



Coaching for Leaders

Why Executives Need Support, Especially in Times of Disruption

By Andre Keil¹

Contents

- 3** Executive Summary
- 5** Coaching in Times of Disruption
- 9** Coaching Methodology:
A Skills-Based Approach
- 11** By the Numbers:
The Impact of Coaching
- 14** Conclusion
- 14** Ready to Take the Next Step?
- 15** About the Author
- 16** Endnotes and References



Executive Summary

Coaching Through Disruption Provides Support

Executive leaders and senior-level managers have an overwhelming job: Not only are they charged with setting the direction for their organizations, but they also have to coordinate alignment with their teams and get commitment so that everyone in the group feels a mutual responsibility for their team's success. Even in good times, when business is booming and employee engagement is high, leaders often feel like they're drinking from a firehose.

But in times of rapid change or disruption to existing business models, the responsibilities of a leader become all the more challenging.

How do you set a direction when the future is unclear? How do you coordinate alignment and commitment when team members are stretched thin and lack job security? How do you create a culture of innovation with limited resources?

These are some of the dilemmas leaders encounter in periods of disruption. Yet in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous times, inspiring leaders are needed more than ever.

Leaders at the peak usually have fewer trusted sounding boards. The pressures they face are unique; plus, their challenges are often confidential.

Why Organizations Invest in Coaching for Their Key Leaders

Executive coaching² is a \$19 billion global industry³ because organizations believe that it can help their leaders innovate in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world. In fact, more than 70% of formal leadership development programs include coaching.⁴

The results of coaching include:

- better and accelerated learning,
- development of critical thinking skills,
- improvement in team leadership performance,
- sustainable organizational change, and
- increases in leaders' self-awareness so they can use their strengths more effectively.⁵

Even in challenging business environments when company resources are under tight scrutiny, organizations prioritize coaching. **That's because in times of uncertainty, leaders are responsible for making strategic decisions that may change the course of their organizations, and coaching provides a laser-focused approach specifically targeted for these key people in the organization.**

Finding Opportunity in Disruption

During disruption, coaches can help leaders seize the immense personal and professional opportunities that arise from volatility through conversations that leverage 4 core coaching skills. Using an approach of listening for facts, emotions, and values, asking powerful questions that both create challenge and support, and establishing clear next steps and accountability, these conversations create insight, self-awareness, and most importantly, action.

Our research suggests that this behavior-based approach to coaching also helps leaders integrate these 4 core conversation skills into their daily interactions. In turn, executive coaching has a ripple effect, positively impacting the entire organization.

This white paper explores why, even in challenging business environments, executive coaching remains important. It explains the benefits of coaching during times of disruption, both for leaders and their teams. And it looks at the reasons why businesses prioritize coaching and rely on it as a tool to carry their organizations into the future.



Coaching in Times of Disruption

Executives and senior-level managers can attest to the saying that “change is the only constant in life.” But while change itself is predictable, the type of disruption it brings is not. From rapid technological innovations to the forced adoption of new work-from-home strategies and virtual solutions, disruption often comes from unexpected directions. For organizations to thrive, leaders must be able to embrace this change and adopt new roles, craft new

identities, and find new meaning for themselves and those they lead. And as leaders find their footing in challenging environments, they need support, too.

During periods of massive change and severe disruption, there are few opportunities for leaders to step away, and merely wishing for adjustment won’t get them there. For executives to succeed in place, they require just-in-time support.

Coaching Formats – From Long-Term to Immediate

Historically, senior managers and executives have engaged in 2 types of coaching:

- **Long-term engagement coaching**, which consists of regular appointments with a coach who understands the leader’s strengths and weaknesses. These sessions inform the development of innovative, personalized solutions that help leaders map their leadership strategy to their organization’s business strategy.
- **On-demand coaching**, which consists of in-the-moment, just-in-time sessions where leaders can access their coach for short check-ins or longer coaching sessions, even outside traditional business hours.

In each format, typically delivered virtually via telephone or videoconference, coaches can help leaders integrate their experiences and acknowledge that complex situations require a new way of thinking.

However, when the pace of change increases, leaders tend to rely more heavily on on-demand coaching, which we have found boosts resilience, helps leaders maintain their momentum, and helps them stay intentional and focused on their goals.

