

# Executive Coaching: from pitfalls... to Magic

*By Jean-Francois Cousin, for "Untold stories of Executive Coaching in Thailand"*

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Coaching has become so trendy in the US over the past 20 years that if you say 'I don't have a coach', it could sound like you don't take good care of yourself or you have no desire to be the best you can be... Coaching has picked-up very fast in Western Europe, Japan, Singapore and Hong-Kong too. Here in Thailand, the trend is gathering momentum, led by "executive coaching", which successful companies employ more and more.

Yet coaching is a significant investment in money and... in precious time from busy managers. So everyone interested would like to know if it will really work for them.

Statistics gathered by Thailand Coaching Society in 2553 show that 93% of executives coached would use coaching again, when a need arise. How about the other 7%? There are pitfalls... and "miracles" don't always happen!

Our objective is that at the end of this chapter, you know how to make executive coaching produce great returns for yourself or your friends or colleagues.

With coaching, as with cooking, there are ingredients for failure and recipes for Success. We will look at both and then understand what is behind the "Magic" when coaching works.

## Ingredients for failures

### 1. Force coaching or/and present it as a punishment

Let's start with an untold story of Executive Coaching: Khun Pramet is the successful Manufacturing Director of XYZ company. Very result-driven, he beats budget forecast everytime. And... he has a 30% turnover in his management team. His subordinates say he is a 'dictator'. One day, his boss called an executive coach and asked him to "change Pramet's leadership style from autocratic to participative". Khun Pramet considered coaching as a punishment. He told the coach "whatever they told you, I am good, I know my stuff, I get the results, no one else can do it better, especially not my boss with his too soft approach. So I don't see why I should change".

It took 3 months for Khun Pramet to understand that "it's not about how good he is, it's about how good he wants to be", and to start to commit to changing. That was a bad start.

**Coaching is not about how good you are, it's about how good you want to be**

Hence, the first ingredient for failure is when a boss forces coaching or/and presents it as a punishment to a subordinate. In this case, it takes time for the coach to help the coachee quit a "victim-mindset" to adopt a "positive-mindset" and recognize the opportunity coaching offers him or her.

"Whatever they say, I AM GOOD"



## 2. No trust in rules of the game

Another ingredient for failure is when the coachee does not trust the rules of the game, especially confidentiality.

If the boss of the coachee has a secret agenda for coaching, is not transparent with the coachee, expects the coach to deliver feedback on his or her behalf, then the coachee will find out and won't trust the coaching process and the coach.

So he won't open up to the coach. He will be careful about what he says and the coach will have limited information to work with. Therefore the conversation will be superficial and the solutions found to issues will be shallow. There will not be real progress and change.

Here is another untold story about executive coaching: the call a colleague of mine received from Khun Apichart, the impatient boss of her coachee:

- Hello, I am Khun Apichart.
- Hello, I am in a meeting
- I can't wait. Your coaching is not working. Apinya has made a bad impression yesterday in Singapore with regional people.
- Did she get feedback from regional colleagues or from you?
- No. Listen, I give her 2 months to change, period. Tell her either she changes immediately or she has to look for another job.
- I suppose you will let her know today.
- No, I don't want conflict. It's your job.
- I need to talk to you about that, I'll call you in an hour. Thank you for your call. Bye.

An executive coach should never accept to work when there is no transparency between the boss and the coachee about the objectives of the exercise.

No (trust in the) rules of the game



## 3. Lack of objectives for the coaching program

Since we have mentioned coaching objectives, do you know a friend who tried to lose weight? What advice would you give him, so he succeeds? Think about it...

You will probably tell him to fix an objective (number of kilograms to lose), then to follow-up and measure progress on a scale, right? If he doesn't, how can he be sure to succeed anyway?

More seriously, a well-known survey has shown that only 3% of people write down their objectives in Life, while 67% say they have objectives but don't write them down. The other 30% declare they don't have specific objectives. What is interesting is that people who write down their objectives achieve 97% of them, while the 67% contingent achieve only 50% of their objectives, and take a lot more time to do so.

That finding applies to coaching as well. And the 3<sup>rd</sup> ingredient for failure is lack of objectives for the coaching program, for each coaching session, lack of follow-up and lack of measurement.

