



ONLINE TOOLKIT

Selecting a Coach

Questions to Ask

The following provides you with some sample questions to ask your prospective coach. We have also provided information for rating the responses below:

- » Describe the steps in a typical coaching engagement.
- » Which kinds of clients have you worked with most? Which kinds do you work with best?
- » Suppose I want to work on developing a skill (e.g., developing leadership style, establishing accountability, or grooming successors), how would you help me develop that skill?
- » How will you keep me accountable to what I want to work on?
- » How long is a typical engagement? How often do you prefer to meet? How long do sessions usually last?
- » How do you prefer to meet with your clients (phone, face to face, email)?
- » How do you stay current in the field of coaching?
- » What else should I know about you?
- » Do you have questions for me?

Rating the Responses

Adapted from David Coleman, Ph.D.

Question: *Describe the steps in a typical coaching engagement.*

Rating the response: What is the coach's approach like? What is their philosophy or style? Does s/he have a process in mind? Does it seem relevant to your situation? Make sure you understand what the coaching process looks like from start to finish. The coach should be able to tell you step-by-step what she or he will do in each stage of the process. While the steps may not be completely linear, you don't want a coach who cannot describe how s/he works. Your coach should also establish leadership goals at the beginning of the coaching engagement and review leadership results at the end.

Question: *Which kinds of clients have you worked with most? Which kinds do you work with best?*

Rating the response: Is the coach's experience relevant to your situation? Consider whether relevant prior experience matters. A coach's background makes a huge difference in the kind of service you are going to get. Look for someone with an understanding of how nonprofits, organizations, or systems work and someone who has coached others in organizations similar to yours. It's also important that your executive coach is not only an expert in coaching but also an expert in learning and change. Be wary of anyone who says s/he works equally well with everyone. Either this coach lacks self-awareness or isn't telling the truth.

Question: *Suppose I want to work on developing a skill (e.g., developing leadership style, establishing accountability, or grooming successors), how would you help me develop that skill?*

Rating the response: Look for multiple approaches and flexibility in thinking. Does the prospective coach suggest resources for learning? Will this person role-play through real situations? Will this person provide examples from work with other clients (anonymously, of course)? Does the coach make suggestions adapted to your learning style or context? Look for a coach who has a style that works with yours and pushes you to learn. A good coach will not be too prescriptive OR only ask questions. A delicate balance exists between giving leaders the answers and helping them to figure out the answers for themselves.

Question: *How will you keep me accountable to what I want to work on?*

Look for a coach who will establish learning goals at the beginning of the engagement and provide check points along the way and during coaching conversations. The coach should tie the conversation back to the goals and the reasons they are working together in the first place.

Question: *How long is a typical engagement? How often do you prefer to meet? How long do sessions usually last?*

Rating the response: Coaches and coaching providers (e.g., management support organizations) in the nonprofit sector have adopted various approaches to the scheduling and format of sessions. Some prescribe a specific number of sessions according to a set schedule, whereas others prefer a more flexible approach. For some, a typical initial coaching engagement is six months, with a 3-month check in to make sure it's on track and the option of renewing. Clients typically meet or speak with their coaches for about 60 to 90 minutes every two to three weeks.

Question: *How do you prefer to meet with your clients (phone, face to face, email)?*

Rating the response: Coaching typically occurs during one-on-one meetings or phone calls. Many coaches work primarily by telephone. Almost all coaches provide phone or email check-in between sessions. Be sure to ask about availability for unscheduled calls and about policy around re-scheduled calls.

Question: *How do you stay current in the field of coaching?*

Rating the response: Does the candidate attend conferences, read books, or participate in collegial groups?

Question: *What else should I know about you?*

Listen for anything else that seems relevant to you and your personal and/or professional goals and needs for coaching.

Question: *Do you have questions for me?*

Rating the response: You should expect a coaching candidate to have questions for you such as, "What does success look like? What results do you want from coaching?" as well as questions about how you want coaching to affect your organization, how you learn best, and your concerns about the coaching process. Most important, you want a coach to ask substantive questions that clarify your thinking about the process and that indicate how this person will work with you.

How do I decide?

The composite of answers to all the above questions and your ratings enable you to select a coach who will work for you. Some clients find it helpful to rank prospective coaches on a five-point scale on various skills: listening ability, ability to ask good questions, ability to identify underlying patterns in a coachee, ability to connect coaching work with organizational goals, ability to adapt an approach to a situation, and comfort and ease in interacting with a coachee.

You also should consider the subjective criteria, such as how you feel about the coach, using your intuition as a guide. As an informed nonprofit leader, make sure you ask the right questions to find the right match for you. At the very least, consider what your instincts tell you about a potential coach and whether you think that person can help you. You are the best judge.

For more information on selecting a coach, please see "Coaching and Philanthropy: An Action Guide for Nonprofits", available for download at www.compasspoint.org/coaching.

Sources:

Coleman, David (2008). "A Leader's Guide to Executive Coaching," Nonprofit Quarterly, Spring, 2008, pp. 30-37, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services Coaching Referral Service; Bethanis, Sue. "When Bad Coaches Happen to Good People", Mariposa Leadership.