Learning From Experience and Hardships

In times of crisis or disruption, executives are called to make tough decisions with far-reaching impacts. Most of the time, there is no “right” choice, and the burden of deciding may feel like a heavy weight. As a result, distressing feelings emerge: anxiety, worry, fear, sadness, anger, skepticism, stress. These feelings ripple out and impact how leaders behave, how they treat others, and even how they see the world.

Not only can executive coaches serve as receptacles for leaders’ anxiety, but coaches can also help leaders better prioritize their own emotional well-being, thereby increasing their effectiveness.

Coaches can help leaders maintain 4 areas of resilience — physical, mental, emotional, and social — so they have the strength they need to make tough decisions and to model resilient behavior for their people.

Coaching is especially helpful in a crisis because it gives leaders a confidential space to test ideas; manage or regain energy and focus; recapture their sense of clarity and purpose; and navigate tough decisions with major consequences.

According to our widely recognized 70-20-10 framework for leader development, executives grow, learn, and change from 3 key types of experiences — and challenging assignments present 70% of on-the-job learning experiences.

Especially during times of disruption, on-the-job experiences include navigating hardships. These unplanned experiences that create adversity may happen at the organizational level (through situations like reorganizations of company structure), or they may happen at the individual level (having to lay off employees).

The lines between organizational and individual hardship are blurred during crises. Leading through the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, executives faced a storm of challenges. On the organizational level, many leaders had to make tough downsizing decisions, while ramping up innovation in a complex business landscape. Personally, those same leaders balanced work-from-home requirements, unexpected child-care responsibilities, and household budgetary restraints.

In the midst of navigating these intertwined professional and personal challenges, feelings of stress can inhibit personal and professional growth.

But through coaching, leaders are better able to tap into the powerful learning opportunities that arise from hardships.

And in working through adversity, leaders can gain greater insight and clarity, increased compassion for others, and resilience.

The Impact of On-Demand Virtual Coaching

During the March-May 2020 timeframe of the COVID-19 pandemic, we provided complimentary 45-minute on-demand virtual coaching sessions, pairing leaders with an executive coach and surveying them about the impact of the coaching sessions.

Over half of the leaders we worked with reported that during the pandemic they had to work more hours for less pay. Further, over 70% reported that they experienced higher stress levels than normal, and half mentioned that they felt increased uncertainty, receiving mixed messages from their bosses and organizations.

In terms of the impact of coaching, 92% reported satisfaction with their coach, and 89% reported increased clarity about what they planned to do as a next step.

A qualitative analysis of survey data revealed that leaders found on-demand coaching to be valuable in 3 ways:

1. As a sounding board for their situation with receiving objective feedback,
2. As an opportunity to process their challenge and create an immediate next step, and
3. As a way to refocus on what was most important for them and leverage what makes them effective.

“CCL provided personalized and customized coaching with realistic goal settings I found extremely valuable for my professional life, with benefits to my personal life. I felt heard and understood as I was guided to developing a plan to address my concerns.”

**Ann Stone, Senior Human Resource Business Partner
University of Kentucky Medical Center**

“My coach was objective, non-judgmental and asked thought-provoking questions which is what I needed and helped me to process. He was able to quickly grasp where I was coming from without a lot of expectation and relate back to my experience which can be hard to do in such a short amount of time.”

**Chris Stake, Research Operations Manager
Lurie Hospital**

“I entered into the discussion thinking that the value add would be limited due to it only being one session, virtually, and with someone that I didn’t know, but I was wrong and [my coach] exceeded my expectations on being able to be effective in a single experience.”

Anonymous On-Demand Coaching Recipient





From Disruption Comes Opportunity

During hardships, an executive coach can help leaders change their perspective so that instead of feeling threatened, they feel challenged and equipped to seize new opportunities.

Those opportunities can take many forms. When norms are upended, leaders may have unique acquisition prospects. Additionally, crises may present new customers with a unique set of needs, and leaders are charged with innovating product and service offerings to meet those needs.

Studies show that employee engagement tends to be high during a crisis. According to research⁶ from Willis Towers Watson, a global risk management company that researched the employee experience during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic:

- 95% of employees report senior leaders demonstrated a “sincere interest” in employee wellbeing and safety
- 89% believed their organization enacted measures to ensure employees felt supported
- 76% of employees say collaboration improved throughout their organization.

