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Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart

**A Systems Approach to Engaging
Leaders with Their Challenges**

Second Edition

Mary Beth O'Neill



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Preface](#)

[Discovering a Passion for Coaching](#)

[Who This Book Is For](#)

[How This Book Is Different](#)

[How This Book Is Organized](#)

[How to Use This Book](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[The Author](#)

[Part One - CORE CONCEPTS The Coach's Stance](#)

[Chapter 1 - AN INTRODUCTION TO EXECUTIVE COACHING](#)

[What Is Executive Coaching?](#)

[How to Be the Most Hard-Nosed Businessperson in the Room](#)

[Four Essential Ingredients of Executive Coaching](#)

[Core Principles That Guide Executive Coaching](#)

[Coaching with Backbone and Heart](#)

[Chapter One Highlights](#)

[Chapter 2 - DEVELOPING A STRONG SIGNATURE PRESENCE](#)

[Your Central Tool](#)

[Self-Differentiation](#)

[Strengthen Your Presence](#)
[Parallel Journeys of Executive and Coach](#)
[Chapter Two Highlights](#)

[Chapter 3 - SYSTEMS THINKING Understanding the Executive's Challenges and the ...](#)

[The Interactional Force Field](#)
[Seeing the Force Field](#)
[The Effect of Anxiety in the Workplace](#)
[The Leader's Challenge](#)
[Triangles: Whose Stress Is This, Anyway?](#)
[Signs That Triangles Are Distracting Leaders](#)
[Enter the Coach](#)
[Patterns: Shall We Dance?](#)
[The Coach's Challenge](#)
[Chapter Three Highlights](#)

[Chapter 4 - THE TRIANGLED COACH Being Effective in the Middle](#)

[The Rescue Model and the Client Responsibility Model of Coaching](#)
[Coaching from the Middle](#)
[Chapter Four Highlights](#)

[Part Two - METHODOLOGY The Four Phases of Coaching](#)

[Chapter 5 - PHASE 1—CONTRACTING Find a Way to Be a Partner](#)

[The Roots of the Coaching Phases](#)
[Contracting](#)

[Join with the Client](#)
[Familiarize Yourself with Your Client's Challenge](#)
[Test the Client's Ability to Own His Part of the Issue](#)
[Give Immediate Feedback to the Client](#)
[Take a Systems View of Your Client's Issue](#)
[Establish a Contract](#)
[Encourage the Client to Set Measurable Goals](#)
[Involve the Boss](#)
[A Word About Assessment Tools](#)
[Chapter Five Highlights](#)

[Chapter 6 - PHASE 2—PLANNING Keep the Ownership with the Client](#)

[Move the Client to Specifics](#)
[Address Issues in Change Management and Role Clarity](#)
[Help the Client Identify Her Side of the Pattern](#)
[Help the Client Plan for Resistance](#)
[Chapter Six Highlights](#)

[Chapter 7 - PHASE 3—LIVE-ACTION COACHING Strike While the Iron Is Hot](#)

[Stage 1: Behind-the-Scenes Coaching of the Client](#)
[Stage 2: Observation of the Client with Her Direct Reports](#)
[Stage 3: Live-Action Coaching of the Client and His Direct Reports](#)
[Stage 4: Live-Action Coaching of Just the Client When the Client Is with Her ...](#)
[Setting the Stage for and Using the Live-Action Coaching Method](#)
[Live-Action Coaching Tasks](#)
[Chapter Seven Highlights](#)

Chapter 8 - PHASE 4—DEBRIEFING Define a Learning Focus

Evaluate the Client's Effectiveness

Evaluate the Coach's Effectiveness

Debrief at the End of a Coaching Engagement

Chapter Eight Highlights

Chapter 9 - AN ROI METHOD FOR EXECUTIVE COACHING

Have the Client Convince the ...

The Dilemmas

The Three Key Factors Methodology

Assessing Other Variables

Truth in Advertising: What It Takes to Get There

The Benefit-Cost Ratio: Clarify the Connection

Anne's Results

Step-by-Step Process

Chapter Nine Highlights

Part Three - SPECIAL APPLICATIONS

Chapter 10 - MAKING A STRATEGIC TRANSITION TO THE ROLE OF EXECUTIVE COACH

Concerns About Making the Transition

Guidelines for the Conversation

Loyal Resistance

Pace Yourself

Chapter Ten Highlights

Chapter 11 - HELPING LEADERS EFFECTIVELY COACH EMPLOYEES

Role Clarity

[Role 1: Articulate Expectations and Ensure the Employee Commits to Them](#)