**Intelligent conversations are not enough to make change happen.  
Indeed, objectives, follow-up and measurement are necessary.**

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#### 4. Lack of support and understanding from hierarchy

The 4<sup>th</sup> ingredient for failure in coaching is the lack of support and understanding from hierarchy and/or a disturbing behavior from the boss.

In coaching, we invite the coachee to explore issues and come up with solutions. It is sometimes a trial-and-error process. Often, the learning from mistakes is very powerful. Coachees may fail before they succeed. For example, a coachee starts to “think out of the box”. His creativity might be fantastic at first. If his boss reacts very negatively, the coachee will never become good at it!

Here is another untold story about Executive Coaching: it’s about Ken in Singapore. He is a brilliant Marketing Director and he has a new brilliant boss, who finds out that Ken is overworked, working from 8am until 11pm everyday and sending tons of emails on Saturday and Sunday. I am called in for coaching.

We diagnose quickly that Ken is so brilliant and can do so much that he prefers to do a lot by himself. He is not impressed by his team and does not delegate. Ken quickly recognizes that he is in a dead-end. He is too necessary to be promoted. And his wife is very upset with him being so much into his work and so little available for his family. Ken decides that he must develop his people and empower them. He knows that it means even more work at the beginning, and that things will get worse before they get better. He bravely takes up the challenge. A few weeks later, I meet Ken’s boss, who tells me Ken is still totally overwhelmed and the quality of the Marketing team work is under-standards. I ask Ken what’s going on, and he tells me: “my boss comes up with new ideas for us every day, he wants us to do them immediately. Everything is urgent and important. I delegate a lot more, but of course some of the tasks don’t reach perfection. I have explained this to my boss who told me: “Listen, I agree I come up with new ideas all the time. Tell me if they are not good. Otherwise, you are a big boy, we invest in you, so you go and fix your team’s performance, I don’t want to hear about this anymore””.

#### 5. Go for quick fixes only

The 5<sup>th</sup> ingredient for failure would happen if a coach, instead of “supporting the coachee to learn how to fish, gives him a fish”. Immediate satisfaction is guaranteed for both for the coachee, his boss and the coach. And it feels so good to give advice, doesn’t it? We feel valuable and helpful in the moment, and our ego gets a nice boost... But the downside is: we create dependency. We think through the problems of the coachee and deliver our own solutions, instead of having the coachee think by himself and find a much better solution. So when the coach is gone, nothing has changed in-depth. It’s all cosmetic change.

Of course, when there is urgency, a coach may ask the coachee for the permission to give advice, but the less this happens, the more the coachee grows.

**Giving solutions to a coachee creates dependency,  
whereas coaching aims at increasing autonomy.**

#### 6. Coach fails to get under the skin of the coachee

Another untold story of Executive Coaching is about Jeff. He is 35 years old, and the Accounting Manager for an SME. Jeff wants to be the CFO of a large multinational company within 5 years... He works hard and quite well, but he is not a star at all. He is stressed out, and super sensitive to status. He’s got an expensive car, a luxury watch, designer clothes, just got married and still stays with his parents. The Company sees that he is striving so hard and is close to burn-out. Jeff does not see that he is close to burn-out, that he is less and less effective, more and more unpleasant with colleagues. The coach is hired to make Jeff more effective...

If the assignment focuses on just that, it will be a waste. Because the effectiveness problem is only the tip of the iceberg.

What is below the water-line? Jeff’s father was amongst the top 100 executives of Siam Cement Group. He paid a small fortune to educate his son, who has an MBA from the US, a Master from *Sasin* and a Bachelor from *Chulalongkorn*. Jeff’s wife is a super-brilliant PhD from a very wealthy family. Jeff feels his career must take him to the equivalent top-10 executives of SCG, otherwise he will be a failure. A shame for his parents and a disappointment to his wife.

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What if the coach does not get that reality quickly? Coaching is then a big failure in waiting, because even if Jeff becomes more effective in the short-term, he will just remain unhappy and miss his life. There is a saying all coaches know: “any executive coaching assignment includes life coaching after the third session”. And so should it be.

**Coaches must coach the “who”, not only the “what” and the “how”.**

Hence, the sixth ingredient for failure is when the coach fails to get under the skin of the coachee, to clarify his values, motivation drivers, personal issues, etc...

As Bob Nelson said: “To get people to move, you can light a fire under them; but you’d better find a way to light a fire *within* them».

## Recipe for Success

After the review of “ingredients for failures”, let’s shift our focus to “Recipe for Success” and 6 practical tips that will make coaching work great for you.

