

# Symmetrical Coaching

## A New Approach to Executive Leadership



909 Montgomery St.  
San Francisco | CA  
(415)252-6670  
info@triumgroup.com

**Over the past decade, executive coaching has been growing at meteoric rates.** Working with a coach was once the exclusive domain of high performance athletes. Today, CEOs and senior leaders view executive coaches as critical supports for their performance and development. Yet, executive coaching remains somewhat misunderstood as a discipline. The industry is fragmented and the value proposition is relatively subjective. As a result, valuating the quality of a coach or coaching firm and validating the return on investments from coaching can be challenging. Often, coaching programs will produce temporary, surface-level results, instead of powerful, sustainable individual and organizational transformation.

The primary problem with most executive coaching programs today is that they focus narrowly on the individual, and not on the dynamic system within which the individual leader operates. At The Trium Group, we believe that coaching the entire system of interdependent relationships is essential to create lasting, positive change among individuals, teams, and organizations.

Trium has built a world-class coaching practice based on two decades of work with senior leaders at leading global companies, such as: Cisco, Genentech, Dropbox, Warner Bros., and eBay. Our executive clients consistently remark on the transformational impact of our work. Scott Cutler, President of the online ticketing marketplace, StubHub, recently commented: “We are a profoundly different group of leaders after working with Trium’s team. The cumulative, systemic effect of seemingly small but deliberate, coordinated individual changes in mindset and behavior is massive. I give them my highest recommendation.”

Trium’s coaching has this impact because of **five principles** that form its foundation:

1. We are **coaching a system**, namely a leadership team, not just individual leaders. We view leadership teams as living systems. Our coaching is deeply rooted in and guided by principles of systems theory.
2. We leverage the **latest developments in neuroscience** to effect deep, sustainable change. We now know that the brain is malleable. Our coaching leverages this phenomenon through a focus on deliberate, repetitive practice of new behaviors.
3. We leverage the principles of **brief paradoxical psychotherapies** to ensure that we produce positive change in a matter of months, not years. Organizations need to move rapidly. For executive coaching to be effective, we must be able to effectuate change in a short period of time.
4. Our coaching is deeply **integrated with the organization’s strategic objectives**. Coaching cannot be fully effective if it is divorced from the reality of what a business is trying to accomplish.
5. Our coaching leverages the latest research in **human behavior, adult learning, and adult development**. It is impossible to effectively change senior leaders without understanding them in the context of a broader adult development journey.

We address each of these principles in further detail below.

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-Scott Cutler, President, StubHub

## **Systems Theory**

All leaders operate within a system: a leadership team. Because we coach all team members, we can go beyond individual leadership development, orienting toward explicit systemic (i.e., team) objectives. Our coaches also act as a team, constantly aware of systemic goals and coordinating coaching strategies in service of these objectives. The systemic approach also avoids the pitfalls of most traditional approaches, where select members of a team will receive coaching. These approaches not only risk pathologizing, or elevating, the members of a team who are receiving coaching, but they are limited in the degree to which they can impact the performance of the team as a whole.

Trium’s coaching is deeply rooted in systems theory and family systems therapy, with particular grounding in principles developed by Dr. Murray Bowen. We are able to leverage principles common to all living systems to amplify the impact of our coaching, such as the principle that human behavior is almost always reciprocal in nature. For example, a CEO may tend to dominate, exacerbating a direct report’s difficulty to speak up in critical meetings. Effective systemic coaching works with both the CEO and her direct report in a way that recognizes and leverages this systemic phenomenon. The direct report practices new ways of being assertive; the CEO experiments with creating more space. The resulting positive reciprocal feedback loop accelerates and amplifies change. And if the direct report asks for support from a peer, and is witnessed, the likelihood of both direct reports showing up with a more assertive voice is enhanced.

Another phenomenon of human systems (indeed, all biological systems) is the strong pull towards equilibrium, or homeostasis, which makes sustainable change difficult. Understanding this tendency of systems allows us to predict that teams will incorrectly misinterpret early progress as a new level of higher performance, underestimating the strong currents that pull us back to prior, lower levels of performance. Armed with this awareness, we help leaders understand and appreciate the importance of support structures to ensure that heightened levels of performance become permanent and sustain over time.

## Neuroscience

Over the past 15+ years, advances in neuroscience have resulted in dramatic changes in approaches to human development. Trium's coaching methodology leverages cutting-edge neuroscience research on the connection between mind and behavior. Neuroplasticity – the principle that the brain can be rewired through intentional, repetitive new behavior – is foundational for why we have leaders practice new behaviors. We design these behaviors to provide immediate feedback and help build accountability structures to ensure the ongoing, repetitive practice of those behaviors.

Trium's coaching also emphasizes cultivating equanimity - the ability of leaders to access the more aspirational area of the brain, the pre-frontal cortex, in order to down-regulate the more fear-based limbic system, which is responsible for the fight, flight, or freeze response. Working with leaders to be more mindful results in demonstrably greater self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, focus, cognitive capacity, and creativity. Perhaps most importantly, leaders who are capable of cultivating equanimity have access to greater amounts of data, which leads to quicker and more accurate decision-making.

## Brief Systemic Therapy

As demonstrated in the pioneering work of Milton Erickson and the Milan School, Trium believes that significant change in human behavior can occur in a relatively short period. This change is possible even if one does not fully understand the factors that have influenced one's current behavior. This methodological approach allows our coaching to focus on skillful, disruptive interventions that can begin early in the coaching relationship. While many of our coaching engagements extend over multiple quarters and even years, initial engagements are structured to deliver meaningful results in periods as short as four months.

## Linking to Strategic Goals

Coaching divorced from the strategic objectives of the business may further development of individual leaders but will often fail to meaningfully advance the goals of the business in which that leader operates. Coaching

is more effective when the leader being coached understands the connection between his development work and the business objectives for which he is responsible. And - when change elements are grounded in business outcomes, the probability that those change elements are accepted and preserved soars. In coaching engagements, Trium draws upon its depth of experience as a strategic consulting firm to build clear ties between systemic behavioral outcomes targeted and the strategic objectives of the organization. To further support the strategic link, we have assembled a team of coaches who not only have deep executive coaching experience but have also been leaders themselves and can relate to the realities of being a business leader in today's increasingly complex world.

## Human Behavior Change and Growth

One of the most powerful and distinctive aspects of Trium's approach to coaching is helping our clients become aware of their underlying mindsets – the beliefs and assumptions that leaders hold. Our work is focused on helping leaders become more conscious of their beliefs, assumptions, and mental models, while developing the capacity to see the connection between those beliefs and actions. Through our work, leaders often discover that what is constraining their effectiveness is a primary mindset. This is what Harvard professor and researcher Robert Kegan calls moving from subject to object: from being subject to (and driven by) our beliefs and interpretations, to holding those beliefs as object, where we can assess them and, if appropriate, choosing more constructive beliefs. While these kinds of mindset shifts can and do occur as part of the natural process of adult development, skillful executive coaching can catalyze and accelerate these shifts in the service of achieving systemic objectives.

The work of human systems transformation is challenging. It must begin with a leadership team that is committed to its own development and that is prepared to do the hard work of examining deeply held beliefs and practicing distinctively new behaviors. The Trium approach to coaching can be a powerful catalyst for executive team development that leads to sustainable, transformational change.