In this window of high engagement, leaders have an opportunity to build trust through flexible benefits, education and training, and better communication. Coaches can provide clarity to help leaders make better decisions about maintaining organizational performance, business continuity, and the safety, well-being, and financial security of their workforce.

Our Coaching Methodology: A Skills-Based Approach

At CCL, we've discovered that a pragmatic and behavior-based approach to coaching works best because leaders learn important conversation skills that they can then put into practice in their organizations. We teach leaders 4 core skills for coaching conversations.

These 4 core coaching skills are best practiced when the relationship between the coach and the leader is strong. A good coach will work explicitly to build a connection based on trust and safety, while at the same time providing structure and clarity. The coaching relationship is a partnership of equals, where the coach drives the process while the leader sets the agenda, set on a foundation of high ethical standards and clear ground rules to create confidentiality and transparency.

4 Core Skills for Coaching Conversations

1

Listening to understand – Our coaches go beyond actively listening (repeating back, understanding, summarizing) to derive 3 different perspectives: facts, emotions, and values. These perspectives help the coach better understand the leader's beliefs, the impact of their words, the tone of voice, and the body language.

2

Asking powerful questions – Coaches ask courageous questions purely for the benefit of the leader's advancement, moving the leader forward and provoking (rather than providing) new insights.

3

Challenging and supporting – Ultimately, coaching is about encouraging the leader to try something different from what they have done before, or to create a significant shift in perspective. Challenge is only possible with the right amount of support, creating an environment of safety.

4

Establishing next steps and accountability – Having an effective conversation is only one aspect of successful coaching. The real work happens in between coaching meetings, where leaders apply insights and experiment with new behaviors.

The ripple effect: Building coaching skills creates a coaching culture. As coaches engage with leaders, they're not only creating insights. They're also transferring skills, encouraging their clients to use these same skills with their direct reports and peers in the organization. Therefore, coaching can go beyond impacting the individual, reaching the entire organization – as everyone can benefit from having a better conversation every day using the 4 coaching skills discussed above.

Once these 4 core skills permeate everyday conversations, leaders are able to build stronger relationships and enhance a culture of psychological safety, increase engagement, and foster development. Leaders equipped with these 4 skills can aim for transformation, even in 10-minute hallway conversations. The intent of each coaching conversation is to learn, grow, create awareness, and foster courage to take actions that lead to meaningful change.

Coaching doesn't happen in a vacuum. Our research indicates the most successful coaching engagements have a high level of involvement from the leader's supervisor. Before leaders start the coaching process, it's best for them to have a "manager alignment" conversation about both their expectations and their supervisor's expectations for coaching.

When coaching becomes systemic, accountability increases and outcomes are strengthened — both for the individual and the organization.



By the Numbers: The Impact of Coaching

Multiple practitioners and scholars have found evidence that coaching is highly effective. Notable findings include:

- Leaders who received coaching were viewed as significantly more effective, satisfied in their jobs, and inspiring to others.⁷
- Coaching increases goal attainment and well-being, improves constructive leadership styles,⁸ and improves overall leadership effectiveness.⁹
- Thanks to leaders’ newly developed skills, coaching affects outcomes such as strategy execution, teamwork, and change management.¹⁰

Furthermore, at CCL, our Evaluation Center researchers have accumulated additional data from thousands of leaders from around the world regarding the impact of virtual coaching programs.¹¹

Their findings give critical insights into the overall value of coaching, its connection to goal advancement, and the relationship between supervisor support and success.

