Internal Coaching

A guide to getting started and making smart, strategic choices.
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Introduction

Growing Demand for Internal Coaches

Cambria has seen a dramatic increase in demand for internal coaching capability to help organizations develop key talent more quickly and for greater long-term impact. The trend is for organizations to leverage internal coaching to accomplish their talent goals faster and more cost effectively at deeper levels in the organization.

Our experience aligns with the 2013 Ridler Report, an internationally recognized research study analyzing strategic trends in the use of senior-level executive coaching, which confirms a trend toward growing use of internal coaches — in addition to, or even in place of, external coaches.

Internal coaches are being asked to leverage their unique knowledge of their organizations’ context, systems, and dynamics to support and develop leaders. Often, internal coaches are therefore better equipped than external coaches to handle a variety of coaching needs.

Top Challenges Addressed

These are the top challenges that internal coaches help to address:

1. Deepening the succession talent pool. As baby boomers transition out, the next generation of leaders are lacking the skills necessary to assume those more senior roles. Internal coaches understand the talent strategies of the organization and when coaching at mid to upper levels can help leaders identify the competencies that will be critical to future roles.

2. Onboarding mid-career hires. Internal coaches are well suited for onboarding support — especially in light of studies that show high “organ rejection” rates for leaders hired from the outside. What’s more, because of wide and growing talent gaps further down the org chart, many organizations are now recruiting greater numbers of mid-career hires in need of rapid onboarding to quickly integrate and gain traction in their new roles.

3. Coaching through change. Companies today are constantly in a state of flux through shifts in strategy, reorganizations, mergers, or implementing new systems and processes. Technologies are evolving at warp speed and leaders need resilient teams to sustain success. Internal coaches can work with leaders to understand what the change means for their specific business and for their team. They can assist in identifying the new behaviors necessary for the change to succeed and stick and how to model the new behaviors while making the transition.

4. Coaching leaders in transition. Whether it’s a lateral move, a promotion, or a cross-sector change in a job, internal leaders moving into new roles need to assimilate into the new role rapidly and galvanize their new teams. Internal coaches understand the culture, the players, key stakeholders, and the written and unwritten rules and norms, and can support a smooth transition for the new leader to more quickly become successful in the new role.
5. **Coaching targeted to specific skills.** Brief targeted coaching is another venue to leverage an internal coach cadre, especially when linked with an executive leadership development program. The addition of brief, 3- to 4-month coaching support to assist leaders in implementing a development plan and practicing new behaviors can yield greater results and sustained behavior change.

6. **Creating leadership program sustainability.** Incorporating coaching as a follow-up to residential leadership development programs provides the support often needed to reinforce how learning is applied back on the job. Coaching can either be individualized or used to assist teams involved in post-session action learning assignments.

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**Advantages of Internal Coaching**

1. **Cost efficiency.** The economic efficiency of building a cadre of internal coaches versus engaging external coaches is an obvious benefit fueling the rise of internal coaching programs. After the upfront cost of providing internal coaches with necessary training and skill development, those capabilities become embedded in the organization and can typically be utilized numerous times per year in a variety of coaching assignments.

2. **Coaching culture.** An additional benefit of training is its daily use in more informal conversations and interactions with leaders and others. Many of our clients have told us that having employees trained as coaches provides a valuable resource to establish and reinforce a culture of coaching inside the organization.

3. **Consistency and alignment.** A common requirement for internal coaches is attendance at either an external coaching program or an internal coach development program that offers a specific coaching model and methodology. The process, language, and competencies can then become a common vernacular among those involved, including the coach, coachee, and stakeholders and/or sponsors.

4. **Organizational context.** Internal coaches have essential knowledge and understanding of their business and political landscape. Often they also have a basic knowledge of the coachee's job function, which makes the coach more credible and provides a level of important context when coaching. Internal coaches who have an understanding of the organization's culture and nuances among different lines of business can help high-potential employees and others learn to work and operate more effectively within that environment to achieve desired results.
Getting Started

Laying the Groundwork

If your organization is exploring whether to adopt an internal coaching strategy as a way to create deeper reach and greater efficiency in cost, consistency, application of cultural knowledge and expertise, consider these four key factors prior to launch:

**Make internal coaching a strategic solution.** Don’t use internal coaching as a separate initiative based on some immediate or ad hoc need. A more systemic, deliberate, and integrated approach to enhancing the talent development solutions will yield greater, longer-term success. For example, aligning internal coaching to specific talent management initiatives can generate significant return on the investment for meaningful targeted coaching.