[Role 2: Coach and Develop the Employee to Meet Expectations](#)

[Coaching Phases for the Boss Who Coaches](#)

[Chapter Eleven Highlights](#)

[Afterword:](#)

[Appendix A - THE CORE ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES OF THE COACHING PHASES](#)

[Appendix B - EXECUTIVE COACHING SKILLS SELF-ASSESSMENT SURVEY](#)

[Appendix C - QUESTIONS FOR CLIENTS](#)

[Appendix D - COMBINING COACHING AND CONSULTING FOR POWERFUL RESULTS](#)

[Notes](#)

[References](#)

[Index](#)

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*In memoriam: To my late husband, Don Werner, who taught
me the difference between nagging and coaching, and
never to coach without a contract!*

*To my parents, Madeline and Walter O'Neill, who have
shown me the value of bringing both backbone and heart
into the world.*

Preface

I did not intentionally set out to become an executive coach. I evolved into coaching. As an internal consultant in a corporation, I encountered leaders who were often inattentive to parts of their management style that rendered them less effective than they wanted to be. In my early experiences with organizational development work, I was also fortunate to have upper management bosses and clients who were willing to show me the ropes for achieving business results while remaining open to my expertise in project management and facilitation. Thus, I was privileged to work with these key decision makers on issues and undertakings about which they cared deeply.

My career development was also aided by the fact that I often found myself in the executive office sitting across from a leader and discussing crucial business issues. A leader was sometimes disappointed with a project's progress. I had two choices: door number one—take his negative feedback personally and conclude that I, along with the rest of the executive team, had let him down; or door number two—search for a pattern in his leadership behavior that inevitably led us all to this point. (Throughout this book, I alternate *he* and *she*, using them interchangeably as pronouns for the coach, the executive, and the employee.) For my first year as an internal consultant, I chose door number one. Chalk it up to inexperience and a false sense of omnipotence (“it must always be my fault”). Given more time and a broader perspective, I noticed door number two opening frequently.

Discovering a Passion for Coaching

So there I was, across from a disgruntled leader. I began to invite him into conversations about his frustrations and to ask him what he thought the external causes were and what he might be contributing, albeit unintentionally, to the slowdown. These discussions were brief at first. As I became more skillful, I incorporated them into regular conversations I had with leaders regarding their business goals (Chapter Ten explores this transition to executive coaching in depth).

Another developmental thread in my coaching practice evolved from my work as a trainer in management development. Now let me say right off that the classes I offered in leadership training were *good*. They were engaging, experiential, and practical. However, the managers basically tolerated the training. They felt pretty smug and satisfied with their level of management skill back on the floor, or at least until they got stuck. However, when faced with pressing and immediate dilemmas about high turnover, troublesome employees, low productivity, or a failed change effort, they would come to my office for help. Their motivation to explore options for action was dramatically keener than their interest in the same issues in my classes. When the managers came to me one-to-one with their issues, I was happy to help them navigate through dilemmas regarding tasks or team challenges that they found personally daunting.

I was midstream in my own coaching practice before I thought of myself as an executive coach. It developed naturally out of these organizational projects when leaders came to me for help. I was ten years into coaching when I began to articulate the coaching method outlined in this book. Now, many years later, executive coaching, both one-to-one and with teams, is the primary focus of my work.

I find coaching executives highly rewarding because the work is challenging, inspiring, fun, and stimulating. I have been blessed with clients willing to look within themselves for the key ingredients of significant change in their organizations. This kind of journey requires full engagement and risk taking on the part of both client and coach.

My passion is to work with executives at the crossroads of two highways: road #1, developing leadership capacity, and road #2, achieving business results. When executive coaching focuses on this intersection, organizations enjoy a two-for-one deal: executives are developing while they are driving for results. They are not taking time out to develop but taking “time in” to develop while they get their work done. What could be a better contribution to organizations than to work with executives at this crossroads? For too long, companies have segregated these functions of leadership development and bottom-line results. Often the people involved with these functions do not develop ways to work together for greater synergies. The kind of executive coaching I define and describe in this book is a perspective that comes from working at this crossroads and finding those synergies. The essence of executive coaching is helping leaders work through their dilemmas so they can transform their learning directly into results for the organization.

The essence of executive coaching is helping leaders work through their dilemmas so they can transform their learning directly into results for the organization.

