



# Becoming an Executive Coach

Executive Coaching of a  
Major Defense Acquisition  
Program Leader

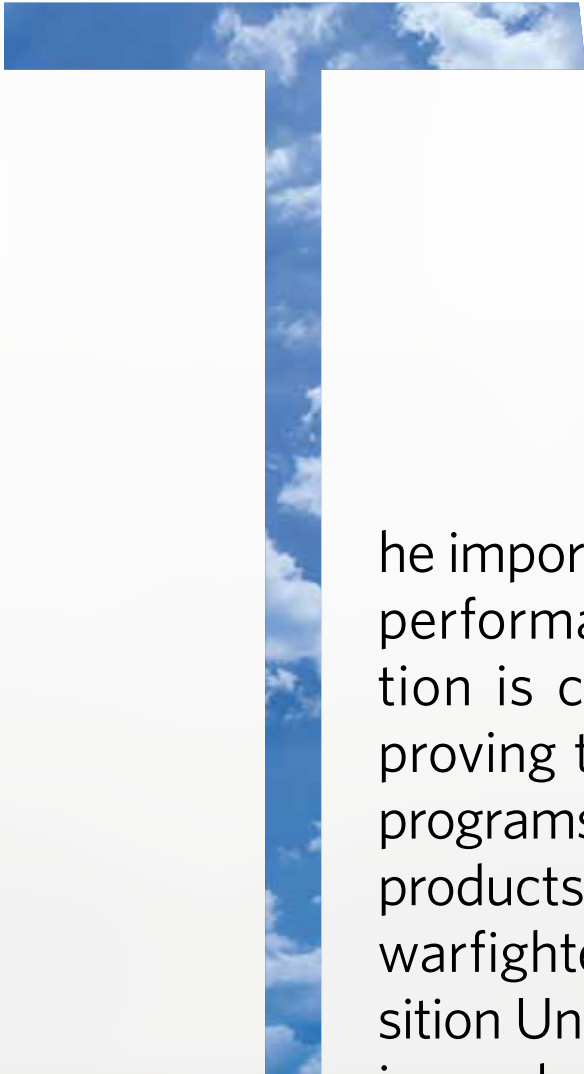
*Lois Harper*

# Report Documentation Page

Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE <b>NOV 2010</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2010 to 00-00-2010</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Becoming an Executive Coach. Executive Coaching of a Major Defense Acquisition Program Leader</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>Defense Acquisition University, 9820 Belvoir Road, Fort Belvoir, VA, 22060-5565</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			



he importance of leadership to the performance of defense acquisition is clear. Committed to improving the results of acquisition programs—the quality and cost of products and services delivered to warfighters—the Defense Acquisition University initiated the training and certification of a small, select group of faculty as executive coaches. I had the privilege of being selected to be trained and prove

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myself as one of DAU's few executive coaches. It has been an incredible journey of learning, growth and contribution.

### **DAU Executive Coaching Flight School**

When I was selected, I asked myself, "What made me an ideal candidate to participate in this initiative?" Mentoring was a familiar concept, but what was the difference in skill sets between that and coaching? What did it mean to be an executive coach? Many other questions surfaced. In my experience, mentoring was rather straightforward and well-defined. It encompassed career progression. The mentor and protégée usually worked in the same line of business. Strangely enough, I quickly learned that an executive coach is not required to have direct experience in the coachee's occupational role. Executive coaching is also more formal than mentoring and concentrates on specific developmental areas. Its intent is to produce a dramatic impact on entire organizations.

Fundamentally, coaching would allow me to participate in dynamic acquisition organizations. I could have a pivotal role in their continuous improvement efforts. It would also allow me to work closely with an organization's most senior leaders and perhaps permit them to go beyond what even they thought was possible. I quickly realized the impact I could really make.

Like the other members of my executive coaching cohort, I committed to apply whatever energy and time was needed for self-study; to participate in workshops conducted by experienced executive coaches; to coach at least one and preferably two acquisition, technology, and logistics enterprise executives; to receive one-on-one mentoring by executive coaches; and to participate in a process to assess my competency and impact as an executive coach after 9 to 12 months.

During the first workshop, Dave Fitch, the champion of the DAU certification program and director, DAU Leadership Center of Excellence, compared it to military flight training—a rigorous selection process, ground school (workshops), simulator flights (mentoring conversations), actual flying (frequent coaching conversations with coachees), and flight checks (the impact assessment).

