

# A Framework for Selecting an Executive Coach/Advisor

*When executive coaching creates value and when it does not*

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February, 2026

## **Executive Summary**

This paper offers a framework for evaluating executive coaching and advisory engagements. It is written with awareness of the risk of talking one's own book, and aims instead to provide criteria that help leaders and organizations make better decisions regardless of who does the work. The perspective reflects over 25 years and more than 200 engagements, including cases where advisory relationships created value, drifted, or failed.

The term *coach* is increasingly imprecise. In senior contexts, what executives often seek is not training or emotional support, but experienced advisory judgment applied to concrete business challenges under real organizational and economic constraints. For familiarity, this paper uses the term *coach*, but assumes a role closer to that of a senior advisor, focused on judgment, timing, and pattern recognition in high-stakes situations. The framework that follows is intended to clarify when this kind of work helps, when it does not, and how to think about its value with discipline rather than mysticism.

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# **I. When executive coaching is likely to work**

When is coaching a good choice for an organization? Three conditions tend to set the stage for a value-adding advisory relationship.

## **I.1 There's an Agreed-Upon Gap**

Coaching is most effective once there is at least some shared recognition that a gap exists. That does not require unanimity, but it does require candor. If leaders are still arguing about whether anything is wrong, or whether improvement is even necessary, coaching usually stalls. The work depends on forward motion, and forward motion depends on naming a constraint, even if there is disagreement about its cause or scope.

There are also environments where the organization is performing exceptionally well by any external measure. In those cases, coaching tends to be used sparingly at the enterprise level, because the system does not experience itself as broken and the results support that view. Where coaching *does* show up is at the individual level, with high-performing leaders who want more range, more influence, or a larger role inside an already demanding culture. In those situations, the gap is not organizational failure but personal aspiration. Coaching works there because the individual sees the edge clearly and wants to move it, even when the broader organization's performance is outstanding.

## **I.2 There's a Problem that Judgment Can Change**

Sometimes an organization is struggling, but not because its leaders are thinking poorly. The real problems are outside the building. Interest rates jump. Regulations change. Technology shifts. Markets collapse. In those situations, coaching can turn into a displacement activity. People talk, reflect, and work hard on themselves, but the underlying constraint does not move. Better conversation does not fix external physics.

For coaching to matter, the problem has to hinge on human judgment. On decisions, leadership dynamics, timing, and sequencing. Particularly, on how people interpret information and act under pressure. If the bottleneck is technical, regulatory, or structural, coaching is at best secondary. You need capital, engineers, lawyers, or time. This is not a criticism of coaching. It is a boundary. Coaching works when better judgment can change the outcome. When it cannot, it becomes motion without progress.

## **I.3 There's a Leader Who Wants Counsel**

Coaching only works if the person being coached believes that counsel can change the outcome. That belief does not have to be optimistic. It just has to be real. If the executive thinks the situation is fixed, political, or already decided, coaching turns into theater. There may be meetings and conversations, but nothing moves.

Coaching works best with leaders who value counsel in general. People who ask for advice, test their thinking, and learn from others. It works even better when they know what kind of counsel they want and why. Strategic judgment. Pattern recognition. Interpersonal dynamics. Hard feedback. This is why voluntary engagement matters. Coaching requires an executive who wants better outcomes and is willing to be challenged, not someone going through the motions to satisfy optics or external pressure. Without that, even the best coach has little to work with.

## **II. How to assess value and price**

The growth of coaching “schools” and certification programs has made it harder than it should be to answer a basic question: how do you tell a good coach from a bad one? The industry has almost no barriers to entry. Anyone can call themselves a coach. There is no required training or external gatekeeper. At the same time, the top of the field is lucrative. Those two facts together create predictable market dynamics: a large bottom tier, a much smaller middle tier, and a tiny group at the top that absorbs most of the value. This is not about ego. It is simple selection pressure.

In markets like this, certificates filter for interest, not judgment. As a result, many coaches are sincere and well-intentioned but poorly suited for high-stakes situations. A smaller group has real competence but limited range. And a very small number have repeatedly worked in environments where ambiguity was real and mistakes were expensive. Unlike other professions, coaching leaves most of the sorting to the buyer. That is why choosing a coach is less about credentials and more about evidence: experience, pattern familiarity, and exposure to stakes that resemble your own.

References still matter, but in coaching they rarely look like public proof, because serious advisors operate under NDAs and a strong ethic of discretion. The right way to assess them is through private, off-record conversations, pattern-level discussion of past work, and quiet reputation checks, not testimonials or named wins, which are often a negative signal.

