

How To Match The Right Coach For Your Executives: A Guide For VC Firms

Execs are holding many challenges of building their teams, figuring out their roles, and driving their initiatives forward. It's impossible for them to do it all well.

It's a practice of extraordinary prioritization—choosing which fires to let burn and which to urgently address.

If you're like most investors and their teams, you want to give your execs every possible advantage to help them and their companies succeed.

One key go-to resource many have come to count on is leadership coaching.

The wrong coach can be a waste of time and money, but more importantly, *they can be a liability* if they point a leader's attention towards the wrong things.

So how do you help them find the right coach?

Below is a guide to help you set your leaders up with a coach that will truly improve their effectiveness and the likelihood of company success.

First, I'll familiarize you with three different types of leadership coaches we see. Then, I'll share with you a tool you can use to help your leader identify the key focus areas they most need support in.

Three Types of Coaches

1. The “Business Therapy”/ “Reactive” Coach

This is the person who is usually an excellent listener, empathetic, able to reflect back and ask probing questions to help leaders get to the best answer for themselves.

They usually can quickly establish rapport and trust, and often are former therapists.

They can help leaders foster more self-awareness, reflect on their actions, understand their tendencies, strengths and weaknesses, and be more confident.

Leaders appreciate this type of coaching as a “shock absorber” to soften the ups and downs of a stressful leadership ride – and these relationships can last for years. They are also great coaches for a leader who is burning out or just needs to find their own center.

However, we've found these coaches typically don't have the pattern recognition to be an effective thought partner in operating the business. Often, session time is spent dealing with "flavor of the week" challenges that fluctuate from week to week, distracting focus from key priorities.

As a result, this coach may not be driving focus and systematically building the long-term development of new skill sets, capabilities and mindsets that are critical for a leader to level up and stay ahead of the growth of their fast-scaling company.

This results in leaders whose companies "outgrow them" and the leadership team thrash that follows.

2. The "Former Operator" Exec Coach

These former Operators are initially very valuable because they have wisdom & experience that come from past success.

They can also be good guides in a "wartime" context, because they've often personally felt the pain of not acting swiftly enough – they have the memory scars and the pattern recognition to know when something's not working, and help leaders take action sooner.

However, we've found that many former operator-now-coaches tend to think that strategies that worked for them will work for their client, and prescribe these "best practices" to them.

They tend to think if they've been a successful leader, they can coach others without deeply training in the art of coaching. More like a mentor, they default to their own pattern matching and background of experience, versus truly probing to deeply listen, inquire, and develop the thinking of the leader through effective coaching methodologies.

While they might seem like a fit at first, eventually when a leader's circumstances don't quite fit the ones this coach thrived in, this coach's "best practices" can be a square peg in a round hole for the leader's needs, and leave other issues unaddressed because they don't fit that leader's background of expertise.

Many leaders want someone who has "been there before", but don't realize these potential drawbacks. While some former operators are good coaches, most are actually better off in the role of a mentor who can be consulted for situation-specific guidance periodically as needed.

3. "Structured and Flexible" coach

These types of coaches are nimble, adroit and skillful at dynamically responding to the week-to-week needs of a leader, while holding the work inside a context of a deeper developmental plan.

These “structured and flexible” coaches almost always co-create some form of a **Leadership Plan** with their leaders.

Derived from a deep inquiry, pattern matching and 360 feedback, this [Leadership Plan](#) is a roadmap of the tools and mindsets that this leader needs to acquire to help them stay 6-9 months ahead of the growth of their rapidly scaling and changing company.

A tight Leadership Plan also includes a board management strategy, a [team development strategy](#), and the coach holds them accountable to executing this strategy through time.

While they will dive in to handle the day-to-day challenges that inevitably come up, their work transcends “flavor of the week” crises, to proactively equipping them with the tools and mindsets to help leaders scale themselves and their teams to meet what’s around the corner in their journey.

These “structured yet flexible” coaches actively refresh and regenerate the Leadership Plan, and many can step in to facilitate high performance teamwork offsites for the exec team as well.

So, which coach is best for my leader?

There are times when a leader is burning out or just needs to find their own center, and a “business therapy” coach can support their mental health.

Or, they are navigating a particularly tricky situation a “former operator” coach has just the right expertise for.

Typically however, we have found that the structured yet flexible “developmental” coaching approach is most often the best fit for the dynamic ride most leaders face.

We like to match them up with an industry-specific mentor (often a former operator) who, together with their coach, can be the brain trust that that leader needs to navigate through most any challenging situation.

So, when someone reaches out for coaching, or you have a sense that a coach could be helpful for a particular leader, consider what type of coach they need. Business therapy coach? Former operator? Or a leadership coach with a structured and flexible approach?

Work with your head of platform to match your founder with the right type of coach if you don’t have these relationships already. Make sure one of those types of coaches is in the mix of coaches you recommend.

And check back in to see who they chose, why, and how it’s going periodically. What they need today may differ from what they need tomorrow.

Finally, here's [a diagnostic tool you can use](#) to identify the key focus areas where your leader most needs support.