**Secure executive sponsorship.** Let’s be honest: clout and position power can go a long way in influencing organizational receptivity to an internal coaching program. Through advocacy at senior levels by executives who are walking the talk, modeling the leadership behaviors important to the culture and having engaged in coaching themselves, they can help garner the support and the resources necessary to build an internal coaching practice. Through town halls, all-hands meetings, or blog posts on the internal web, their testimonials and encouragement can create momentum and opportunity for a budding internal coaching program.

**Identify a small but mighty internal coach cadre at the start.** The caliber, skill, and reputation of your first group of internal coaches will establish the reputation of your program. Choose your internal coaches as wisely and deliberately as you choose and scrutinize the external executive coaches you bring into the organization. Consider selection criteria such as demonstrated coaching skills with clients (formally or informally), a track record of solid business and people results, and capacity and commitment to assume this added role, to name a few.

**Adopt a “pull versus push” strategy.** Go where the energy and appetite for internal coaching resides. If there is a single line of business or sector where those in leadership positions are clamoring for coaching, carpe diem! Where sponsorship and advocacy already exist, these are the best places to aim internal coaching because those leaders realize the value and benefit of individualized, targeted support.

Making the Business Case

There are a number of questions to address in exploring the business case for internal coaching — chief among them: What are the critical business and talent management objectives where coaching could help accelerate meeting important deliverables, whether it’s investing in the development of more leaders or helping leaders to hit business goals more quickly by showing up more effectively?

This question gets at the most important criterion for creating internal coaching support: if it doesn’t make an impact on the business, then it’s probably not worth doing.

Leading and managing internal coaching efforts is a labor-intensive process, so planning for a gradual start-up not only helps to ensure early success but also helps build a stronger business case and more “pull” for developing and implementing internal coaching efforts.
Other important considerations:

- What are the gaps that internal coaches could address?
- Would internal coaching provide adjunct support to already existing leadership programs?
- What about providing internal debriefing capability to support 360 or other assessment instruments that the organization regularly uses?
- Is there valuable rising talent that could benefit from additional coaching support at levels below the typical target audience for external executive coaches?
- Is your organization focused on diversity initiatives and wanting to provide additional development opportunities to specific groups such as women, people of color, or leaders in cross-cultural environments?

**Launching the Initiative**

This is about choosing where to implement internal coaching initially, and teeing up the kinds of partnerships needed to ensure success. If the starting point is a leadership program, a tight partnership with the program owner is needed — not only at the outset, but also all along the way — to ensure that the internal coaches understand the content of the program, and that the way they are deployed supports the primary goals of the program.

Quick side note: Many years ago when one of the authors first started down this path at Wachovia, Cambria’s managing partner, Ellen Kumata, advised her to start small. She quickly learned that this was wise advice, both in general and in the specific context of this work. It makes all the difference to begin with a single important target audience, with specific objectives for the coaches to support the coaching client. Taking on too much too soon is a surefire recipe for failure.

If the starting point is a specific audience of key talent, partnering with the talent management function and/or HR will be critical to ensure that internal coaches are deployed wisely. In Cambria’s prior experience leading external and internal coaching for Wachovia, we initially deployed internal coaches in the bank’s high-profile high-potential development program that was being offered to key leaders. This program, developed in partnership with the Keenan Flagler Business School at University of North Carolina, also leveraged a competency-based 360-degree assessment that supported the coaching.

We trained the internal coaches on what coaching is (as opposed to their day jobs) as well as in the skills and process of debriefing the assessment and providing 6 months of individual coaching support to help participants craft and implement a development plan tied to their assessment results and the main lessons in the program.

Another important point: treating the internal coaches as a precious resource — carefully utilizing them in support of the appropriate audiences of leaders — helped to ensure that the designated internal coaches were well-respected and worth the investment.
**Stakeholder Partnerships**

Take a close look at your key stakeholders to clarify where to begin. In most cases, the most important stakeholders are in the HR community:

- Heads of HR for various businesses and functions
- Organization development and change management teams
- Talent management and leadership development functions

To pave the way for internal coaching to serve broader HR initiatives, plan to get input from those stakeholders on what’s needed, what would be a deal-breaker, and how best to address their needs and concerns.

Key considerations before approaching your stakeholders:

- How much do they know about coaching and how it can be used?
- What education and support will they need to make this more than just another “solution du jour”?

