

The Fearless Thinkers Podcast | Season 2, Episode 16

Best in class executive coaching with Jennifer Porter and Jessica Skon

Masami Cookson:

Welcome to Fearless Thinkers, the BTS podcast. My name is Masami Cookson, and our host is Rick Cheatham, head of marketing at BTS. On today's show, we have Jennifer Porter and Jessica Skon.

Jennifer Porter is an executive coach and experienced operations executive who is passionate about building better businesses through leadership and team coaching. She started her career in global strategy consulting, then held a series of senior operating roles at fast paced, growing organizations, mostly as chief operating officer, before shifting to executive coaching and leadership development. In 2011, she founded the Boda Group, the leading global provider of executive coaching, which joined the BTS family earlier this year.

Jessica Skon is president and CEO of BTS Group. Throughout her more than 20 year career at BTS, Jessica has worked with numerous clients, combining deep business knowledge with transformational development to help people and their companies evolve together. In addition, she has delivered CEO and C suite advisory in service of transformation. She built the BTS leadership practice and pioneered the application of enterprise simulations for strategy execution.

How's it going today, Rick?

Rick Cheatham:

You know what, Masami, really couldn't be better for me because I actually get the day off today.

Masami:

Wow. What a change.

Rick:

Jess will just be sitting down with Jennifer and exploring a little bit about what it means to be a great executive coach.

Rick:

I actually had the chance to listen to Jennifer speak a little while ago and. The really cool thing is, uh, the only thing that matches her knowledge and depth of understanding and executive coaching is her passion for the topic and, and helping people achieve the results they're looking for. Thought it would be best for this one to just let them chat.

And then we'll be following up here in the coming weeks with a series where I'll get to know Jennifer more and our audience will as well.

Masami : Fantastic. Let's get into it.

Jennifer, I am so excited to be having this conversation with you today, primarily because it gives a chance for BTSers around the world and our entire client base to have a chance to learn from you.

The last four or five years, our clients were asking us to support them with executive coaching, broader change initiatives or leader readiness or succession and so forth. So I spent the last four to five years meeting with different firms.

One of the things that struck me about you and your firm and your approach was your unparalleled and exceptional quality standards.

If you don't mind, I'll share a little bit about my experience with coaching, my personal experience.

There were two times in my life when it occurred to me that it would be helpful to have a coach. The first time was when I was asked to take over BTS North America, which is about 50 percent of our business, and the second time was about a year and a half ago when I was asked to take over from our founder and run the global business. So, for me, it was two transitional times. If I'm really honest, I had no idea what to expect. I think the general feeling I had about coaching at that moment was it was mainly used for "problem leaders." I hadn't seen that many examples in my life of proactive – I just want to get better, I want to make sure I form the right team and make the right decisions – so, I would say in both cases, it's been extraordinarily helpful. The first time I'd say I mainly gained a lot of self-awareness around some of my strengths and therefore some propensities that I have and some watchouts. The second time [was] to help me think about my role, what I'm trying to get done and how I get things done.

I can't wait to hear from you. How do you actually see coaching? What's your definition of it? What's the intention with Boda?

Jennifer Porter: The story you tell about your two experiences – they're very consistent with what we hear from the leaders and executives that we work with, which is they don't know what to expect. They maybe have a perception that it's an indication something's wrong, and they're not sure what they'll get out of it. I usually talk about coaching at its simplest.

Coaching is about helping an executive become the best version of themselves. I've been doing this almost 20 years, and I've yet to meet an executive who didn't want to show up every day and be wildly effective, positively impact their colleagues, the business, continue to grow and get better. And yet we find ways to show up every day and be less than the best version of ourselves. So, coaching really helps people do that.

And the way that happens is by a tight partnership between a coach and an executive, where we as coaches help leaders answer five basic questions.

Question one is, who am I? What are my strengths? What are my development areas? What are my preferences? Where do I get and lose energy in my interactions and the work I do? What are my biases, beliefs, my assumptions, what are my past experiences? So, everything that makes me.

