

JOELLE K JAY

STAYING GREAT WITH EXECUTIVE COACHING

Originally published in Nevada Business Journal, December 2004

The best leaders realize the time to improve is when things are going *well*. Instead of shoring up weak spots when they lead to trouble, smart leaders strengthen strong spots to *prevent* trouble. It's how the great stay great.

One of the most powerful strategies for staying great is executive coaching, which takes into account the specific strengths of leaders, and aims for the advancement of individuals and the company as a whole.

One corporation that has implemented executive coaching is International Game Technology (IGT). Forbes magazine calls IGT one of America's Best Managed Companies. IGT is consistently a high performer, capturing the lion's share of the gaming equipment market at 70 percent

And yet, this is the time they have chosen to enhance their leadership. Now, during their boom, they have instituted executive coaching for top and promising leaders. IGT has launched this initiative while the time, energy and resources are available to further advance the company's success.

What's interesting about IGT's approach is its focus on successful executives. Coaching is extended to the director-level executive all the way up to its senior vice presidents and highest-level officers. Coaching suits this level of leadership, where the issues are so complex. Leaders are able to talk *in context* about things like strategic planning, managing change, and—especially for leaders ascending the ranks quickly—shifting from a narrow concentration on daily operations to more global thinking. Executive coaching at this level does not try to “fix” something that's “broken,” but rather maximizes the opportunities for leaders to successfully manage business.

What makes executive coaching so appropriate for accomplished leaders is its emphasis on building upon existing strengths. By applying this approach with her coach, one IGT executive was able to use her distinctive organizational system to improve her efficiency. Another used her reserved, quiet nature to create tighter bonds among her team. These leaders leveraged their unique styles to sustain the company's growth and improve their own performance in the process.

IGT is just one example of the many corporations maximizing the good times by expanding the capacity of their leaders through executive coaching. The most successful programs are characterized by five important elements.

1. **They focus on high-achieving, high-potential leaders.** The kinds of issues faced by top leaders are the most complex and have the greatest bearing on the success of the company.
2. **They build upon the existing strengths of individuals.** Leaders reach their positions by virtue of their talents. These same talents are the ones to amplify to keep them and their companies going strong.
3. **They are individualized.** The private nature of coaching provides the safety that is vitally important to leaders, who need to be able to explore issues freely, directly, and in confidence.
4. **They are flexible.** The duration, structure, and format of coaching vary from one leader (or one company) to another. It's critical to give the change process time and create a program that befits the goals for the coaching.
5. **They function in context.** The dynamics of a company's people, pace and processes complicate every leader's job. Good programs take this into account while staying true to the vision of the company and the growth of the leader.

When companies offer leaders the opportunity to improve through executive coaching, they take full advantage of the talent in their ranks. But the time to do it isn't when times get tough. By investing in their leaders when they're strong, succeeding companies can capitalize on momentum and push the limits of performance.



Joelle K. Jay, Ph.D., is president of the leadership development practice, Pillar Consulting. As an executive coach, author and speaker, Joelle helps leaders achieve top performance and business results. Her clients include presidents, vice presidents, and C-level executives in Fortune 500 companies. Joelle is the author of *The Inner Edge: The 10 Practices of Personal Leadership*. To find out how Joelle can help you reach the next level, visit: www.TheInnerEdge.com.