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By Mary Beth O'Neill
Book Review By Kathleen O'Donnell

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Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart

BY MARY BETH O'NEILL

BOOK REVIEW BY KATHLEEN O'DONNELL

What a wonderful metaphor: backbone and heart! Backbone refers to one's ability (and willingness) to state one's position, whether popular or not. Heart refers to one's ability (and willingness) to stay in relationship and to reach out to other people even when in conflict. Backbone and Heart work together. We all have a dominant area (backbone or heart). We are more comfortable with one than with the other. As executive coaches, we've got to do both and do both well. Our job as coaches is also to help an executive track her own ability to show both backbone and heart. There is much to learn about both backbone and heart in this major book, written by one of the leaders of the Executive Coaching field.

Mary Beth O'Neill sets the stage for her insightful analysis of the executive coaching process by declaring: "leaders hold a special position in the landscape of change." She further sets the stage by defining executive coaching as "helping leaders get unstuck from their dilemmas and assisting them to transfer their learning into results for the organization. . . . to turn the leader toward her team." O'Neill suggests that coaches bring a trained, yet natural curiosity of a journalist or anthropologist to the leader's work situation. They also share conceptual frameworks, images and metaphors with executives and encourage rigor in how leaders organize their thinking, visioning, planning and expectations. In adding to this list,

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O'Neill suggests that executive coaches should challenge executives to their own competence or learning edge and should help build the leader's capacity to manage their own anxiety in tough situations.

Building on her many years of experience as an organizational consultant and executive coach, Mary Beth O'Neill suggests that executives (top and upper levels in organization: CEO, VP, Exec Director, plant manager) inevitably must perform three functions:

1. Communicate the territory (vision, purpose, goals and outline opportunities and challenges).
2. Build relationships and facilitate interactions (leading to outstanding team performance).
3. Produce results and outcomes – more through others' efforts.

She suggests that an executive coach can use these three functional areas as a checklist that enables the coach to determine the leader's ability in each of these areas and to determine the amount of attention that should be given to each area. In essence, according to O'Neill, executive coaching becomes a process for increasing a leader's skill and effectiveness in these three functional areas.

Mary Beth O'Neill's background in organization development (OD) is evident in two additional ways. First, she seems to be borrowing from the OD literature in her description of the processes that are engaged by executive coaching. She proposed that executive coaching is a four stage process: (1) contracting, (2) planning, (3) live action intervention and (4) debriefing. One of the other ways in which O'Neill utilizes the OD literature is rather unique in the literature on executive coaching. O'Neill places great emphasis on a systems perspective regarding the functioning of executives. She urges executive coaches not to focus too narrowly on the personal challenges being faced by their clients. Executive coaches should instead stay focused on the fundamental processes operating throughout the organization.

As a coach, O'Neill keeps an eye on the system of a leader and the individuals and groups in the mid-size spheres around that leader. Why? Because leaders naturally look outward and with a future perspective. O'Neill suggests that skills at the midsize sphere are underdeveloped. Coaches can help leaders see their role in this mid sphere and can help them adapt their way of interacting in this mid-sphere. Mary Beth O'Neill suggests that those executives who are operating at the very top of the organization must attend to both the mid-sphere and upper sphere of their organization. They must truly be systemic thinkers and actors. This suggests additional challenges for these men and women. The top level executives must be responsive to the needs of stockholders or partner ownership. They must also be concerned with issues associated with succession, organizational loyalty, strategic alliances, and their organization's positioning in the marketplace. With all of these additional demands, the highest level executives are faced with yet another condition that ultimately is even more challenging. These men and women are lonely at the top – they can't (or won't) ask for help. O'Neill's impression is that the biggest difference in coaching between top and mid level executives concerns the nature of the communication between coach and client. She suggests that one must be more direct and blunt with those at the top. The executive coach must be more bottom-line oriented with these high level executive and must get to the point sooner.

Regardless of the level where one is coaching, there are four essential ingredients in O'Neill's model of executive coaching. First, one must have a results orientation to a leader's problem. Second, the coaching relationship should be established as a partnership: the coach and client stand side by side as they unravel dilemmas. The coach inquires, stimulates and challenges executive to perform at an optimal level. Third, an executive coach should engage their executive client in an in-depth exploration of the specific leadership challenges that the executive faces. The coach should help her client identify hurdles and the forces that pulls him off course. The coach helps her client see his impact on others. O'Neill evokes the image of a boater creating wake in water and not looking back to see what impact the waves have had on the lake. Fourth, O'Neill suggests that an executive coach should help her client link the behavior and performance of her team to specific goals and help her client set specific expectations for team. It is in this interface between leader and team that O'Neill makes her most important and unique contribution to the field of organizational coaching.

Three core principles guide Mary Beth O'Neill analysis of effective executive coaching. First, an executive coach must bring her own, unique signature presence to coaching. We can identify this signature presence when we ask ourselves three fundamental (and penetrating) questions as coaches: "Why am I doing this?" "Is it truly good for the client?" "Am I only trying to lower my own stress?" These are three remarkable questions that each of us as coaches should ask ourselves frequently. Thank you, Mary Beth, for challenging us with these questions.

O'Neill goes beyond just suggesting that we must identify our signature presence. She proposes that this presence is itself a major tool of intervention. When "present" the executive coach is authentic, integrated and engaged in carefully crafted (rather than cookie cutter) techniques. When a coach is present, her values, passion, creativity, emotions, discerning judgment and resourcefulness are available to her client. By identifying our signature presence, we as coaches are better able to tolerate the ambiguity of any coaching relationship, as well as the daunting challenges, and associated anxiety, disapproval and stress of our client (as well as our own anxiety, disapproval and stress). The "present" coach is a true partner with her client. Coaching relationship must be built on trust. Trust, in turn, is built on the ability mutually to get and receive feedback, to learn from one another's experiences, and to be present.

Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart is written in a very informative and accessible manner. Each chapter ends with bulleted highlights of key information; furthermore, each chapter is sprinkled with cases and stories – infuses the conceptual information with life! O'Neill's style is very effective . . . she uses the old training adage: "tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, tell them what you told them." I am a firm believer in being a teacher to my coaching clients at times. I share concepts with them and de-mystify the process of coaching. O'Neill's format and accessible writing style lends itself to that practice. Thank you, Mary Beth, for writing a book that helps me become a better teacher and coach.

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