In our experience, when you have the HR community behind the effort (e.g., if they feel that their lives will be easier and their clients will benefit), momentum for this work really takes hold. So pay attention to the marketing, education, and communication needed to make this work. Ask yourself: What will the partnership look like between the person who “owns” internal coaching and the HR community and their business/functional clients?

Beyond these initial partnerships, are there executives in your organization who are advocates for coaching and its benefits? How might you and your HR partners leverage these advocates to get internal coaching off the ground, especially if it’s targeted at a broad population of key talent versus participants in a specific program?

Deploying internal coaches into a few influential areas of an organization is often a way to light many fires around the notion of internal coaching, and this energy then accelerates the success of the entire internal coaching process.
Selecting Internal Coaches

Where to Look

Many HR professionals might say that coaching is a part of their job, but at many organizations this coaching has been largely informal and transactional — until recently. Many companies are moving in the direction of a more clearly defined and structured internal coaching strategy, and once the decision to implement this strategy is made, there are several key steps to consider.

The first step is to identify whom to train and deploy as internal coaches.

The best internal coaches share a number of common attributes.

While there are many ways companies identify and select internal coaches, most tend to focus first on the HR community as the initial target group, including HR business partners, generalists, organizational development, and/or learning and development professionals.

Once a strong core group has been formed, some organizations branch out to recruit additional business leaders to round out the cadre. Various approaches are commonly used, such as application, nomination, sponsorship, and even drafting the right talent. Whatever the approach to identifying a roster, we have found that the best internal coaches share a number of common attributes.

Seven Key Characteristics

Now that you have identified your sources of potential internal coaches, how do you choose the people who are most likely to make good coaches? Some in your organization may already have a reputation for being good people-developers, and they will probably be your first draft picks. Beyond that, though, are a handful of personal characteristics that predict who will be a better coach, and we recommend that you look for them among the people who are otherwise ready and able to become part of your cadre.

So what are some of these characteristics? For example, you might want to put “emotional intelligence” first on the list; however, there are so many ideas about what “EI” means and how you would assess or observe it. One of Cambria’s coaches, Kent Blumberg, published his Ph.D. dissertation on the competencies of outstanding executive coaches, using a combination of critical incident interviews and a survey of expert coaches to identify the most important behaviors and characteristics. Borrowing from his findings and adding our experience working with outstanding executive coaches in our own network, we settle on seven characteristics that can be seen in great coach candidates who are not yet coaching:

1. **Optimism.** Good coaches expect the best of others, radiate positive energy, assume that people are acting out of their best intentions, and believe that others are intrinsically motivated to learn and grow.

2. **Self-confidence.** Good coaches hold others accountable to what they have agreed to do, don’t let commitments slide, and confront people if needed to call time out, deal with resistance, or address other non-productive behavior.

   In addition, coaches cannot be intimidated by hierarchy since they often are coaching “above their job grade.” Being able to speak truth to power is essential combined with respect and partnership.
3. **Suspension of judgment.** Good coaches don’t pre-judge others based on initial impressions or stereotypes, nor do they draw conclusions about others’ potential or limits without extensive observation and open-minded information gathering.

4. **Curiosity.** Good coaches are intensely interested in others. They ask lots of questions in getting to know people, their situations, challenges, concerns, feelings — in short, everything they can learn about the other person.

5. **Connection.** Good coaches make other people feel like they are the most important people in the room. They do this by their gaze, body language, listening — in short, their intense focus that communicates how important the other person is in that particular conversation.

6. **Nonverbal sensitivity.** Good coaches are tuned in to the subtle cues in others’ behavior, attend to others’ choices of words, pace, tone, and volume of conversation, and pick up on when their words and body language don’t match.

7. **Emotional self-management.** Finally, good coaches are tuned in to their own emotions and the emotions of others, understand how their words and behaviors are received, and use this knowledge to manage the situation.

There's a lot more to being a good coach besides these characteristics: business understanding and experience, data gathering and interpretation, and learning and mastering coaching techniques chief among them. These alone, however, will not make a person a good coach, so take care to choose those with the greatest promise.

### Three C's to Consider

Once you have your internal coaching talent pool identified, focus on these three important considerations:

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**Credibility.** Many factors contribute to a potential coaches’ credibility, and answering several questions can help you narrow to the most important ones: Do they have a solid, positive reputation? Have they been with the company long enough to establish themselves as top performers? Do they exhibit good discretion and engender the trust of those around them? Is there a balance of assertiveness and integrity? Do they have an ability to establish and achieve goals, for themselves and others? Do they demonstrate consistently good partnering and influencing skills? Do they have a strong brand in the organization as being reputable and competent?