### A. 3 core-beliefs for Success in Coaching

How you introduce coaching to someone largely defines the initial engagement of the coachee in the process. Should you be in the position to offer or advise coaching to someone, I recommend you tell coachees you believe they can be better or “even better”, and they are worth the investment in executive coaching. It is not about how good they are, it is all about how good they can be.

Here is another untold story about Executive Coaching: one of my Clients repeats every year to the new batches of coachees: “you know, coaching is very expensive”. And that works very well! The coachees feel honored, wish to pay back, and they do!

**Introducing coaching as a privilege is not just right,  
it triggers a lot more engagement and accountability.**

At the start of a coaching assignment, it is also important to share that coaching can be painful at times. Just like at the gym, when your personal trainer asks you for another 5 push-ups although you feel tired! And just like honest conversations, where you hear a truth about yourself or tell the truth to someone about them, and it’s not comfortable.

**In coaching too: no pain, no gain.**

When I ask coachees a few months after the end of their coaching program: “what was the most important moment for you in the coaching program?”... they always choose a moment of “hard truth”, when they identified something important for them, during an intense conversation with me. It can be “I am not myself at work, and I could do much better if I was authentic” or “I realized people perceived me as selfish, and that was quite the reality” or “I understood that working 15 hours a day was showing I was not ready to embrace a bigger job, whereas I thought working hard would secure my promotion”.

### B. All coaching partners Aligned and Accountable

Here is our “AAA” moment... Executive Coaching is a team-sport, not just a game of tennis ! For great success, it requires **All** parties to be **Aligned** on goals and **Accountable** for success. The coachee, his/her hierarchy, HR (when appropriate) and the coach. To make this happen, I suggest you organize a meeting with all parties to validate the objectives, in all transparency, agree on confidentiality rules and on what the boss and HR can do to help the coachee. It’s a “we all win or lose together” agreement.

Hence, a second ingredient in a successful coaching recipe is: **All** coaching partners **Aligned** and **Accountable**.

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### C. Clear and share road-map + consistent tracking

If you go from New-York to Los Angeles, or Chiang Rai to Rayong, you need a map, don't you? It's the same in coaching. We progress faster if we design a road-map. Beyond agreeing on coaching objectives, it's useful to formalize how we move from where we are to where we want to be. As an example: if we want to improve communication skills, we need a plan: with whom? For which results? How can we measure our progress?

My suggestion here is that the coach supports the coachee to work-out the objectives and progress-indicators, and then the coachee him/herself presents them to the coaching-partners, hierarchy and HR, to seek feedback, advice and support. This approach empowers the coachee, involves partners and raises everyone's accountability for success.

It is also useful to have a meeting to review progress at the middle and at the end of the coaching program, all together.

Hence the third ingredient of a successful recipe is to articulate clear objectives and progress indicators, share the 'road-map' with partners, and then track progress consistently.

### D. Confront reality (360-survey a *must*).

As we most often work on soft skills in executive coaching, how others perceive the coachee's skills is all-important. The most successful step changes I have seen in coaching started when coachees were 'hit' by the hard-reality of others' perceptions about him or her, and accepted it.

To accelerate that 'moment of truth', my advice is very basic: make a 360°-survey at the start and then *again* just before the end of a coaching program. It helps the coachee acknowledge the reality of others' perceptions and act on it.

**Confronting the reality of other's perception (360-survey) is a *must* in executive coaching.**

### E. Ensure visible quick-wins

In coaching, we take coachees out of their comfort-zone, we give them home-work, and that calls for a lot of efforts from coachees. To keep their motivation, we -coaches- must

**ensure visible quick-wins happen.**

Examples of 'quick-wins' are the progress of one subordinate, more effective meetings, going-back home earlier, making a great presentation, solving an old conflict...

Once a quick-win happens, take the lesson and celebrate!

### F. Choose an experienced coach, with strong credentials

The last -but not the least- ingredient for a successful coaching recipe: choose an experienced coach, with strong credentials granted by an international organization of coaches, such as the ICF (International Coach Federation) or the Association for Coaching. Keep in mind the difference between a 'certified' coach -which means the coach followed a course, but some courses last only 4 days...- and a 'credentialed' coach. A 'credentialed' coach has been accredited by an international organization of coaches, which checked the quality of the coach's certification and the number of paid-hours of coaching performed, submitted the coach to exams and made reference checks. A chapter of this book is focused on how to make sure you select the right coach for you.

