



When and How to Engage a Leadership Coach for Yourself

Rebecca Pope-Ruark • November 14, 2022

Coaching is often lauded as a skill excellent leaders need to empower their people and create healthy, productive work environments. [Carla B. Swearingen's 2020 article](#) explores in detail what coaching is, its benefits, and several ways it can be used to develop faculty “one conversation at a time,” and in her [April 2022 article](#) on coaching for academic leaders, Susan Robison explores one framework and two tools academic leaders can use to guide important conversations with their faculty.

While coaching is a useful skill to possess, working with your own executive coach can be just as valuable, if not more so, to your success as a leader. The [International Coaching Federation \(ICF\)](#) defines coaching as

“partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential. The process of coaching often unlocks previously untapped sources of imagination, productivity and leadership.” A trusting coaching relationship can offer a safe, judgment-free space to explore ideas, decisions, conflicts, and challenges with a person dedicated to your professional development rather than to the institution.

As more people with higher education affiliations undergo training and certification, new and established leaders have greater access than ever before to coaches who understand academia from the inside out and who can offer safe, non-institutionally affiliated spaces to deal with the complex professional and personal realities of academic leadership. I talked to four ICF-certified coaches who work with academic leaders, all with leadership or leadership development experience themselves, to find out reasons clients seek them out as well as their advice for finding the best coach for your leadership role and journey.

Reasons academic leaders engage a coach

The coaches I interviewed shared a variety of reasons people seek them out, including being new to leadership or a specific role, experiencing a crisis or personal challenge, and needing support managing relationships and communication with others.

New to leadership. [Dr. Katharine Stewart](#), coach and senior vice provost for faculty and academic affairs at North Carolina State University, says that many of the leaders she coaches are within a year or two of starting their leadership role and want to focus on being effective in the job. She says these leaders have a strong desire to make a positive impact but often need support with aspects of the job such as managing relationships and responding to crises or challenges. [Dr. Katie Linder](#), coach and associate vice chancellor for digital strategy and learning at the University of Colorado Denver, also works with new leaders who often “want a coach with them from day one to help them navigate the new environment, especially if they have changed institutions.” Like Stewart, Linder says she works to help identify values and priorities, and she notes that she will occasionally help the new leader articulate a leadership theory or philosophy as a foundation for their future work.

[Dr. Jennifer Askey](#), coach, former faculty member, and faculty leadership development professional, notes that, often in the case of department chairs, the new leader might have taken on the role out of duty rather than excitement. She works with these new leaders on not only values and purpose but also leadership skills and strategies they will need to succeed in their roles while maintaining a solid connection to other important aspects of their careers such as teaching, research, or writing.

Crisis or specific problem. The coaches shared that clients often seek them out to deal with a specific professional problem or personal crisis. Askey regularly sees leaders come with a particular problem, such as how to handle difficult people they manage, and want help solving that problem. “But the diagnosis of the problem is almost always more complex than the initial presenting issue,” she says. Linder agrees, noting that “the issues leaders deal with are complicated and multilayered, and coaching gives you the space to talk through all of those different layers of what you are trying to do.”

Linder also sees clients who are in personal crisis, perhaps realizing that they need to move on from a leadership role or are being pushed out, and need to figure out how to deal with that delicately. [Dr. Jennifer Mobley](#), executive coach and former department chair and assistant dean, sees clients who are burned out and “at the nexus of ‘where’s higher ed going?’ but also ‘what’s the next step for me? Have my values and goals shifted?’ They are asking deep questions about their present and their future, which can be a very vulnerable place.” Coaches like Linder and Mobley work with these academic leaders to sort through the present situation and look toward future action.

Relationships and communication. Stewart notes that managing relationships with staff, faculty, and senior leadership is one of the primary reasons people seek her coaching services. Mobley argues that a coaching space allows clients to practice difficult conversations, rehearse different ways of addressing interpersonal challenges, and get feedback on planned strategies for addressing complex situations. Askey uses the example of working with a client on how to effectively run department meetings by talking through goals, planning a strategy to achieve those goals, and then debriefing to make sure the client's actions aligned with their values.

Mobley leverages her background in organizational communication to work with clients interested in how best to communicate their values and to use those values and communication strategies to effectively implement or manage change. She observes that “so many of the problems we have come down to effective communication, and working with a coach allows clients to build up those competencies over time with a trusted partner.”

All four of the coaches I interviewed reiterated that a trusting coaching relationship can be a form of self-care because having a confidential sounding board can be safety net for academic leaders who might not have anyone else they can talk to about their concerns, challenges, and problems. As Linder notes, “Having a confidential space with someone you trust and who is invested in your success as an academic leader is worth its weight in gold.”

Selecting the right coach for you

If coaching sounds like it might be a professional investment you would like to make, what's the next step? How do you choose a coach who you can work with successfully? Askey, Linder, Mobley, and Stewart have some helpful suggestions.

- **Know your goals and initial needs.** Before you connect with a coach, Stewart suggests spending time reflecting on your current status and role, what your biggest challenges and interests are, and what topics you want to bounce off a trusted sounding board. She advises thinking about your purpose and values, desired outcomes for the relationship, and the level of accountability you wish to be held to between sessions. Mobley also encourages those seeking coaching to consider voices that might not currently be present in one's “personal advisory board,” such as someone who challenges your thinking; Linder advises listing any identity factors that might be important to you as well. Doing this pre-work will make vetting potential coaches easier.
- **Check for certification status.** All the coaches I spoke with recommend looking for coaches who hold a professional certification in coaching. Coaches with advanced certifications (PCC or MCC through ICF, for example) have been trained extensively, have worked directly with clients for over 500 hours, and abide by a professional code of ethics.
- **Look for coaches with experience in higher education leadership specifically.** Linder recommends tapping your network to learn about coaches who are already working with leaders you know and trust and for coaches who are either academics themselves or trained in higher education. “Shared governance, for example, is foreign to many people who work in industry,” she says, so having a higher ed–friendly coach who has experience as an academic executive or working with academic executives saves you from having to provide extensive context for every topic you bring to a session. While coaching is about helping clients develop their own solutions and approaches, Mobley notes that working with a coach who has leadership experience themselves also opens up the possibility that they can offer tools and approaches for you to consider, and act as not only a sounding board but also a trusted advisor who can challenge, empathize, and hold space for you.

- **Speak to more than one coach before committing to a coaching relationship.** Having a discovery call with several potential coaches allows you to check for relational fit as well as get to know what their professional values are, how they handle different situations, and how they will engage with you during a session. All the coaches I spoke with recommend looking for a coach outside of your institution who will be invested in your growth and development rather than the politics of an institution. Askey suggests asking a prospective coach how they might handle a particular situation and what the coach's approach to going deep into personal and professional challenges in a session. She says you want a coach you feel comfortable with and can be vulnerable with, but also someone who will push you to greater self-awareness.

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