Internal coaches need a solid track record as high performers with impeccable reputations. Such credibility enables them to quickly establish (and maintain) trust and rapport with their clients. Very often, a person’s reputation inside the organization will precede them, so having good “street cred” in the system helps to lay the right foundation for the coaching relationship.

As is true in many situations, when it comes to the reputation of an internal coaching practice in an organization, perception is reality, and one bad apple can spoil the bunch.

**Capacity.** Here are the most important questions for exploring a coach candidate’s capacity: Does he or she have sufficient bandwidth to take on the additional coaching role and responsibility, either...
informally or formally? Some organizations adopt a rigorous 4- to 6- month coaching process for internal coaches that requires 25 to 35 hours of additional work beyond their “day job” for each engagement. Other organizations want internal coaches to leverage coaching in a more informal, ad hoc way, and with that, the expectation is that coaches are coaching in multiple situations and on a regular basis.

Internal coaches must also be adept at managing time and multiple priorities, establishing clear boundaries and limits, demonstrating good organizational skills, and juggling the demands of a full-time job and coaching. Once engaged with a client, they are on the hook for seeing it through to the end, and for maintaining their energy and focus throughout the process.

**Commitment.** Both personal commitment and the commitment of one’s manager is critical to enable the full participation of an internal coach. On a personal level, the coach must have a passion for coaching and find the work personally rewarding. Many internal coaches often wish that their job involved a more official coaching role with a higher percentage of time spent coaching and developing others.

Personal satisfaction is often the motivator that gets internal coaches interested in signing up year after year. It becomes a natural part of who they are and is a way for them to “give back” in a meaningful way. In addition, manager support and alignment allows coaches to integrate the time spent on coaching into their daily activities without concern or worry about how they are allocating their time and focus beyond achieving the objectives and deliverables of their full-time job.

Another important measure of commitment is a coach’s participation in a “community of practice” and/or investing in his or her own personal development beyond what the organization offers. A common practice of many organizations is to host regular meetings of the internal cadre in person or by phone to share best practices, watch-outs, and information about upcoming organizational initiatives that might affect coaching, and in general to contribute to their continued learning and development of that of their colleagues as coaches. Every client organization we have advised on creating an internal coaching capacity has instituted this “community of practice” concept and found it extremely valuable.

An internal coach can also elect to pursue his or her own development through formal coach training programs to continue building skill and competence. There are several quality coaching schools, many offering programs accredited by the International Coach Federation, a non-profit professional organization that represents personal and business coaches.

**Important bottom line:** As you consider your strategy and identify your cadre, select coaches who will be excited and consider themselves lucky when they learn they’ve made your short list. It’s likely they will value the opportunity to add coaching to their professional toolbox and support the development of key talent in their organizations.

One final consideration, as we’ve mentioned earlier: It’s best to start small when building your internal coach capability. That’s the best way to ensure you deploy the best coaches in the first round to minimize risk, manage the process most effectively, and maximize the reputation and value of internal coaching right out of the gate.
A Few Caveats

Internal coaches have a number of advantages over their external counterparts. As noted earlier, they have a deeper understanding to the organizational context, political landscape, and culture that can allow them to function more effectively. They also have insights into the kinds of development experiences (assignments, programs, outside resources) that the organization can make available to their coaching clients.

Despite these advantages and others related to developing and maintaining a group of internal coaches, it is important to also acknowledge that there are a few challenges that come with being an internal coach that either must be worked around or avoided altogether. Below are three very common “watch-outs” to be mindful of.

**Perceived credibility.** Despite their expertise and seniority, internal coaches are not always given the same level of credibility as external coaches. Credibility is also an important success factor in coaching effectiveness, and so it is an important factor in who is designated to be an internal coach. The selection process must be rigorous, with a well-defined and deliberate set of selection criteria and standards.

Factors such as a person’s current and potential coaching competency, level of respect and reputation in current and prior roles, passion and appreciation for the value of coaching, and demonstrated coaching style and attributes, albeit informally, are factors to consider, though they don’t automatically put the internal coach on the same footing as the external coach.