### **Coaching Is About Results**

Among many distinctions between DAU's executive coaching and other executive coaching approaches is DAU's focus on helping our coachees produce extraordinary results and legacies. It is in the process of producing results that our coachees expand and deepen their leadership skills—but the first focus is business results. Executive coaching provides a relationship where leaders can candidly discuss and explore the challenges that confront them, who they are now, who they would like to be in a leadership capacity, and how they will get there. DAU's executive coaching and executive coaching conversations are based upon the premise that leaders need to transform themselves if they are going to



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have any hope of transforming the performance of their organizations. Leadership is about who you are, not what you say or hope to portray.

Each member of DAU's executive coaching cohort was required to enroll two acquisition leaders as coachees—preferably program managers, program executive officers, organizational commanders, or their deputies. For many of us in the cohort, enrollment of coachees was relatively easy. We had only to mention that we were involved in DAU's executive coaching program to have executive volunteers. Among the leaders coached in the pilot program were general officers, an admiral, members of the Senior Executive Service, and numerous O-6s and GM-15s. Every Service was represented. One of my coachees was Chris Miller, program executive officer for command, control, communications, computers and intelligence (PEO C4I). Miller's experience includes military, industry, and federal civilian service. As PEO C4I, he is responsible for a portfolio of approximately 135 programs and projects, including major defense acquisition programs and major automated information systems.

An executive coaching relationship embodies many different facets, among them, thinking partner, confidant, sounding board, strategist, and conscience. As an executive coach, you are committed to your clients, their aspirations, and their drive for success and personal growth. At the start of our coaching relationship, Miller and I signed a formal agreement that listed our expectations of each other. During our coaching, our expectations grew as we experienced first-

hand the value of the relationship to achieving the mission and goals of PEO C4I.

Among the expectations and commitments Miller and I made to each other was to have a series of conversations, some conducted face to face, on a monthly basis; and coaching phone calls as frequently as weekly. Although I was committed, I was unsure that Miller could make the same level of commitment. He had an incredibly busy schedule. That and other questions kept surfacing. How would I know if we had a firm foundation for an optimal coaching relationship? Even though it takes a few sessions to determine, the schedule can be an early sign. If the coachee sticks to a coaching schedule, then the coachee might just believe coaching has merit and be willing to take the time to work on something transformational while still conducting the duties of his or her day job. Miller did just that and increased the frequency of our meetings to twice a month to ensure the momentum gained from our sessions was not lost.

We agreed that I would conduct a 360-degree assessment for Miller with the aim of soliciting feedback that could help him achieve the next level of his leadership effectiveness. We also agreed to create a source document to clearly articulate his vision and goals for PEO C4I, as well as the imperative for his vision.

### **Not Your Typical 360**

Instead of using a standardized, Web-based 360-degree assessment tool, DAU's approach is to conduct personal interviews (face to face or over the phone) with the individuals identified by their coachees. They included supervisors, peers, subordinates, and stakeholders. I asked the same set of questions, but I was permitted to probe further on certain responses and elicit specific examples of some of the behaviors observed. Another major difference is the request to the individuals being interviewed to have their responses to questions and all other aspects of the interview attributable—even verbatim. While I said that I would accept feedback even with the stipulation that it would be non-attributable, everyone I interviewed—political appointees, other flag officers, Senior Executive Service members, and Miller's subordinates—was willing to be on the record.

I learned that interviews facilitate the identification of themes of strengths and areas to be addressed if the leader wants to achieve his or her next level. I learned that attributable feedback gathered by personal interviews has a level of focus and impact that is far greater than feedback that is non-attributable. Attributable feedback is powerful.

In the series of meetings I had with Miller to review and interpret his feedback, he and I noted three distinct phases: reaction, reflection, and action. The fact that we planned to cover the feedback in a series of meetings gave Miller time to let the feedback sink in (and to react as the feedback was given); time to reflect (probably the most difficult and time

consuming to coach); and time to identify his own interpretations and the actions he wanted to take. As a next step, Miller and I presented the unvarnished feedback, the visible themes, and his plan to address the feedback to his direct reports. This was not part of the formal coaching process, but Miller wanted his team to understand the executive coaching methodology, what the return on investment was expected to be, and how he would be accountable to his executive coach.

