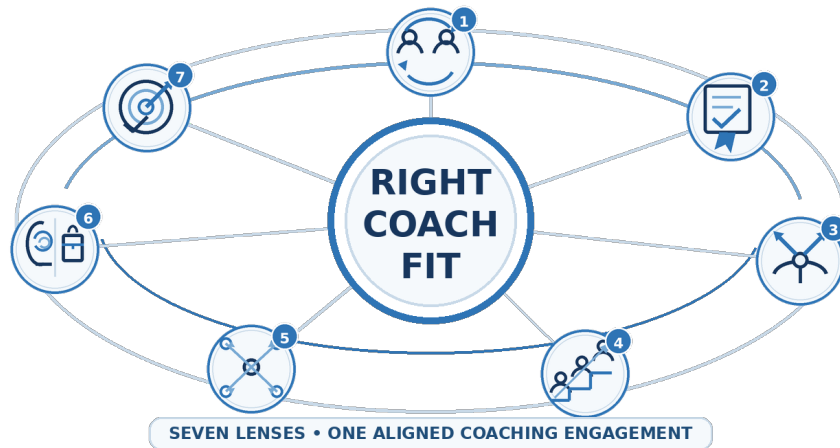


WHITE PAPER

How Do You Know You Have the Right Coach for You and Your Organization?

Seven Questions to Ask Before You Commit



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Choosing Beyond Chemistry

The decision is consequential. An executive coach may influence how a leader thinks, communicates, makes decisions, manages pressure, and leads others. When an organization sponsors the engagement, the coach may also affect succession readiness, team effectiveness, change leadership, and execution.

Chemistry is not enough. A comfortable first conversation can matter, but comfort alone does not establish competence, relevance, or fit. The stronger question is whether this coach can help this leader make observable progress within this organizational context.

Fit is multidimensional. The right coach brings more than credentials or an impressive client list. Look for professional preparation, self-awareness, relevant experience, an appropriate relational style, business understanding, psychological depth, and a disciplined way to define success.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION: Can this coach understand the person, the leadership role, and the organizational system well enough to support meaningful change?

THE SEVEN-POINT VETTING FRAMEWORK

- **Practice what they teach.** Does the coach have a coach, mentor, or supervisor?
- **Verify professional preparation.** Are they formally trained, credentialed, and committed to continued development?
- **Define the relational fit.** What traits will help you feel both supported and stretched?
- **Confirm relevant leadership experience.** Have they coached leaders at a comparable level with similar challenges?
- **Test their change-context experience.** Have they supported leaders through the kind of transition your organization is facing?
- **Look for dual acumen.** Can they work with both the psychological and business realities of leadership?
- **Require a definition of success.** Can they help establish measurable criteria for the engagement?

CLARIFY THE ENGAGEMENT BEFORE INTERVIEWING

Name the client. Is the primary client the executive, the sponsoring organization, or both? The answer affects goal-setting, confidentiality, stakeholder input, and progress reporting.

Name the desired difference. Complete this sentence before selecting a coach: “By the end of this engagement, we should be able to observe...”

Name the boundaries. Agree on what remains confidential, what may be shared with the sponsor, and how progress will be discussed without compromising the coaching relationship.



Does the Coach Have a Coach?

Practice matters. A coach should be willing to engage in the same reflective work they ask of clients. Their own coaching, mentoring, or professional supervision can help them examine blind spots, receive candid feedback, and remain accountable to their development.

This is an indicator—not proof. Having a coach does not automatically make someone effective. It does, however, offer useful evidence of humility, professional integrity, and a willingness to continue growing.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- An active relationship with a coach, mentor coach, or coaching supervisor.
- A clear explanation of how they continue developing their judgment and self-awareness.
- The ability to discuss their own learning process without making the conversation about themselves.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- Are you currently working with a coach, mentor, or coaching supervisor?
- How does your own development influence the way you coach?

WATCH FOR: Any implication that the coach has advanced beyond needing reflection, feedback, or professional challenge.



Is the Coach Credentialed and Formally Trained?

Training establishes a foundation. Because coaching is a broadly used title, ask what formal education the coach completed, what competencies were assessed, and what ethical standards guide their work.

Credentials are one data point. A recognized credential can indicate defined education, experience, performance, ethics, and continuing-development requirements. It should not be treated as a complete verdict on the coach's effectiveness or fit.

