

COACHING

SENIOR LEVEL + EXECUTIVE

WOMEN



*Having coached women leaders for years, I've noticed specific patterns.
Curious if my experience parallels what other active coaches know,
I interviewed 18 of the busiest, most successful coaches in the industry.
Indeed there are commonalities that we experience.
Knowing these can help the coach provide the best possible support.*

— LIZ CORNISH —
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Reasons for Coaching

Executive Presence: Becoming “Leader-like”

Though the phrase is somewhat overworked, executive presence is still the most common reason women seek coaching. This is often about

- Claiming their power and using their voice.
- Gaining visibility in the organization.
- Understanding the power dynamics and organizational politics.
- Influencing and selling their agenda.

*“Women sometimes don’t realize work is a game—
and they need to ‘lace ‘em up and play’.”*

— KAREN WUNDERLIN

Career and Life Strategies

Interestingly, many of us agree that there are subtle differences between the director and executive level woman. While career strategies are important, most at the executive level are not as concerned with classic work-life balance issues. At the senior level, women are still organizing their lives and coming to terms with the enormous sacrifices required for success. At the executive level, they are more likely to be reconciled to their decisions and focused primarily on their career. Reasons cited are:

- If there are children they are usually older and don’t require as much care.
- The women at this level have come to terms with their work-life choices. They have figured it out and secured the support they need.
- Being at the executive level allows more freedom for scheduling and planning.

Both levels want help strategizing the next step, exploring the question, “How can I move my career forward while in this place?”

Issues That Often Emerge

While executive presence and career strategies are the primary stated reason senior women seek coaching, I often find they need help recognizing, then tackling the following:

Fear-based Overcompensation

Women leaders need to explore what drives their decisions. Sometimes it is fear-based and counterproductive. A fear of making mistakes and failure might result in playing too safe, or over-zealous, tedious analysis. A fear of rejection might result in not speaking out when necessary. A fear of failure might keep a woman from going for stretch goals. A helpful shift for women is to transform their fear from a career-inhibitor to a useful tool.

For example, Sally, an EVP for a large media firm, spent too much time developing consensus. This tendency slowed decision-making down in a very fast-paced industry. When explored, she realized she had an unconscious fear that Frank, a strong and opinionated direct report, would publicly challenge her authority. Realizing that, she decided to spend more individual time with Frank to develop rapport and seek his ideas offline. Decision time sped up and Frank became a strong ally.

Second Guessing

Stepping into their role and getting beyond the “imposter syndrome” fear that they aren’t good enough or don’t deserve the role. Women are more comfortable managing familiar lines of business. When the role expands into new territory, they might tend to second-guess themselves or overreact to those who doubt them. Coaches should be ready to help their clients move through periods of self-doubt, especially if it is belaboring the decision-making process or causing destructive stress-related responses.

The Need to Let Go and Move On

Women are hard-wired to take things personally and emotionally. The inner critic is tough to recognize and tame. Coaches should be prepared to help their clients do the following:

- Move beyond taking developmental feedback, mistakes or challenges too personally
- Recognize when being hard on themselves is limiting their success
- Take career hits with humor and keeping setbacks in perspective
- Focus on what’s working and move away from self incrimination

Learning, then Working the System:

Generally, women tend to be internally focused on the work product while their male counterparts are more externally driven. Good coaching will likely include helping them manage the political environment and strategize their relationships. This needs to go beyond deciding “who” to include in one’s network. Coaches should help clients think more deeply about maximizing relationships. This includes determining:

- Who is critical to their success
- What message that person or team needs to receive about your client, her team or her agenda
- What does that critical person or team value? What is important to him/her?
- How can your client frame her message so that it will be well received?
- An action plan for moving forward

For example, Davis, a successful controller thrives on doing the accounting services work. However, the rest of the organization pushed back vigorously when her department launched simple but critical accountability measures. Her agenda was clear – get buy in from the rest of the departments. However, what the marketing department values is quite different than legal services. She needs to tie her message into the goals of each department to ultimately get their support.

Women often eschew that they consider internal relationship manipulation. The communication tactics fine for an outside client become distasteful when required within the organization. Coaches can help leaders explore their negative responses, then guide women to identify what value is being compromised. From there, coaches can support leaders to reframe the situation, focus on the end result or resolve the value conflict.

What They Seek in a Coach

Those interviewed tend to agree on what their female clients value in a coach. Most common answers were:

Empathy. They want the feeling that someone “gets” them. When contracting, coaches should be careful to emphasize the relationship, not the program.

Validation that their lives are crazy, the work is stressful and challenges difficult. They need reinforcement that they are doing a good job. It is more important to females that the coach reinforces their desire and belief that the leader will succeed.

“Women have a tendency to take the developmental feedback very personally. They internalize the feedback and can be very hard on themselves, trying to figure out what they are doing wrong and what they need to change about themselves.”

— CAROL A. GALLAGHER, PhD

A Breather:

- A chance to be vulnerable, a secure place to fall apart, then the support to pull it back together. This implies a strong level of trust.
- Permission to be authentic. Since most organizations are still organized around the male psyche, women often need the coaching arena to decompress and be genuine without fear of reprisal.

Most men at this level are focused on getting their problem solved. Trust is not as critical an issue. Junior women tend to want job advice. Executive women often just need a safe place to vent. They often know the “answer” but need the space to regroup, reframe, re-charge and strategize.

Desired Coaching Skills and Experience

Everyone interviewed believes that coaches need broad skills and experience but did not agree on what earns a potential coach a “ticket to play”. When asked about the minimum qualifications required to be effective at this level, answers included the following:

- Executive Experience
- An advanced degree in Clinical Psychology
- Master Coaching Certificate
- Deep professional and life experience (a sense of been there, lived through that)

There was no emphasis on the gender requirement of the coach. However, Brian Underhill of Coachsource did mention that female managers often request a woman whereas the male leaders typically don't have a coaching gender preference.

A final thought

Clients, naturally, are individuals. Though my research, expertise and passion are coaching females, I never introduce gender. Issues and challenges are not xx or xy related until the individual says they are. Even then, I question their assumptions about the context and focus on the issues, values and behaviors. However, knowing that patterns exist will hopefully encourage you to strategically expand your skill set and prepare for the woman leader's typical coaching challenges.



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