Who This Book Is For

People in many disciplines have become interested in the coaching field. Some practitioners have a traditional business background and enter coaching from one of the following organizational roles:

- Internal organizational development specialist
- External consultant
- Human resource staff
- Staff positions that require coaching skills such as project leaders, engineers, and information systems managers

Others enter the field of executive coaching through different routes, such as counseling. Regardless of your background, if you identify with one or more of the following statements, you will find this book useful:

- I have reached a plateau in my effectiveness as a coach, and I need to find my way to the next level.
- I am not sure when one-to-one executive coaching should be expanded to working with the leader's team.
- My clients don't use my services as well as they could.
- I have a gut sense of what works when I coach, but I don't know why it works. And sometimes it doesn't.
- The leader I am coaching resists my advice.
- I want to avoid becoming as anxious as my clients so that I can continue to be useful to them.
- I want to increase my range of coaching within different venues: one-to-one, team, behind-the-scenes, and live action.
- I want to improve the way I give tough feedback.

How This Book Is Different

There are many books on coaching that describe the skills used in coaching individuals to achieve both higher competence and greater motivation in their work. One of the main audiences for these books is managers who are learning how to better coach their employees. Two excellent examples are Hargrove (1995) and Bell (1996). Although the writers focus on managers, business coaches in general can benefit from learning the building-block skills to coaching detailed in the literature. *Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart* explores a different territory.

First, this book is written for professionals who coach leaders of organizations. These executive coaches have the privilege of working with the men and women who lead and influence the direction of today's organizations. With this privilege comes a responsibility to partner with leaders in significant ways in order to contribute to successful change efforts. The work of executive coaches now has its own literature.

Second, unlike coaching methods that use techniques to leverage changes within the client, *Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart* focuses on the need for coaches to use their own presence with the client. Executive coaching is not about imposing skills training on leaders. Fundamentally, it is about learning to be with leaders as they navigate through their world and finding key moments when they are most open to learning.

Let me be clear about being, learning, and doing. Being, learning, and doing do not trump the need of our clients to produce business outcomes. Executive coaching has to be relevant to achieving business results, and coaches should

be business partners with their clients (Chapter Five). This involves helping leaders face their own challenges in attaining business results, to see how they can hinder their own progress. In these pivotal moments, the manner in which a coach manages the relationship with the executive facing those challenges can make the critical difference in the coaching outcome and thus the business outcome.

Third, this book focuses on the larger systems forces at play that require the attention of the executive coach. By “larger systems forces,” I mean an organization’s force field that shapes and influences the individuals working within it (I define the interactional force field and its effects in Chapter Three). Individuals subconsciously react to this field with their own emotional responses, either helping or hindering their effectiveness. Executives act and react within this field, along with everyone else they lead. Coaches who fail to see how the system affects their clients will not understand why their interventions sometimes fail. When coaches use skills presented in the general coaching literature and do not incorporate a systems approach, their efforts will yield limited results.

A systems viewpoint allows coaches to see the executive’s world in a new way. *Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart* explores a systems perspective and shows the implications and choices for the coach who maintains that perspective.

Although coaches need a systems viewpoint to understand their client’s environment, they also need to realize what effect their client’s system has on them. This is the central premise and challenge of the book. Coaches must tune in to how the client’s force field affects them, so they can maintain their equilibrium within it and help the client to do the same. When coaches hold this bifocal view, seeing their client and themselves within the system, they

can use the skill-building technologies in the coaching literature effectively. In fact, they can finally realize the full power of these skills.

How This Book Is Organized

This book navigates between two cliffs: a way of thinking about coaching and a methodology of coaching. I imagine this book as a river that runs through the canyon created by these two cliffs, needing both for its shape and power.

Just when it seems that a philosophy about presence and systems will lose its practical application, a method emerges to clarify that way. When the method becomes too rational for the topsy-turvy challenges of organizational life, a way of remaining in the moment saves the method from being trivialized. Perhaps the image is more like Alice of *Through the Looking Glass* when she finds herself in the wood of the vanishing path. When one is following a well-worn trail (the method) and that path disappears, one needs a way to attend to the forest (using one's presence in the moment) and orient oneself within it.

Following is an overview and sequence of the content in the book.

Part One: Core Concepts: The Coach's Stance

Chapter One defines executive coaching and explores three core principles that underlie the book: coach self-management, a systems perspective, and a methodology compatible with the first two principles. The chapter explains the use of backbone and heart as it relates to the principle of coach self-management.

Chapter Two addresses the need to develop a signature presence, a way of bringing forward your backbone and your heart as a coach. I describe four conditions that promote a strong presence, benefiting both coach and executive.