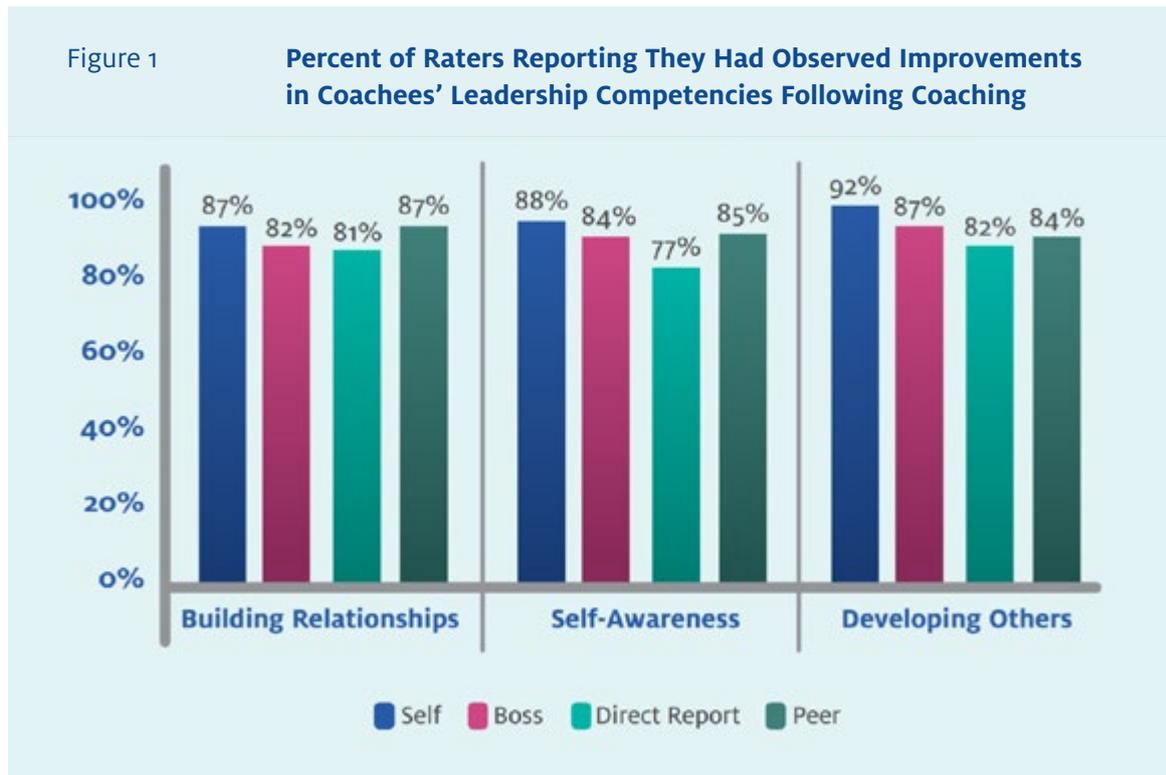
One of the first findings of this research is that **95% of participants believed, to a moderate or higher extent, that coaching was worth the time and effort required.** This is interesting because this data was collected after multiple coaching sessions, over the course of 9 months on average.

While it may be common for leaders to find a single coaching session valuable because it helps them reach new insights and set initial goals, our finding shows this assessment of the value of coaching can also be sustained over time. Coaching participants rated specific coaching behaviors consistently high:

<p>Assessing the Current State</p>		<p>“My coach assisted me in recognizing areas for improvement.”</p>
<p>Challenging</p>		<p>“My coach encouraged me to practice new behaviors.”</p>
<p>Supporting</p>		<p>“My coach provided practical, realistic, and immediately usable input.”</p>
<p>Driving Results</p>		<p>“My coach helped me identify specific behaviors that would help me achieve my goals.”</p>

Coaching Supports Competency Growth & Goal Advancement

Our study also revealed improvement in leadership competencies following a coaching engagement. The following chart shows some of the most commonly assessed leadership competencies.



Leaders were asked to identify what impact the changes in behavior would have on themselves, their direct reports, and the groups they lead. Leaders and their raters also provided written comments.

Some examples of specific coaching impact included:

- A boss stating that as a result of the leadership development and coaching, the leader now challenges the leadership team more often, resulting in stronger decisions by the team.
- A leader indicating that because of improved team functioning, fewer mistakes are being made by his direct reports when using a technical system.
- A direct report indicating that the group's job satisfaction and stress levels have improved as a result of the leader's encouragement and support.

Overall, the data provides evidence not only of a positive coaching experience, but also that **investments in coaching yielded progress towards developmental goals, observable improvements in all leadership competencies assessed, and meaningful outcomes for both the individual leaders and the groups they lead.**

Relationship Between Supervisor Support and Goal Progress

Lastly, our study indicated that a systemic approach to coaching (where it does not take place in a vacuum) is impactful. A main factor that contributed to goal progress was revealed in the relationship between the self-ratings of “supervisor support” (the participant rating the support they received from their supervisor) and “supervisor ratings of goal progress” (the supervisor rating of the progress made by the participant on one, 2, or 3 goals).

