around work/family balance, stress management, making choices, or any other topic that would serve the culture of the organization. You can help create a culture for people to say no if they are overloaded, and to better balance work and family.

You may also have the opportunity to coach employees around 360 degree feedback tools or other assessment tools the organization may use. These take feedback to the next step — once the employee gets the feedback, you can coach them about their impact on others in the organization and on how to create something different or better for themselves and others. Many assessment tools require specific training and formal certification to administer with integrity. Even if you're not introducing the tool to the organization, be sure you understand it within the context of the work your clients are doing.

In Summary

Hold confidentiality, be clear about who your client or clients are, design your alliances well, find a champion within the organization, make sure you have the training and support that you need, set up coaching supervision for yourself, and remember that you can make a difference to both your individual clients and to the organization as a whole.