### **The Value of a Source Document**

Following an example provided to me in training, Miller and I collaborated on a PEO C4I source document—Miller's "transformation manifesto." Not to be confused with the sort of comprehensive strategic plans we are taught to build, Miller decided that his source document would be a preamble to the PEO C4I Strategic Plan. He wanted his source document to stand on its own as a concise and inspiring message to his entire workforce. To make the document impactful, he gathered data from internal and external stakeholders. Much of it was as follow-on to the 360-degree feedback he had received. Then he developed the core document. I was a sounding board and thinking partner during the process. After soliciting feedback from key staff personnel, program managers, and other stakeholders, Miller made a final revision and published it for all to see and understand, and as a basis for personal action and accountability.

### **Tangible and Intangible Benefits**

In January 2010, I earned certification as an executive coach. Miller cited a myriad of benefits he received from coaching. The same was true for the other coachees who participated in the DAU executive coaching process.

In addition to the feedback gathered during the assessment process for certification, an independent study of the return on investment of the pilot program was conducted recently. The tangible and intangible benefits reported by the coachees were strategic: increased customer satisfaction, increased resources, increased workgroup productivity, reduced cycle time, increased organizational efficiency, increased personal productivity, improved ability to deal with and mentor employees, more effective stakeholder management, more effective time management, greater ability to solicit and get advice and ideas from seniors, and overall leadership skills improvement.

### **The Challenges of Coaching**

Do I think there are challenges to executive coaching? Absolutely. Time constraints predominate. Wedging executive coaching into an executive's day job is extremely challenging. Some of the key tasks a coachee agrees to implement as part of the executive coaching plan may compete with programmatic tasks for which he or she is responsible. Determining what action and calendar items make a true difference in realizing the organization's vision should not be too difficult. The executive coaching cohort had several tools that

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SECTION 3685, TITLE 39, U.S.C.  
SHOWING OWNERSHIP,  
MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION

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*Defense AT&L* is published bimonthly at the Defense Acquisition University, Fort Belvoir, VA 22060-5565. The university publishes six issues annually. The director of the DAU Press is Eduard Boyd; the managing editor of *Defense AT&L* is Carol A. Scheina; and the publisher is the Defense Acquisition University Press. All are colocated at the following address: Defense Acquisition University, Attn: DAU Press, 9820 Belvoir Rd., Ste. 3, Fort Belvoir, VA 22060-5565.

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**Average Number of Copies Each Issue  
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- A. Total number of copies printed  
(net press run): \_\_\_\_\_ 22,443
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1. Sales through dealers and carriers,  
street vendors, and counter sales: \_\_\_\_\_ 0
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requested: \_\_\_\_\_ 21,993
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means; samples, complimentary,  
and other free copies: \_\_\_\_\_ 279
- E. Total distribution: \_\_\_\_\_ 22,272
- F. Copies not distributed: \_\_\_\_\_ 171
- G. Total distribution: \_\_\_\_\_ 22,443
- 

**Actual Number Copies of Single Issue  
Published Nearest To Filing Date**

- A. Total number of copies printed  
(net press run): \_\_\_\_\_ 22,775
- B. Paid and/or requested circulation: \_\_\_\_\_ 22,322
1. Sales through dealers and carriers,  
street vendors, and counter sales: \_\_\_\_\_ 0
2. Mail subscriptions paid and/or  
requested: \_\_\_\_\_ 22,322
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- E. Total distribution: \_\_\_\_\_ 22,601
- F. Copies not distributed: \_\_\_\_\_ 174
- G. Total distribution: \_\_\_\_\_ 22,275
- 



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would successfully facilitate that. The more daunting challenge comes with changing an executive's daily routine. It represents more of a paradigm shift.

**What I Learned**

It's not just about the coachee. Executive coaching has transformed me as well. I learned that an executive coach can have an incredibly positive impact, and that the investment of time and other resources involved in executive coaching is outweighed by the benefits and results. I overcame initial doubts about my capacity to coach senior executives. I learned how to ask questions, particularly thought-provoking questions, in a way that allowed my coachees to see themselves objectively and to discover their own solutions. I discovered the coachee (not the coach) is masterfully equipped to come up with the best solutions. I learned how to be a better listener, sometimes, hearing beyond the words. I developed increased strategic perspective. Finally, I established coaching relationships that I will value the rest of my life and which may be my most valuable contribution to the acquisition workforce I serve.

*The author would like to thank Dave Fitch, director, DAU Leadership Center of Excellence, for his assistance with this article.*

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