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# The Executive Coach

## What this role is for and how it works

By Mitch Saunders

When people ask me to help them, they are usually looking for solutions to problems that need more than a quick fix. For example:

- *I need to find a better way to relate to a colleague or founding partner.*
- *How do I/we create a culture that's preoccupied with innovation—to provide more value to customers and lower costs?*
- *Certain situations trigger my worst reactions—how can I be more effective in those difficult moments?*
- *Our business model is losing steam; what can we do?*
- *How do we turn an unproven idea into a real business opportunity?*
- *I've been very successful thus far. But I don't want to keep repeating the same script. How can I be more creative in the next phase?*

The kind of guidance I provide supports an individual in three domains of leadership: 1) **Performance Improvement**, 2) **Personal Agility** for evolving the way one plays the game of leadership, and 3) **Systems Change** for guiding development of the organization's future. Let's take a look at what each offers.

### Performance Improvement

Performance Improvement is about advancing from one level of mastery to the next. This type of coaching or mentoring supports continuous development when the client wishes to extend capability in one or more specific areas; and the improvements can be measured by external standards. The improvement goal can be as simple as learning new communication skills or as complex as learning how to improve speed-to-market for new products. The focus could also involve overcoming habits that no longer serve.

*A coach offers a unique kind of relationship. It's a partnership that provides a safe context, a reliable framework and proven practices that enable the individual to generate more value by working smarter not harder.*

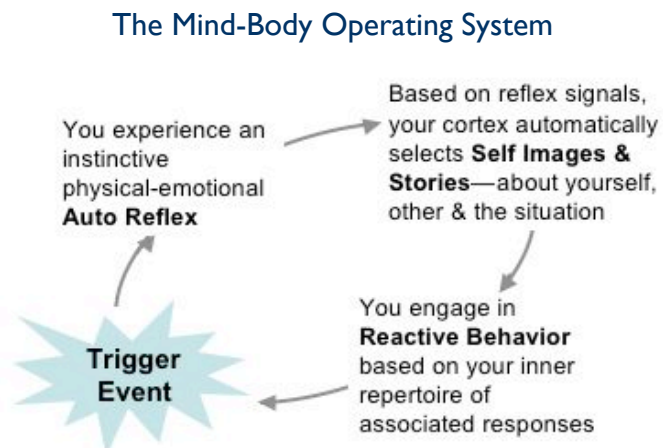
Think of a skier whose trainer says: You've demonstrated that you can make it down most extreme runs now. Here are some ways to overcome habits that will keep you from feeling confident and satisfied on those runs. I'll also help you learn to self-correct for continuous improvement.

## Personal Agility

Each of us has a “signature” way of playing “the game”—the way we’re most comfortable. We like what’s been successful in the past. But each of us also has a wider range of more robust attitudes and behaviors. Boosting Personal Agility is something that is addressed from “the inside out.” It becomes particularly relevant as a person ages, or as the business undergoes a change and its demands exceed the individual’s current range of capability. It’s tough. One’s sense of identity can be on the line, and there is a lot at stake. It’s further challenging because neither the coach nor the client has a clear picture of the outcome at the start.

How does this work? Each of us has a distinctive way of creating value. I refer to it as, “It’s what’s mine to do.” But most people aren’t clear about this. People get stuck on what they *can* do. Assistance with Personal Agility can provide a way to clarify and translate vague or unexpressed desires into more powerful ways of using our talents. We look at which patterns of behavior to refine, what changes might be called for and how to go about realizing those changes. Instead of trying to force fit an ideal, this type of coaching draws upon and leverages the client’s natural abilities and innate ways of creating value in the world. Because the focus is on the client’s native capacity for creativity and resourcefulness, less effort is required, and subtle changes make a huge difference.

Another, crucial aspect of this kind of assistance can involve changing deeply ingrained response patterns. Each of us has a distinctive, “mind-body operating system”. It governs our mental-physical-emotional responses. We can learn to alter our responses to call on and find comfortable, effective options. It’s about learning how to work *with* and influence our natural instincts to form more effective options and powerful new moves.



## Systems Change

Organizations, like the rest of us, have certain tested ways of responding to dilemmas. However, in the face of unrelenting upheaval in the marketplace, leaders need to figure out what is shifting, what is ending and influence what’s trying to emerge. This can be the most challenging role a leader can have. Most organizations, like all of us, tend to “stay stuck” and need new methods and tools to figure out what stage or life cycle is ending and how we can deal with associated conflicts and crises. To navigate high-stakes

transitions, clients learn to use simulations, modeling and rapid prototyping to explore and master what it takes to influence the change affecting their organization. The interaction effects of new products and services, strategies and business architectures typically involve surprising discoveries. Therefore, when we work on systems-change, we explore, anticipate, or even simulate the functioning and emergent nature of an untested system. Together, we generate and experiment with something entirely new. We develop sustainable organizational solutions for tough questions and game-changing transitions.

