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## **ARTICLE** **COACHING**

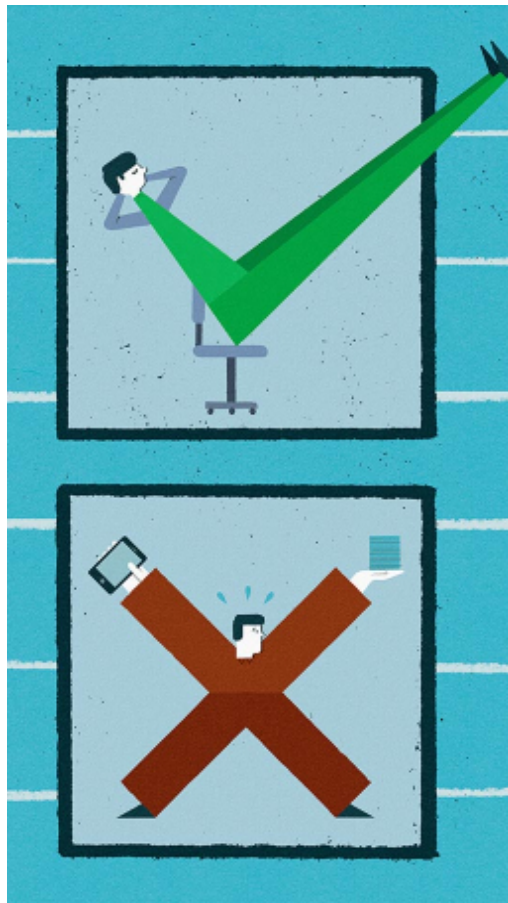
# When Coaching Finds That an Executive Isn't in the Right Role

*by Ben Dattner and Elizabeth Wood*

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In the traditional view of executive coaching, an executive, with her boss's [participation](#), takes personality assessments, receives [360-degree feedback](#), and creates and implements a development plan designed to address performance gaps, optimize her contribution, and prepare her for new responsibilities. This approach is based on the fundamental belief that enhancing performance in a role as currently structured, is the best way ahead.

However, in some cases, the coaching reveals that the person is in the wrong role. Some people are qualified on paper, but for political, historical, or personality reasons can't really succeed on a given team or in a particular job. Other people may have many talents and a great track record of past success, but are not thriving in their present role as it is currently defined. When this becomes clear, bosses too often prematurely conclude that they have to fire the person or that the coaching was a waste. However, instead of seeing this outcome as some kind of failure, a boss and an organization can instead frame

the result of the coaching as indicating a different, but still successful, path. Sometimes, redefining the role is in the best interests of both the organization and the individual working with the coach.

That's because as organizational structures become more fluid and reporting relationships become more project-based, the very notion of what constitutes a particular role within an organization is being rethought and revised more often. In this context, a coach may add value not just to one direct report, but can also provide helpful perspective about the larger organization, department or team in which the individual is working. It can be hard to acknowledge one's own strengths and weaknesses, sometimes it's hardest to do so when that feedback is coming from the boss. For the boss, it can be daunting to consider making organizational changes; it often initially seems easier to try to optimize individual performance within the existing organizational structure. A good coach can provide an outside perspective on both of these issues, because they're not motivated by any politics or agendas.

If coaching has revealed that one of your reports isn't in the right role, here are some options to consider:

**Move the person to a different role.** One executive we know was a regional leader in a large, multinational organization. He had an entrepreneurial mindset and performed at his best during a phase in the business cycle when much of his time and energy went into deal-making with outside partners. Once the business cycle shifted, however, and the focus of the role was more about managing a team and driving organic growth, he struggled to adapt. His boss engaged an executive coach who worked with him to identify his strengths and work preferences through conversations and 360-degree feedback assessments. Eventually, he approached his boss about moving to a role in a small emerging market – while it would mean managing less revenue and fewer people than his current job, he'd thrive on the dynamism of the startup opportunity. Fortunately, the executive, his boss, and the organization all recognized that this was a better fit, and the move was made quickly.

**Redefine the existing role.** Sometimes it's not feasible – or desirable – to move someone to a different role. In these cases, rethinking the scope of their current role can be just as effective. After working with a coach, a CFO realized that she was not particularly good at, nor did she much enjoy, managing people in a large, globally dispersed finance team. She did, however, have a strong track record in driving business results through superior client relationship management. She successfully made the case to her boss that creating a “chief of staff” role on her team would free her up to do her best work and allow one of her direct reports, who was much better at people management, to take on those responsibilities. Her boss was very supportive of the change.

**Redesign the org chart.** Roles can become unwieldy or incoherent because of historical factors, politics, or happenstance. Consider the case of a company where Real Estate had historically reported in to the General Counsel's office, given the focus on managing and negotiating leases. A coaching engagement with the newly hired head of Real Estate helped indicate that in order to make real business impact, the reporting line had to change to the COO. To the General Counsel's credit, she

was comfortable with the change even though it made her domain smaller, because she acknowledged the larger benefits to the business overall.

It may seem risky to change an existing role, build a new role around an individual's preferences and strengths, or to rethink organizational structure, but it can be well worth it to set your most knowledgeable and talented high performers up for sustained success.

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**Ben Dattner** is an executive coach and organizational development consultant, and the founder of New York City-based [Dattner Consulting, LLC](#). You can follow him on Twitter at [@bendattner](#).

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**Elizabeth Wood** is Chief Human Resources Officer for Levi Strauss & Co.

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