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How Much Coaching Do We Really Need?

When I first did an agile transformation (450 people located in 12 countries) the coach we worked with provided the leadership with a couple of days training, helped us put together a plan to transform, trained a couple of teams, trained the leadership team on how to train teams, and then, with the exception of a couple of check-up visits, left us alone to figure out what to do. At the time I did not question this approach. It was just the way things were done.

Roll forward a few years and what I find is that today I am asked to engage as a coach on a full time basis. The thinking seems to be that it is only by being engaged full time that the client organization feels like they can make progress. Again, this just seems to be the way things are done.

In some ways this makes sense. When I first did transformation work there was not a deep body of knowledge around transforming large organizations to agile. Today we can leverage a far larger body of knowledge. And, to be honest, the “full time” model suited me. A long term engagement means a regular check coming; a low risk contracting option for me.

My thoughts are evolving here though. As a result of a transformation I am working, one of the principles, Elizabeth Flood, said to me: “I have opportunity to learn so much when you are on vacation.” Elizabeth found that when I was away she had to take responsibility for the success or failure of aspects of the transformation. Since I was not available, this meant that she went out, took risks, and learned for herself. Interestingly, and perhaps a ding on my ego, the results were exceptional when I was not involved.



“I have opportunity to learn so much when you are on vacation.” - Elizabeth Flood

This was a bit of a wake-up call for me. If the purpose of the transformation is to have the organization be agile themselves (to put the agile coach out of a job) am I actually an impediment to that happening?

I needed to step back and understand what the benefit is of using a full time coach and evaluate the value we offer over a more “as needed” approach to transformation coaching. The conclusion I came to is that the use of full time coach is risk reduction strategy for the client organization. What I am also beginning to understand is that like all risk reduction strategies, it comes with cost. What surprised me was that the cost may not be obvious.

What Is The Relative Cost of a “As-needed” vs “Full time” Coach Engagement?

Let’s start with the monetary costs. Simply speaking, it costs more to keep a coach around full time.

Coaches that are not full time will cost more on a per day basis simply because they are absorbing the risk associated with fact they are not continuously employed and because some of the “preparation time” for various events.

To understand why a full time coach costs more, let’s say we are going to transform an organization of say 500 knowledge workers and basically want to kick the process off over a period of a year (note: there is huge variability in the practicality of doing this, but I needed a timeframe to calculate costs). Comparing an “as-needed” coaching model to a “full time” approach gives a base calculation:

As-needed: Let’s say good transformation coach at say \$2500-\$3000 per day plus expenses. Engagement in this case is:

- 1 week assessment,
- 1 week leadership review and planning,
- 2 weeks start-up training for a number of teams,
- 4 x 1 week checkup session(s) each with 1 weeks additional engagement each time to work what has been discovered,
- An additional 4 x 1 week as-hoc session based on need.

Full time: Let’s say you bring that person in full time is about \$2000-\$2500 per day. Engagement in this case is:

- 4 days a week for 12 months to kick off something significant. Realistically the “12 months” is really about 40 weeks of actual engagement after removing vacations, holidays, and so on.
- This includes same activities above, but also the coach will attend meetings, work directly with people, etc.

Comparing the cost:

- As-needed model: At high end of \$3000 / day, cost is \$192,000 for 16 weeks engagement, plus 16 weeks of expenses for the year.
- Full time model: At low end of \$2000 / day, cost is \$320,000 for 40 weeks engagement plus 40 weeks of expenses for the year.

Internal expense will probably be around the same for the client organization. Most transformation coaches will tell you they are there to work themselves out of a job (and hopefully you’ll see evidence of that as you engage with them through the transformation). This means you will still need to create a team of people responsible for the transformation, with appropriate level of leadership. This is true whether coach is engaged full time or as needed.

What is the Benefit of Having a Full-time

Coach?