WHAT TO VERIFY

- The coach-training program, awarding organization, and credential level.
- Experience coaching leaders at the level and complexity relevant to the engagement.
- Ongoing education in coaching, leadership, organizational systems, and ethical practice.
- A clear approach to confidentiality, conflicts of interest, boundaries, and referrals.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- What formal coach training have you completed, and how was your competence evaluated?
- What credentials do you hold, and what continuing development do you pursue?



What Do You Need to Feel Supported and Stretched?

Trust should support challenge. A leader needs enough psychological safety to speak honestly about uncertainty, conflict, ambition, and mistakes. The coach should also interrupt familiar thinking, test assumptions, and hold the leader accountable when insight has not translated into action.

Fit is specific. A highly effective coach can still be the wrong coach for a particular leader. Identify the traits and interaction style that will bring out your most honest and developmental work.

TRAITS TO CONSIDER

- Direct enough to confront patterns, contradictions, and avoidance
- Warm, empathetic, perceptive, and highly attuned
- Pragmatic, structured, and action-oriented
- Reflective, systems-minded, and comfortable with complexity

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- How do you balance support with challenge—and what would you do if you believed I was reinforcing the problem I wanted to solve?

PERSONAL CHECK: After the conversation, ask yourself: “Could I be candid with this person—and would I take their challenge seriously?”



Have They Worked With Leaders in Comparable Roles?

Level changes the work. A first-time manager, functional executive, founder, successor, and CEO each face different levels of complexity, visibility, authority, stakeholder pressure, and organizational consequence.

Exact titles are not required. The coach does not need to have held your position or worked in your precise industry, but they should understand the decisions, relationships, tradeoffs, and pressures that define your leadership context.

Logos do not tell the full story. A recognizable client list may establish exposure, but it does not reveal whom the coach supported, what challenge was addressed, or whether the work produced meaningful change.

EVIDENCE TO SEEK

- Experience with comparable leadership scope and developmental challenges, described without violating confidentiality.
- A thoughtful explanation of what tends to differ by leadership level or organizational stage.
- References or testimonials that speak to the coach’s process and impact—not only likability.



Do They Understand the Change Your Organization Is Facing?

Context reshapes development. A merger, acquisition, succession, restructuring, rapid-growth phase, or downsizing changes more than an executive's task list. It can alter authority, identity, stakeholder expectations, team stability, decision rights, and the emotional climate of the organization.

Relevant experience reduces generic coaching. Ask whether the coach has supported leaders through a comparable transition and what they have learned about the leadership demands created by that kind of change.

Request the proposed process. Before signing an agreement, ask the coach to outline how they would develop the engagement. A responsible coach may not prescribe a complete development plan before conducting an assessment, but they should be able to explain their approach.

A CREDIBLE APPROACH SHOULD ADDRESS

- **Initial assessment.** What will the coach seek to understand about the leader, the change, the stakeholders, and the organization?
- **Development priorities.** How will the coach distinguish urgent transition demands from longer-term leadership development?
- **Stakeholder alignment.** How will the leader's goals connect to the organization's priorities without compromising confidentiality?
- **Measures and milestones.** How will progress be reviewed as the organizational context changes?
- **Adaptation.** How will the plan evolve when new information, resistance, or business conditions emerge?

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- What leadership demands tend to emerge during this type of organizational change?
- Based on what you know today, how would you approach building my development plan?
- How would you keep the coaching aligned with changing organizational priorities?

WATCH FOR: A prepackaged program that remains essentially the same regardless of the leader, transition, stakeholders, or organization.



Do They Bring Both Psychological and Business Acumen?

Psychological acumen addresses the person. This includes emotional intelligence, mindset, self-awareness, behavior patterns, motivation, identity, communication, intrapersonal dynamics, and interpersonal effectiveness.

Business acumen addresses the context. This includes strategy, operations, execution, financial and market realities, organizational design, decision rights, accountability, stakeholder dynamics, and the demands placed on the leader's role.

Executive coaching requires translation. A coach does not need to serve as the leader's consultant or tell them how to run the business. They do need enough business understanding to recognize what is material, ask informed questions, and help the leader translate personal insight into organizational effectiveness.

USE A THREE-LAYER TEST

- **The person.** Can the coach identify patterns in how the leader thinks, reacts, relates, and regulates?
- **The role.** Can the coach connect those patterns to the responsibilities, decisions, and influence required of the position?
- **The system.** Can the coach recognize how structure, culture, incentives, stakeholders, and business conditions affect the challenge?

