

# COACHING NEWS FROM ESTONIA'S NON-PROFIT SECTOR: SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD

As executive coaching grows in popularity, **Joseph C. Santora**, **Gil Bozer** and **Mari Kooskora** report on their findings from the Estonian non-profit sector, where leaders and their organisations are reaping the benefits of new approaches to their leadership and coaching.

Today, executive coaching has become a very popular practice in Estonia and beyond, utilised by a number of organisations in a variety of workplace settings. The benefits of individual executive coaching can include a greater level of self-awareness, a stronger sense of self-efficacy, improved communications skills, refinement of specialist knowledge and improved skills acquisition, all of which help executives reach their personal and organisational goals as well as to be more effective leaders. In turn, this has helped leaders to create a more positive and productive workplace environment.

In recent years, researchers have conducted a number of studies on coaching in organisations within the Estonian for-profit<sup>1</sup> and public sectors<sup>2</sup>. We have expanded the narrative on coaching by adding our research findings on some preliminary results from our survey, which was based on executives working in the Estonian non-profit sector.

## SURVEY, FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSION

We conducted an online survey of executive directors in order to collect data on a number of key non-profit executive leadership succession issues. One of these issues was coaching, which is an often ignored area of succession planning<sup>3/4</sup> (see side bar, p.44). The coaching section revolved around the executive directors' views of coaching, how it aided goal accomplishment, and the wider impact of coaching.

Our preliminary findings collated from responses to the Non-profit Executive Succession Survey (NESS) were as follows:

- Over 40% of survey respondents did engage with an executive coach.
- The timeframe for coaching interventions ranged between one and three years

- Coaching improved performance almost equally in areas of a) self-management, b) managing others, c) leadership development and d) change management.
- Improving communication and team effectiveness, and improved their organisation's fundraising.
- Coaching is appreciated as being an important initiative for employee and board development.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In general, our findings add value to the conversation on executive succession - an issue that is as relevant in non-profit organisations in Estonia as it is in other parts of the world. Although there is limited research on the effectiveness of executive coaching in the non-profit sector, recent work suggests that coaching is indeed an effective mechanism for building executives' management and leadership capabilities<sup>5/6</sup>.

Executive directors in particular are likely to benefit from coaching. Perhaps the most significant benefit is that it allows these individuals to improve some of the soft skills which are often overlooked in favour of more obvious ones, such as personal development, managing and leading others, and change management. In addition, improved communication, one of the bedrocks of effective leadership, was the foremost outcome for executives who received or had received coaching.

Although coaching is rarely formally recognised as a tool to support smoother leadership transitions (for example developing a succession plan, dealing with 'founder's syndrome', meeting expectations), it is expected that by improving their leadership and managerial skills executive directors will be better equipped to take on senior roles in their organisations and also to develop the internal talent pipeline.

We believe our preliminary findings are both interesting and instructive in further understanding coaching issues faced by non-profit executives - both in general and more specifically in Estonia. The findings are a positive contribution to recognising the potential benefits that coaching can offer non-profit executive directors, a group of people who frequently suffer from isolation, and who are provided with inadequate support structures. Going forward, the future looks bright for executive coaching, but further exploration is needed to shed additional light on coaching in the non-profit sector in this former Soviet Union satellite country.



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A revised version of the Nonprofit Executive Succession Survey (NESS) (2015), a 67-item questionnaire, was placed online for a convenience sample of Estonian non-profit executive directors. The purpose of the survey was to collect demographic data on participants and their responses to succession information on non-profit sector executive directors. For the purposes of this article we focused only on responses to the 'Executive Coaching' section, which consisted of six items. Answers included a yes/no response, a fill-in-the-blank, and further items. In total, 44 Estonian non-profit executive directors completed the online questionnaire. In addition, interviews were held with 15 Estonian non-profit executive directors. Both the questionnaire and the interviews were conducted in Estonian.

## DEMOGRAPHICS

57% of the respondents were male and 43% were female. 70% were non-founders and 30% were founders. The ages of the executive directors ranged from 23-64.

## LIMITATIONS

- 1) The sample may not be truly reflective of the Estonian non-profit sector or applicable to other settings in Estonia or elsewhere
- 2) The size of the sample was relatively small
- 3) Only responses to the 'Executive Coaching' part of the questionnaire appear in this article along with selected interview responses.

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