Now that you have a recipe for coaching-success in coaching, magic can happen!

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# What is behind the magic in Executive Coaching?

## a) The coaching process is engineered for Success

What is behind “coaching-magic”? First of all, the coaching process is ‘engineered’ for Success. Executive Coaches are trained to use coaching models and then build their own. All coaching models are basically in-depth problem-solving approaches. Historically, the first one was the G.R.O.W. model: establish Goal, examine Reality, explore Options, and establish the Way ahead and the Will to go.

Examining reality is a critical part of any coaching process, and will enhance coachee’s awareness: self awareness, awareness of others and of their perception. This stage will invite the coachee to tap into deeper thinking and insight.

Often, at the beginning of a coaching session, coachees will announce they want to work on an objective that is the “tip of an iceberg” and reflects superficial thinking. The first thing a coach must do is challenge it and allow for deeper thinking to take place.

As an illustration, here is another untold story of executive coaching: the beginning of a real coaching conversation with Melvin, a Singaporean executive. He starts by telling me:

- I’d like to delegate more
- Please tell me more
- I need to spend more time on high-level issues, and improve my work-life balance
- Anything else?
- Higher-level managers delegate more than I do
- ... (I remain silent)

Melvin wriggles his hands, eyes staring afar, absorbed in his thoughts. After a while, I ‘mirror’ his unspoken communication:

- Melvin, to me, you look like you are struggling internally...
- Yeah... on the one hand, delegating some tasks frees me for more important ones, but on the other hand, I risk getting lower quality deliverables from my subordinates
- And...
- To be criticized for that
- Anything else?
- Hmmm... (*silence*) Yeah, I won’t get credit anymore for what I am doing now
- Melvin, I am hearing a lot of “I”, “me”, “my”...

Melvin reclines in his armchair, as if he had been hit, with a kind of a sigh. Here we help best by saying nothing... heartless as it may appear! After almost a minute, Melvin speaks again.

- Yeah, I must admit it sounds all about me... and I am stuck... (another sigh) I mean, as long as it’s all about me, I am stuck.
- “Stuck”?
- Stuck to my level
- “Stuck” like what?
- Stuck like a bird with tied wings.

At this stage, we have deconstructed superficial thinking, and Melvin is ready to move towards a deeper exploration. You noticed that he articulated a metaphor (‘like a bird with tied wings’), which indicates that he is starting to tap into his unconscious.

In coaching, beyond using processes that are engineered for success, we

**continuously monitor actions and results, until the objectives are met.**

We simply never let go until success.

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b) Coaching offers a safe space, a safe “laboratory” for deeply personal experiments to the coachee

A second reason behind “coaching-magic” is that coaching offers a safe space, a safe “laboratory” for deeply personal experiments to the coachee. Once the coachee trusts the coach, he or she opens up. Coaches are often the only partners that coachees can fully open-up to. Particularly CEOs, who are so isolated at the top of a Company, and can’t share fully their thoughts and doubts with any one else. Here is another untold story of executive coaching, which shows the value of creating a ‘safe space’ for coachees to reflect. It is about Vinh, an ambitious Sales Manager in Vietnam, hungry for success and money -whatever it takes-. As we discuss, she tells me about the little girl she was, from a poor family in North Vietnam. Her mother ran a small laundry business, her father disappeared when she was 4. She had to clean the houses of friends of her mother when she was 9. And when she talks about the first 1000 Vietnamese Dongs she received as salary, she almost cries. That was when she promised herself that she would be successful and never ever lack money.

To who else than her coach could she share her story and discuss in-depth how much of a constraint that promise has become?

Soon after she articulated her full story to me, she realized how far behind in the past it was, how affluent and successful she had become, and how keeping her focus on money and success had become a limiting factor for further career and personal growth. Often,

**the coach is the only non-judgmental thinking-partner executives can have.**

The coach has no other agenda than the success and the fulfillment of the coachee. That allows for many self-limiting beliefs to be revised.

c) Coaching helps people know themselves better

A third reason for the “coaching-magic” is that coaching helps people know themselves better. And “a wise leader must first know himself well”, as Lao Tzu said. Coaching accelerates the process of self-discovery.