Chapters Three and Four cover specific ways of using systemic dynamics to read a client's system and recognize the system created between the client and coach. There are many system variables to study. Chapters Three and Four focus on some of the central ones. As a coach, you will find that when you attend to these systemic concepts, you are more likely to free a client and an organization from the detrimental qualities of their own system.

Part Two: Methodology: The Four Phases of Coaching

Chapters Five through Eight outline four essential phases to the coaching process: contracting, planning, live-action intervening, and debriefing. These can help both beginning and experienced coaches provide a more in-depth service to their clients. The method, however, depends greatly on bringing one's presence to coaching and maintaining a systems perspective. As an important part of the debriefing phase, Chapter Nine explains a way to calculate your clients' return on investment for your executive coaching contracts.

The combination of using systems thinking while bringing forward a signature presence creates a highly engaging and effective process.

Part Three: Special Applications

Chapter Ten is for consultants, trainers, and human resource professionals, internal or external, who facilitate processes and projects in organizations. This chapter explores the instances in which leaders do not seek coaching directly. It also describes the conversations practitioners must have with these leaders before they start to see you as a coach.

Chapter Eleven covers how a coach can help an executive who needs to coach employees. Executive coaches often work with clients who struggle with being effective coaches themselves. This chapter explains how to assist executives in becoming more effective coaches.

How to Use This Book

Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart can be viewed as a workbook for coaches. Key ideas are in bold type throughout the text so that you can quickly access the areas most important to you. Highlights of the main ideas appear at the end of each chapter. You may wish to look at the highlights first as an overview before delving into the chapter or scan them quickly for a review.

Appendix A contains the four essential activities, with matching outcomes, for each of the coaching phases. You can use it to prepare for a coaching session and then check back afterward to see if you covered all the essential bases of that coaching phase. Appendix B has an extensive self-assessment survey organized by the activities and skills needed for each coaching phase. You can identify your strengths and weaknesses regarding the coaching method in this book. Appendix C covers key questions to ask clients during the contracting, planning, and debriefing phases of the coaching method. Finally, Appendix D explores the territory of combining coaching with consulting. It lists the competencies you need to have if you want to broaden your practice to include larger organizational consulting efforts.

There are stories from my coaching practice and typical vignettes throughout the book that illustrate the coaching concepts and the methods you can apply to the challenging situations you encounter when you coach clients. I invite you to use the material in this book to visit your past, present, and future coaching experiences with new eyes.

Seattle, Washington

Mary Beth O'Neill

May 2007

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The Author

Mary Beth O'Neill is an executive coach, leadership consultant, author, and leader of the Executive Coach Training Seminar Series.

O'Neill has coached a range of leaders, from CEOs to senior vice presidents, vice presidents, and directors. She works with executives and their teams as well as one-to-one with leaders. Her specialty is live team coaching, encouraging individual initiative and leadership from a systemic perspective. The outcome of team coaching is the creation of clearly defined stretch goals and business results that are achieved through the executive's and leadership team's development. Some of her clients have included Premera Blue Cross, Nike, Microsoft, Waggener Edstrom, REI, Simon Fraser Health Region, Catalyst Paper, Marguerite Casey Foundation, Harborstone Credit Union, and TransAlta Utilities Corporation.

The Executive Coach Training Seminar Series in Seattle, Washington, is sponsored by the Leadership Institute of Seattle/ Bastyr University. As lead trainer for two of the three seminars, O'Neill uses the approach and methodology from this book, particularly in how to create a synergy between the client's leadership development and the production of bottom-line business results. The three seminars specifically cover the skills required to use the book's four phases of executive coaching (registration is online at www.mboExecutiveCoaching.com).

For eleven years O'Neill was a graduate faculty member in the master's program at the Leadership Institute of Seattle/Bastyr University, which offers degrees with an emphasis in organization consultation and coaching, or

systems counseling. She taught courses in executive coaching, managing organizational change, change agent and consulting skills, action research, creating business goals and measures, and systemic intervening in organizations. She continues to teach the executive coaching class in the master's program.

Previously she was the director of training and development at the Sheraton Seattle Hotel and Towers. She received the 1988 President's Award for her contributions to productivity and quality at the Sheraton.

O'Neill has a master's degree from Whitworth College in applied behavioral science, with an emphasis in organizational development. She also holds a master's degree in theology from Vanderbilt University.

She has been the cochair of Human Systems Development Professionals, an association of organizational development practitioners in the northwestern United States and Canada. She is a member of the International Consortium for Coaching in Organizations as well as the Organization Development Network.

Part One

CORE CONCEPTS The Coach's Stance