### **II.1 Define the Value of the Problem**

For all the confusion around coaching, the value part is often the simplest. You start with the value of the problem. “Problem” does not mean something is broken. It just means something is not yet what it could be. That might be a weakness, a recurring mistake, or a conflict that keeps resurfacing. It might also be money left on the table, capabilities not yet built, or a role not fully inhabited. Economically, it is the same dollar either way.

The task is to look honestly at a leader’s real challenges and ask a basic question: if this were handled better, how much value would change hands? You don’t need precision. You need a range. If a major decision is made six months earlier, what is that worth? If a conflict is contained instead of spreading, what value is preserved? If a leadership gap is closed early rather

than late, what costs are avoided? Companies make estimates like this all the time when they approve acquisitions, restructurings, or pivots.

Our goal in this analysis is to be **extremely** conservative. Because these numbers are noisy and easy to overstate in hindsight, the responsible move is to discount them heavily, often by an order of magnitude, to arrive at a conservative anchor.

Take a few common high-stakes situations.

In a large merger or integration, value is usually lost through talent attrition, delayed synergies, and execution drag, not because the deal thesis was wrong. Even after heavy discounting, it is reasonable to assume **\$50–150 million per \$1B of enterprise value** is at risk over the first one to two years based on timing, leadership alignment, and sequencing alone. Advisory work does not change the strategy, but it can speed decisions, contain conflict, and reduce costly drift.

In an activist defense or proxy contest, the business itself may be healthy, but control, leadership continuity, and strategic freedom are in play. After conservative discounting, **\$25–100 million per \$1B of enterprise value** can hinge on board dynamics, leadership distraction, and loss of optionality during and after the fight. Here, advisors matter most in preparation, internal alignment, and avoiding unforced errors under pressure.

In a strategic pivot, failures rarely come from choosing the wrong direction. They come from wavering commitment, fragmented execution, or half-measures. Even conservatively, **\$40–120 million per \$1B of enterprise value** can be at stake due to timing and resource misallocation. Advisory leverage shows up in sequencing, clarity of intent, and keeping leadership aligned through uncertainty.

**Apply an order-of-magnitude discount ( $\div 10$ ) to account for noise, attribution error, and hindsight bias**

**Conservatively discounted value (per \$1B of enterprise value)**

- Large-scale merger or integration: **\$5–15M**
- Activist defense or proxy contest: **\$2.5–10M**
- Strategic pivot or major repositioning: **\$4–12M**

This discounted range is a realistic working anchor. It assumes the problem is real but that only a fraction of the apparent value is movable, and only a portion of that is plausibly influenced by better judgment, timing, and execution. Even at this level, the numbers remain economically meaningful without relying on optimistic assumptions.

## II.2 Potential impact of coaching

Once you have a rough sense of what the problem is worth, the next question is how much a coach can help. There is no clean formula, but there is a sensible way to think about it. Most experienced leaders can point to moments when a trusted advisor made a real difference, not by being brilliant, but by being timely. They validated a doubt about a bad deal, slowed a rushed decision, or asked the simple question that forced follow-through. None of these moments look dramatic at the time, but over years they add up.

Looked at conservatively, many leaders would say good advisors protect or improve perhaps five to ten percent of their long-term value by preventing avoidable mistakes and improving execution at the margins. Because this judgment is noisy and retrospective, it should be, again, discounted heavily, often by an order of magnitude. Even then, the number usually remains meaningful.

Put to work, this logic leads to a conservative result. Start at the low end of the five percent estimate for advisory impact, then discount it by an order of magnitude to account for noise, luck, and hindsight. What remains is roughly half a percent of the value at stake. In a real situation, that can translate into a few hundred thousand dollars of expected value, not from heroics, but from small things done better: avoiding one unforced board misstep, slowing a rushed decision by weeks rather than months, containing a conflict before it spreads, or forcing follow-through on something already agreed.

Using the prior example, the math looks like this. After conservative discounting, the problem itself is worth roughly **\$40 million**. Applying a further discount to the advisor's contribution yields an estimated impact of **0.5%**, or about **\$200,000** in expected value attributable to advisory work. That figure assumes no upside capture, no best-case attribution, no annualization, and no brilliance. It is what remains after skepticism.