Let me share with you another untold story: I was a silent observer at a meeting in a bank, and my coachee was chairing the meeting. Nobody spoke except when he asked them to. When he was saying something, no one was looking at him. At the end, he asked me: “so what do you think?” I answered: “You remember, we agreed that when you ask me an opinion, I tell you what I think, right or wrong, and sometimes it may hurt?” “Yes, that is still OK” he said. So I told him “I think your team-members don’t like you at all at the moment”.

One hour later, at the end of the session, the coachee was having a big smile on his face... Why? Because he was freed from doubt. His boss, his wife, his subordinates had sent him messages that he was autocratic, but he thought they had a hidden agenda.

When his coach told him the same, it immediately became true to him. Now that he knew that much more about himself, he could act about it. 3 months later, the engagement of his 400 people had skyrocketed (starting from very low) and the business results had soared, but most importantly, he had become a happy man and you could see it on his face. He was on the way to become a role-model in management, and actually got promoted one year later...

d) Coachees are forced to think!

A fourth reason behind “coaching-magic” is simply that coachees are forced to think. We ask questions. Sometimes coachees try to ‘escape’ or to avoid answering. But we come back to the point from a different perspective. Sometimes coachees say nothing or they ask us for our opinion. And then we say nothing either... Silence is a great friend of coaches!

Hence, coachees have to think, and they do. As I wrote before, it is sometimes painful, like at the gym when you work out with a trainer who pushes you to the limit. But the enormous benefit is that the coachees acknowledge that they can think through many issues, reconsider some of their beliefs, think out-of-the-box, so they gain confidence, and start to enjoy the process.

**Coachees’ self-esteem rises as they see they can exploit so much more of their potential.**

That is really a most important part of “coaching-magic”.

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e) Coaching stretches coachees out of their comfort zone... and they survive!

A fifth reason behind “coaching-magic” is that a coach stretches coachees out of their comfort-zone, and... coachees survive after all! And they get quick-wins. But the true benefit is that they realize they can try new things, embrace new possibilities and be comfortable outside of their environment. Here are a few common examples of ‘work outside of comfort zone’:

- networking, which is so ‘un-natural’ for many executives; or
- making a presentation to the big boss from the US headquarters; or
- solving conflicts within their team or with other functions.

f) Coachees start to coach their subordinates themselves

A sixth reason behind “coaching-magic” is that coachees start to coach their subordinates themselves, asking questions and requesting them to think, further and deeper. Often coachees are not aware that they are doing it, at the beginning. But then, after a while, they realize it, and they see the results. This is a very powerful side-effect of executive coaching.

As we regularly come to work with our coachees in their office, we can feel and see that their team-members gradually look happier and more engaged.

g) Coaching starts a self-development journey

The last reason behind “coaching-magic” is that coachees enjoy more and more being challenged. At the beginning, coaching sessions are like tennis matches, ping-pong, ping-pong, ping-pong... After a while, the coachee juggles the ball by himself more and more. The coach speaks less and less. The coachee starts to self-coach, asking him/herself questions after questions.

Here is a real example. I ask my coachee Andrea:

- Andrea, what’s the most important thing we should discuss today?”
- I became very angry with Joe, my subordinate yesterday... Why is that? Because he did not deliver on time again... Why did it upset me? Because it caused me extra efforts to deliver my own work on time to the big boss. I was afraid to lose face. Probably that’s not all. I was also angry with Joe because I had told him it was important to deliver on time and it feels like he did not respect me on that. It is true that I did not follow-up. And maybe I did not motivate him with the task. OK, I need to improve my delegation. Let’s talk about that.”

Coaching triggers a drive for self-development which lasts after the coaching program is over. So we can say “the doing (of coaching) is often more important than the outcome”.

## Conclusion

**Coaching starts a journey where coachees will continuously challenge themselves to be the best they can be and be the happiest they can be.**

The benefits shall span a career-time, and even beyond.

## Reflection questions:

- *Read again the 6 ‘ingredients for success’ in coaching, and for each one, rate how well (or poorly) they are used in your Company: ★ poorly ; ★★ quite OK; ★★★ very well.  
After your diagnosis, think about what You can do next time to improve the success-level of coaching in your Company.  
Come up with 3 ideas and go for them!*
  - *If you have been coached yourself, read the 7 reasons behind the ‘magic’ in executive coaching and reflect how they worked for you.  
Then think about how you can prolong your ‘self-development journey’ further, write down 2 or 3 ideas of actions, and make them happen.*
-