## Putting It All Together

When the three domains of leadership are addressed with a coach, the benefits of each are amplified. To better understand this synergy, let's look at an example from a real-life, anonymous situation.

### **Presenting Issues:**

The CEO of a high tech company wished to adapt his leadership to reflect more wisdom as well as leveraging his managerial skills. Unlike most of his colleagues on the executive team, he had a particular knack for spotting new opportunities and a track record for bringing them to fruition. He was concerned the company would miss the next wave of technological innovation if he didn't find a way to combine his passion for innovation with a style of leadership that would enable its realization in this context.

The CEO believed that trends in his industry would require that his company extend its product line beyond hardware to include software and use of the internet, especially in the area of e-diagnostics.

He complained about the inability of business unit leaders to dedicate serious attention and effort to this initiative. After two years of prodding, there were only four employees (out of 8,000) who were dedicated full-time to software innovations. Business unit leaders seemed more preoccupied with stabilizing the current system than ever before, and exhibited little more than lip service to the goal of becoming a multi-product company.

### **Learning Opportunity:**

*The CEO felt the need for change, but did not recognize the aspiration, or the opportunities underlying his discomfort. He was ready to alter his signature way of playing the game of executive leadership.*  
**(Personal Agility)**

*He recognized that his company faced a critical adaptive dilemma—the need to evolve an entirely new capability and product line.*  
**(Systems Change)**

*Espoused goals weren't enough. The company lacked both an integrated model to enable new product development and the corresponding organizational infrastructure to support innovation while still engaged in continuous improvement for existing lines of business.*  
**(Systems Change)**

### **Presenting Issues:**

In the context of coaching, this CEO realized that one of the ways he wanted to lead in the future—consistent with how he wanted to deepen and shift his own leadership—could offer tremendous leverage. In the future, he would focus more on the co-development and redesign of the company's product and business architectures.

In the future, the company would treat the software fund as an internal source of venture capital and reduce what he called 'randomized, miniscule investments.' Leadership would take more calculated risks and support a limited set of high potential investments.

Consistent with his vision of a renewed role for himself, he enrolled the COO to become more consultative with business unit leaders. He also instituted executive development to promote the dual tasks and capabilities for managing existing operations while simultaneously growing the next generation of products. These moves enabled the CEO to focus more on scouting for potential breakthroughs, defining the emergent direction for the company, and growing new infrastructure to support it. He also directed more of his time towards nurturing the most promising seed ideas and experiments.

### **Learning Opportunity:**

*He refocused business unit contributions into a managed software development fund. This shift required him to trust his own instincts more, while also calling on key allies for support and reality checks. (Personal Agility & Performance Improvement)*

*He began to draw on mentoring from an old friend who manages a venture capital fund. (Performance Improvement)*

*He learned to redirect his reflexes and his attention despite constant pressures to the contrary. (Personal Agility)*

*A cross-organizational forum for innovation became an incubator for product & service breakthroughs. The company's strategy also matured, combining strengths of their hardware with new software capabilities--e.g., enabled dramatic labor savings through interpretation of hardware problems via remote web browser. (Systems Change)*

By putting all three approaches together, clients and their teams not only learn to work smarter, they learn how to keep pace with parallel changes in their organization. They learn to cooperate with the natural cycles of renewal already underway. They learn how to sense and shape the future.

**Each of us has gifts ripe for expression. An executive coach provides a safe context, a reliable framework and proven practices that allow those gifts to come forth and generate new value.**

Since 1985, **Mitch Saunders** has coached and mentored senior leaders and their teams, typically those trying to achieve unprecedented goals. For example, he:

- Helped the senior team of an early stage company create an entirely new market for laser-aesthetics,
- Coached the key individuals and sub-teams that that came up with an unprecedented way to commercialize the knowledge assets collected from the service of semiconductor equipment, and
- Led a series of Breakthrough Labs for leaders from the Program on Negotiation at Harvard University that resulted in a new form of conflict prevention currently being implemented in five countries in the Middle East.

Earlier in his career Mitch co-founded and managed a company credited with changing the way public policy was forged in California. He was formerly a researcher and instructor at the Organizational Learning Center at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is also the creator of *The Breakthrough Lab*—a powerful new method for understanding and creating change for leaders and organizations.

Mitch is a Director with The Alliance of Chief Executive Officers. He is also the creator and Director of The CEO Studio, a unique development program Silicon Valley Bank offers to clientele poised for exceptional growth.

Mitch is a pioneer in the disciplines connecting innovation, leadership, personal mastery and organizational transformation. In 2008, his unique approach became the foundation for a postgraduate program on organizational change offered by Seattle University. He serves as a trusted advisor to executives, social entrepreneurs and other change agents.

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