



# Delivering the coaching elite to Unilever

Find out how Caroline Horner, director of i-coach academy and Sam Humphrey, head of global coaching at Unilever are using a unique assessment and selection process to produce more effective executive coaches.

Coaching has fast become a significant part of many organizations' learning and development strategy, as companies are looking at ways to optimize the performance of their critical talent.

These are the people who will make the difference between the success and failure of a business, from top management downwards. This, in part, explains the recent rise in the use of executive coaching. However, due to its relatively recent emergence and growth, few HR professionals have enough in-depth experience of managing coaching activities and, in particular, selecting and supervising external coaches.

As a result, many practitioners are struggling with issues that are preventing them from gaining full value from their current coaching activities. The challenges noted include:

- confusion around terminology in use;
- a lack of agreement about how a good coach should behave;
- engaging stakeholders in coaching relationships;

- ensuring a good match between coach and client;
- drawing up contractual arrangements; and
- evaluating the impact of activities.

These are significant challenges for HR professionals if they are to leverage the value to be gained from a really successful coaching assignment.

## Assessing coaching skills

Caroline Horner is director of i-coach academy, a world leader in the development of professional coaches. She has been working with Unilever to apply learning from her work assessing professional coaches. This is part of an education program to design a selection process for coaches working at the executive level within Unilever.

Horner has worked with Sam Humphrey, head of global coaching at Unilever, a leading global consumer goods company, to design the process. Humphrey is responsible for developing the coaching frameworks and processes and for setting standards for coaching within Unilever, to ensure that coaching meets the business needs.

Humphrey's role evolved when Unilever recognized that while the company was spending large amounts of money on coaching, it was questioning the return on investment. Humphrey comments: "We recognize

that coaching is still in its infancy and that as an unregulated profession that has become uncommoditized, it's difficult to know where to go and who to buy coaching from. There are no barriers to entry and the market has become increasingly crowded with coaches. There is clearly an issue of minimizing the risk of damage that the wrong coach could inflict on the business and its executives, but the truly elusive goal is to maximize the opportunity, to move away from small-impact coaching and strive for hugely impactful coaching for both the executive and the business. We acknowledge that there are numerous players attempting to evolve as a professional body and that it's just a matter of time before a dominant player is established."

## Setting up a consortium

I-coach academy is currently in the process of creating a consortium to jointly run a selection process for coaches working at senior levels in organizations. Many of the processes are similar and will allow organizations to benefit from learning and working together while accessing high quality coaches who have been through a rigorous assessment.

Unilever recognized that i-coach academy shared their values, ethics and modes of integrity and favored its framework (see Figure 1, right) for

## UNILEVER

Unilever is one of the world's leading consumer goods companies, with three global divisions – food, home care and personal care. It employs 234,000 people in around 100 countries worldwide.



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developing professional coaching practice. It was not lack of skill in selection that was missing from Unilever, rather the *understanding* of coaching. The combination of i-coach academy's coaching framework and its unique approach to assessment of professional competency made i-coach an ideal partner.

### What is a coaching framework?

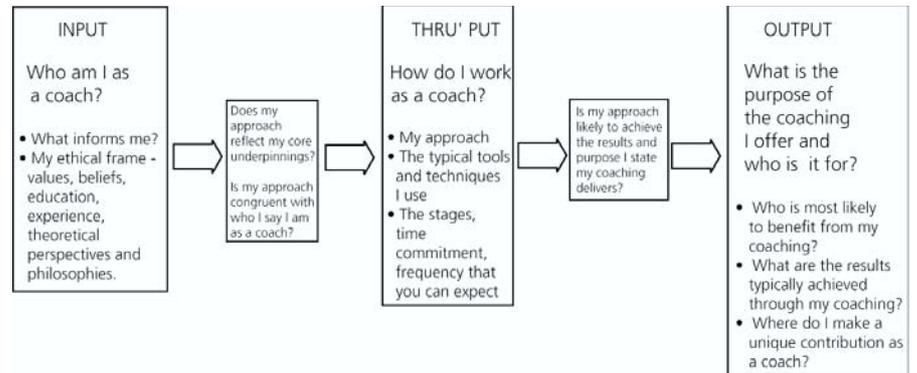
I-coach believes that every coach will coach differently based on their experiences, education, beliefs and values, regardless of whether they use the same tools and processes. Instead of expecting coaches to use existing coaching models, the focus is on supporting individuals to design their own coaching framework. Each framework should make explicit what informs and underpins their coaching work and have a clearly articulated approach and purpose. I-coach academy also believes that there is no single "right" model or approach to coaching and that different outcomes require different approaches.

The academy program does not teach coaching, but coaches students to develop their own understanding of what their coaching can offer clients, who they are as individuals and how to enhance the way they work in practice. I-coach academy worked with Unilever to determine what coaching could deliver for the company. It mapped their coaching levels against i-coach academy's masters level professional criteria, in order to determine appropriate criteria for Unilever.

### How does the selection process work?

The selection process includes an initial screen of a coach's biographical and technical data, as well as participation in a criteria-based interview. Having

Figure 1. The i-coach academy framework (van Oudtshoorn, 1992)



successfully completed this stage, the coach is then invited to take part in an assessment that involves a presentation of their coaching framework and a demonstration of their coaching approach. Business partners, coaching specialists and likely candidates all participate as assessors. To date, the process has been run three times at Unilever in the UK and once at Unilever in Australia.

Once the selection is complete, the "matching process" starts – matching the right coach to the right executive. Humphrey notes: "Matching is crucial if the coaching intervention is to be successful. It's essential to ensure that the coaching need is explored, firstly to ensure that coaching is the appropriate intervention and secondly, to identify if there is a coaching approach that will work better with the particular issue and/or the particular client. Once a shortlist is compiled, the executive will meet at least two coaches before making a selection."

Humphrey adds: "The business leaders who participated in the assessment center process were surprised to learn that coaching at this level is a complex process. To date, 69 have taken part in the i-coach academy/Unilever assessment process and 28 have got through."

For Unilever, the process has achieved great results. The investment in time in the selection process has paid off. People may interview well, but fail at the next stage of the process. It has found there is a fundamental difference between talking well about how one coaches and delivering good coaching.

### Positive coaching

The program has been well received at Unilever and is having a positive impact. To cynics who claim that coaching is a fad, those at i-coach academy and Unilever say that until the market matures, there are many coaching glitches to be sorted.

Unilever has tried to define what purpose coaching serves at different levels in the organization, so that coach selection criteria are clearer and more informed selection decisions can be made. If organizations continue to let themselves be overwhelmed by this new and growing market, they will continue to miss the real value-adding opportunities that coaching can bring.

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