What do you get from a coach when they are full time? What would be missing out of if we went for a more ad-hoc approach? Let's assume the transformation coach is interested in driving transformation forward and, in particular, is not being used for staff augmentation for the client organization. The full time transformation coach will help with:

- A sense of urgency resulting in continuous, probably gentle, pressure applied to the organization to change.
- A different point of view when it comes to assessing how things are going and where we should go to next, based on the wider understanding the transformation coach has of base agile, lean etc thinking as well as their experience in working the transformation.
- A set of individuals in the organization will be developing their skills based mentorship and coaching of the transformation coach.
- A wider set of ideas on how to work specific situations that arise in your transformation as a result of their wider experience.
- A cheerleader that can help drive the transformation as a result of their experience at seeing things improve in other organizations (they "know" agile will help) which can help overcome obstacles.
- A point of stability as, when things do not go as expected (big or small) there is someone in the room that is calm and helping you through the situation.
- A way of explaining new concepts that may be difficult for the organization to accept. For many, agile and lean concepts applied to knowledge work are counter intuitive or worse, simply unbelievable. But people need to make the change in mindset to really get the business results they need. A good story, a good metaphor developed by working in previous transformations can help the organization get more quickly to understanding and application.

Sounds pretty useful, right? And let's face it a lot of organizations are using this approach for exactly these reasons.

What Are the Hidden Benefits of a More Ad-hoc Approach to Coaching?

There are however downside to the full-time approach as well. Looked at the other way the downside of a full time approach are the upsides of an ad-hoc approach. In many ways when you have a full time coach you have effectively "outsourced" the "help" aspects discussed above.

For example, do you need continuous pressure from an external source, or do you have a sense or urgency already that can provide this pressure?

The first time I did a transformation, we didn't need someone to keep the pressure on. Let's face it; we were desperate. Our clients were complaining about the quality of our work. Our sales and marketing organization were complaining about missing schedules and inconsistent delivery. Our finance

department were worried about the future trends. To put it simply our jobs were on the line. We did not need this pressure to come from an external source. We just had to continuously remind ourselves and the organization about what we were doing and why, and this created the pressure and the sense of urgency. While it is sometime easier to get external help with “pressure” and “urgency” in many cases you know what needs to be done and why and so don’t need an external coach to help with this.

This is the base case but it turns out there is a more insidious and long term problem with outsourcing this aspect of the transformation. By outsourcing “urgency” and “pressure” the organization doesn’t really learn how to do establish urgency and pressure for themselves. If this kind of transformation were a one of event, that would be fine. However today’s organizations are operating in an increasingly volatile environment, and the one thing we know for sure is that this is not going to be the last transformation. In fact, much of agile assumes that we need to continuously and relentlessly improve in response to our environment. We therefore need to become good at focusing the organization on what is important, and be able to pivot quickly in response to new issues. In other words, we need to develop the organizational muscles to establish urgency and pressure to change as we detect shifts from the business environment. By outsourcing this aspect of the transformation for agile, we don’t really learn how to do it for ourselves and delay this learning.

A similar set of thinking can be applied to all the points above. If we rely on a coach to:

- Help us with an agile viewpoint, then it will take longer for us to develop this insight ourselves. Again, when I first did a transformation I had contacts I could chat with when we had a business problem that needed to be addressed. But in reality, I spent more time researching the issue, discussing with others in the organization, and so on to come up with approaches that we could try. Some worked. A bunch did not. But we got better and better at it, ourselves. We developed this important organizational capability.
- Mentor leadership to modern approach, then our leadership takes longer to learn how to continuously learn themselves. In the worst case, this could lead to the expectation that learning needs to be spoon fed to leadership, which is not exactly an agile approach.
- Help as a cheerleader, or as a point of stability, then we won’t develop our organizational ability to motivate and overcome obstacles this way.

Does This Mean That We Should Not Use a Full Time Coaching Model?

None of this says that a full time coaching model is bad, only that you might take longer to get to certain outcomes. From a time perspective, you will probably get through the kick-off phase faster with a (team of?) full time coaches.

The reality is that organizations might need some of this help. People and organizations learn in different ways and sometimes an “outsider” can do things that no one in the organization can do. Also it might be easier to convince others in the organization that you need a full time coach, as the “as needed” model is harder to work.

In the end both models have pros and cons depending on your situation. The main discussion here is not so much about what is right, but rather to help you understand that even though the prevailing model recommends a full time coach, it may not be the best solution for your context.

Context

- Large scale transformations effecting organization.
- Traditional organizations who are used to bringing in consulting help to bring about change.

[FAQ](#), [transformation](#), [organization](#), [coaching](#)

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