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- How do you distinguish coaching from consulting or advising in your engagements?
- How do you connect a leader's internal development to the business and organizational outcomes they are responsible for?
- When would you recommend bringing in a consultant, therapist, or other specialist?

THE RISK OF IMBALANCE: Psychological insight without business context can remain abstract. Business knowledge without psychological depth can become advice rather than development.



Can the Coach Define Measurable Success Criteria?

Value should be describable. A coaching engagement should begin with a clear definition of what is expected to change. “Become a better leader” or “improve communication” may be useful starting points, but they are too broad to guide an engagement or evaluate progress.

Measurement includes more than numbers. Some outcomes can be quantified; others are best assessed through observable behavior, stakeholder feedback, decision patterns, leadership habits, or progress toward business-linked priorities.

EXAMPLES OF MEASURABLE SUCCESS

Development goal	Observable indicators	Possible evidence
Improve delegation	Clearer decision rights; fewer unnecessary escalations; greater ownership by direct reports	Stakeholder feedback; escalation patterns; time shifted toward strategic work
Strengthen executive communication	More concise messages; clearer decisions and requests; stronger adaptation by audience	Meeting observations; 360 feedback; sponsor or team input
Lead organizational change	Consistent narrative; stronger alignment; earlier response to resistance and risk	Change milestones; pulse feedback; decision and communication cadence
Increase strategic effectiveness	More time on high-leverage priorities; improved tradeoff decisions; less reactive work	Calendar and priority review; milestone progress; decision quality

Use multiple checkpoints. Clarify the baseline, review progress during the engagement, and assess what changed at the end. The measures may evolve as the leader learns more, but they should never disappear.

Measure contribution—not false attribution. No responsible coach can guarantee a business result that depends on market conditions, organizational decisions, and many other people. A skilled coach can still connect development goals to business priorities and define the leader-level indicators the engagement is intended to influence.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- How will you help us define meaningful success criteria for this engagement?
- What baseline information or stakeholder input would you recommend?
- How and when will we review progress?
- How do you handle an engagement that is not producing the expected movement?

WATCH FOR: A coach who speaks extensively about transformation but cannot explain what progress would look like in observable terms.

Before You Sign: Final Decision Guide

Evaluate the whole picture. No single criterion determines the right fit. Use the interview process to assess the coach's preparation, relevance, relational effectiveness, range, and discipline—not simply how impressive or reassuring they seem.

GREEN-LIGHT CHECKLIST

- The coach's training, credentials, ethics, experience, and ongoing development are credible.
- I can imagine being candid with this person and receiving their challenge.
- They understand my level of responsibility and have relevant experience with my context.
- They can work with both psychological dynamics and business realities.
- Their proposed process is tailored rather than prepackaged.
- They can explain confidentiality and sponsor communication clearly.
- They will help define, review, and refine meaningful success criteria.

COMMON RED FLAGS

- **Validation without challenge.** The coach is supportive but rarely willing to confront patterns, inconsistencies, or avoidance.
- **One-size-fits-all design.** The offering changes little across leaders, roles, or organizational circumstances.
- **Vague or guaranteed outcomes.** The coach cannot define observable progress—or promises results beyond their control.
- **Overreliance on prestige.** Credentials, client logos, or titles substitute for relevant examples and a credible process.
- **Blurred boundaries.** The distinctions among coaching, consulting, mentoring, therapy, and organizational confidentiality are unclear.

THE FINAL TEST: Do you trust this coach enough to tell the truth, respect them enough to consider their challenge, and believe they understand enough of your world to help you change what matters?

CONCLUSION

The right coach is not universal. The coach who is effective for one leader, role, or season may not be right for another. Fit should be assessed against the leader's needs, the organization's context, and the outcomes the engagement is meant to support.

The decision should be disciplined. Choose the coach who brings the strongest combination of professional preparation, relevant experience, relational fit, psychological and business acumen, tailored process, ethical clarity, and measurable direction.

SELECTED REFERENCES AND RELATED READING

- [E.P.I.C., "Top Scenarios: When to Use an Executive Coach."](#)
- [International Coaching Federation, Coaching Credentials.](#)
- [International Coaching Federation, Core Competencies.](#)
- [International Coaching Federation, Code of Ethics.](#)