**Confidentiality issues.** From the coachee’s perspective, an intertwining of relationships could impede the development of a coaching-friendly context. Imagine sharing serious concerns about your weaknesses with someone who may be consulting with your business unit leader about whether or not you should be promoted. The potential for role conflicts is obvious and a delicate situation for an internal coach. It can be tough to provide high-quality feedback to someone with whom you have a complicated set of interdependent relationships.

Cambria often recommends arranging coaching assignments so that no internal coach ever works with someone from their own business unit. In our experience, this offers the best of both worlds for coach and coachee. Coaches still have familiarity with the culture, and from the coachee’s perspective, a sense of safety is bolstered by the understanding that the coach will not be engaged in making decisions about the coachee’s future, at least in the near term. When done this way, the coachee experiences the safety and objectivity of an external coach and the organizational savvy of an internal coach.

**Bandwidth and boundaries.** For most internal coaches, the role of internal coach is an add-on while they still have their demanding day job. This can create a risk factor that needs to be closely monitored.

When a coaching request or need emerges, the coach has to respond quickly. Therefore, a best practice is to discuss the coach’s ability to handle this request to ensure that there is adequate time...
to take on the assignment. Otherwise, if coaches are too busy with other activities, their ability to respond may be compromised and service to the client may suffer — which can critically impact the brand and reputation of internal coaching. So it’s important for the internal coaching sponsor to keep this on their radar and understand that some coaches may occasionally have to opt out of an assignment.

**Coach alignment.** This is an important consideration for any new cadre of internal coaches that goes beyond the initial focus on training, certifying, and deploying the coaches internally. It’s critical that you go the extra step with an internal coach development initiative to ensure that all newly minted coaches are working off the same playbook, grounded in the organization’s strategy and how talent development fits into that strategy. In other words, this isn’t about just assembling, training, and releasing a cadre of coaches into the field. Take extra care to make sure that every coach is in sync with how best to coach in concert with the organization’s strategic priorities.

Building a successful, sustainable, and scalable internal coaching strategy is an ongoing endeavor that will evolve as the needs of the organization change and as new coaches are initiated and current members move on. The big wins that justify the effort of developing internal coaches include the potential for significant increases in talent retention, engagement, and productivity; a stronger leadership pipeline; and higher levels of organizational performance. Our clients have concluded that these outcomes are worth the investment.

**Conclusion**

As you have seen, this eBook details our thinking about how to start your internal coaching initiative, including:

- The challenges internal coaching can help you address
- How to structure a strategic approach to internal coaching
- How to make the business case and launch your initiative
- How to select internal coaches — including an exploration of key characteristics

For many organizations, developing internal coaching offers the most thorough means for creating a coaching culture where leaders at all levels engage in developmental conversations that are ongoing, constructive, and motivating.

But a culture of coaching doesn’t happen overnight. First, it requires a commitment across the organization to value coaching from the most senior management levels on down. Second, it requires a critical mass of people skilled in the art and practice of coaching — people who serve as resources to coach and reinforce good coaching by others.

These internal coaches — a combination of HR professionals and line managers who value coaching as a powerful catalyst for development — become sustainers of the coaching culture and thereby make ongoing development through “everyday coaching” a core competency of the enterprise.
Four Final Questions

If you’re considering launching an internal coaching initiative, ask yourself the following questions to see if this is the right way to go:

1. What are your organization’s overall strategic imperatives?
2. How will internal coaching support them?
3. Can you build strong commitment across the organization?
4. Are you prepared to be thorough and patient to drive sustained results?

The answers will help you decide if the timing is right and if your organization is ready.

About Cambria Consulting, Inc.

Since 1985, Cambria has helped Fortune 500 companies, government agencies, and non-profit organizations accelerate the development of individuals and teams. Extensive experience creating and applying best practices in all facets of talent management and development enables Cambria to rapidly implement innovative solutions tailored to each client’s business objectives.

With a worldwide network of consultants and partners, Cambria is recognized for its expertise in executive coaching, talent assessment, competency modeling, role profiling, succession planning, blended learning, and online talent development systems.

About Inside Edge

Inside Edge® is Cambria’s holistic approach to developing internal coaches and internal coaching practices. Cambria has been developing internal coaching capability in organizations for over twenty years, bringing an uncommon level of experience to our Inside Edge engagements. Our approach includes a strategic view of coaching that targets key talent and business drivers, a seasoned training faculty of practicing executive coaches — many of whom have been internal coaches themselves — and a track record of implementing, managing, and enhancing internal coaching practices with high business credibility and impact.