For some people, even this discounted number can cause sticker shock. That reaction makes sense. But it says something important about the role itself. A coach or advisor is often the only person whose job is to help an executive get better over time. Everyone else around that executive has different incentives. Some help. Some distract. Some actively make the job harder.

As leaders rise, it is unfortunately common for them to encounter limits to their effectiveness. Not because they stop caring, but because pressure builds. Conflict grows and fatigue can set in. The environment becomes noisier. Against that backdrop, advisory work is not just about improvement. It is also about preventing plateauing or decline. That is what the number is really capturing.

## **II.3 Latency and Ramp**

A final factor that matters a lot is latency. Judgment does not show up fully formed on day one. An advisor brought in at the last minute, without knowing the organization or its people, is limited to fast pattern recognition. That can still help. It is often better than nothing. But it is not where the real value comes from.

The real leverage comes from time and familiarity. Knowing how power works in practice, not just who reports to whom. Knowing which conflicts matter and which will fade. Knowing how decisions really get made. That kind of understanding takes time, and so does working trust. This is why retainers often make sense. Not out of convenience, but because context accumulates. The best time to engage an advisor is before a crisis, not during one. Long relationships allow the work to shift from orientation to execution, and that is when judgment matters most.

## **II.4 Trial Before Commitment**

Retainers can make sense because they allow a coach to build real understanding over time. But committing too early is a mistake. Before you lock in a long-term arrangement, you need to see how the relationship works, especially when things get tense.

That means starting small. Month to month, or at most quarter to quarter. You want to know how the coach shows up under pressure, how they handle disagreement, and whether their judgment holds when the stakes rise. A long-term commitment should come after that, not before.

## **III. What to watch for (common failure modes)**

### **III.1 Client Analysis**

The core challenge in any advisory relationship is holding a simple balance. The advisor works with the executive, but the client is the company. That means helping the leader think clearly and act effectively, always in service of what moves the organization forward, not what feels best in the moment or protects ego. Most of the time this shows up as a clear line the work cannot cross: is this decision helping the business or serving some narrower need. Executives deserve wide freedom to run their companies, but there are moments when interests diverge and choices need to be named plainly. In those moments, a good advisor stays in the right lane, whether that requires a gentle nudge or a direct push, and never forgets who they work for.

### **III.2 Experience and pattern familiarity**

Good coaches are like good pilots. What matters is time in the seat. Not years in the industry, but real repetitions. Actual engagements where decisions had consequences and judgment mattered in the moment. Time in role can be misleading. Someone can claim decades of experience and still have seen very little. Another person may have fewer years but far more exposure to live situations under pressure.

Medicine offers a useful comparison. The strongest predictor of good outcomes is not credentials, but how many times the surgeon has done the operation. Coaching works the same way. What you want is specific experience: your sector, your scale, your kind of problem. Public or private. Growth or distress. Integration, activism, succession. The closer the match, the faster the ramp and the better the judgment when timing matters.

### **III.3 Latency versus drift**

One risk that comes with a good advisory relationship is the same thing that makes it valuable: time. As an advisor learns the organization and trust builds, their judgment improves. But if that relationship is not checked, it can drift. The coach becomes a routine expense, the work feels familiar, and it gets harder to say what value is still being created. This is where zero-based thinking helps. At least once a year, it is worth starting over and asking what the problems are now, what they are worth, and how much this advisor is actually helping. Be conservative. Discount attribution. Adjust the retainer if needed, even if the coach pushes back or walks. It is your business. Latency builds power, but drift erodes it, and serious engagements name that risk early.

## Conclusion

This framework is offered in good faith as a tool anyone can use. It is not an argument for a particular firm, approach, or philosophy. It is an argument for the practice itself, at its most serious and most valuable. The aim is to make clearer when advisory work actually helps, when it does not, and how to think about it without mysticism or salesmanship.

The world senior leaders operate in has become more complex and less forgiving. The last few years have brought isolation, volatility, and sharp economic shifts. At the same time, ownership structures have changed. There are fewer public companies, more private capital, and less room to hide behind process or committees. In that environment, judgment matters more, not less. Decisions are made faster, under pressure, and with fewer second chances.

When used well, executive coaching or advisory work is not a perk or a crutch. It is a way to protect and sharpen judgment where it has the most leverage. This paper does not argue that coaching is always worth doing. It argues something narrower and more useful: that when the conditions are right, the problem is real, and the work is disciplined, the value is understandable and defensible. Strong businesses depend on leaders who can think clearly over time, and this framework exists to help support that outcome, whoever ultimately does the work.