We found that **the more participants felt supported by their manager, the more progress they made on their development goals.** This finding highlights the important role of managerial support in a leadership development or coaching engagement.



*Progress rated by the boss; substantial progress=4 on a 5-point scale.



Conclusion:

Coaching for Leaders Is Critical, Particularly in Challenging Times

As coaching becomes increasingly popular and convenient thanks to virtual modalities, organizations continue to accrue evidence that it works. However, it should not be assumed that all coaches and coaching will be high quality and get results. Executive coaching represents an investment of time and resources, so continuously monitoring quality and assessing whether an executive coaching initiative is producing results is critical.

Organizations should make sure both coaches and the coaching engagement are evaluated by measurable criteria. Nonetheless, this research provides support for these key benefits of coaching initiatives: It is likely that companies will continue to invest in executive coaching as a key tool to develop leaders and improve their ability to carry out strategic initiatives. A strong coaching program that is well-integrated and supported within the organization can provide much-needed structure and clarity so executives can prepare mentally, emotionally, and professionally as they lead their organizations through a disrupted world.

Ready to Take the Next Step?

During challenging times, support your executives so that they're prepared to lead your organization into the future. Our executive coaching services can be delivered virtually to provide one-on-one, customized leadership development opportunities for senior managers and executives — anytime, anywhere.

To learn more and get started, visit ccl.org/virtualcoaching.

About the Author



Andre Keil is Coaching Practice Leader at the Center for Creative Leadership, where he works with hundreds of certified coaches across the United States. He is an executive coach himself and partners with organizations to help implement large-scale coaching services. In addition to designing coaching engagements, Andre works with clients to create coaching cultures inside their organizations. Andre is on the International Coach Federation's Coach Training board. Prior to his current role, Andre ran CCL's EMEA coaching business from the Brussels campus.

Endnotes and References

1 The author would like to acknowledge that this paper is built upon an earlier one, [Building the Case for Executive Coaching](#), authored by Sarah Stawiski; Maggie Sass; Rosa Grunhaus Belzer, with contributions from Mark Reynolds (2016).

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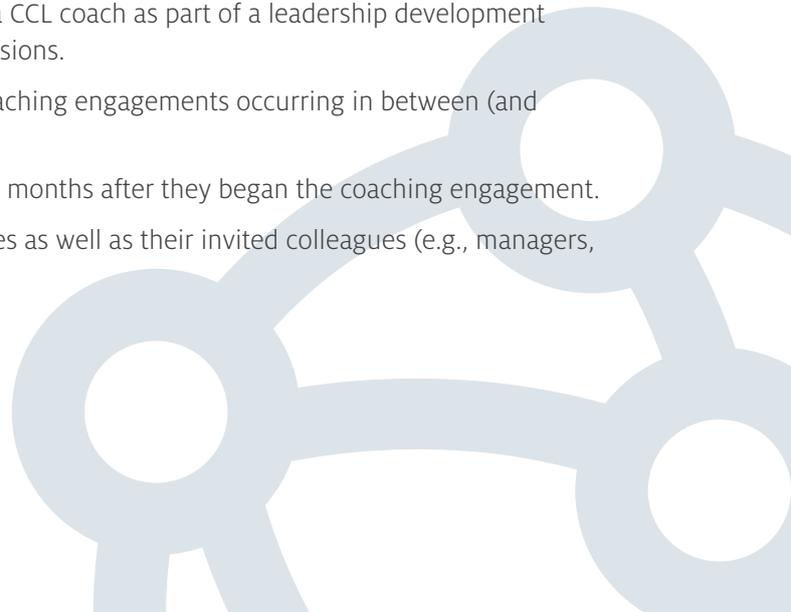
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We conducted an analysis of an archival dataset that included 347 leaders, 3,103 raters, and 37 coaches under the following circumstances:

- Leaders completed a coaching engagement with a CCL coach as part of a leadership development initiative that also included 2, 3-day classroom sessions.
- Classroom sessions were 9 months apart, with coaching engagements occurring in between (and sometimes just after the second session).
- All of the ratings were completed approximately 9 months after they began the coaching engagement.
- Ratings were collected from the leaders themselves as well as their invited colleagues (e.g., managers, peers, direct reports, etc.).



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