Question two is, how am I impacting the humans in the business around me? The more senior we get in an organization, the less feedback we get about the impact we're having. We get at this through our leadership insights process, which is our proprietary 360. It's a very in-depth way to talk to stakeholders around a leader and understand how they experience that leader.

Question three is, how do I want to impact the humans and business around me? When you took over North America, and when you became our global CEO, I think in both instances you probably were thinking, How do I need to shift my leadership? So, creating that leadership vision is what we do with question three.

Question four is, what are the barriers that stand between where I am today and that future state?

And then **question five just says, okay, so now that I understand who I am, the impact I'm having, where I want to go, what the barriers are, how do I actually navigate a path from where I am today to that future state?**

All of those questions sound quite simple, and yet they're extraordinarily complicated to answer.

Jessica Skon:

You're coaching a lot of different C-suite executives on the day to day, week by week, and so is the team. Is there an example of one you want to share that kind of helps to illustrate what it feels like to go through this process with you?

**Jennifer
Porter:**

I'll tell you the story about an executive at Microsoft. I'll call him Mark.

I met Mark a couple years ago. He was in what then was called a partner development program at Microsoft. Part of the program was everyone got assigned to a coach, so if you had asked Mark why he worked with me, he would say, "Coaching was part of the program. I didn't really have a choice."

He didn't really understand what coaching was, but he knew there was a 360, and he was very eager to have that because one of the challenges he was facing [was] he wasn't getting any feedback from his manager. In retrospect, he really thought that I was going to give him advice. And so, he spent a lot of time in our coaching conversations at the beginning giving me context, explaining the players, explaining the business.

And he shared with me, you know, it took me a little while, but I finally figured out that the work to be done wasn't on all those people that [he] was interacting with. It was more [him] looking at [his] own thought process, [his] own decision making, and [his] own behaviors to figure out how I could be more effective.

**Jessica
Skon:**

That resonates a lot with me. I think I had a very similar first starts with my first coach. I think it's because we don't know, we don't know what coaching is, actually, or what to expect, or what it feels like to do the work to become better. I think the world might be confused on that, or maybe it's just Mark and [me who are].

**Jennifer
Porter:**

The vast majority of the executives we work with come to coaching expecting a consulting model. Coaching isn't a model of: we coaches analyze the problem and recommend an answer. Coaching is much more a model of: we bring tools to a leader to help them evaluate and think about their context so they have a broader set of choices they can make and so they can experiment with new behaviors, and ultimately, try some new things and get better.

Jessica Skon: You know, it sounds like through the process, we are also gaining the muscle memory for continuous improvement.

Jennifer: Yes. One of the great things for him has been what he's able to do when I'm not there... He thinks about it in two ways. One is, when he's faced with a difficult challenge, or something he's struggling with, he now can reflect on his own to think – what are the assumptions I'm making? How else can I think about this? Where could I be wrong? – so he has a broader toolkit to do his own analysis.

And the other one is, and I loved hearing this, that he thinks he's a much better coach to his team. Because of our interactions, he's observed a lot of coaching behaviors, and he is therefore much better at listening, asking thoughtful questions, and my sense is his team likes working with him a lot more.

Jessica Skon: In addition to those benefits you just stated, what was he actually working on?

Jennifer Porter: He went in with the goal of, "I want to get feedback, and I want a better working relationship with my manager." He had a very superficially-positive relationship with his manager. They were very cordial with one another. His manager is very positive, but Mark didn't love working with his manager.

What came out of his 360 was a whole bunch of feedback he found useful; [the] most important one for him was the identification of what had been a blind spot: his lack of empowerment of his team. The way that showed up for Mark was [that] he has a real superpower around complex problem solving: the bigger the complicated fire with a customer issue, the better Mark [is] at solving it. That superpower, overused, meant that when big customer problems arose, Mark would jump in and lead the charge of solving the problem and not let his very capable team do their part. They weren't growing and developing to be able to handle those things without him, nor were they feeling particularly excited about working with him because they always felt like they were peripheral. This was a huge blind spot to

him because he really felt like, "I'm in the trenches with my team," right? Like, "I'm being a great leader, up at two in the morning, if that's what we have to be solving this problem," not realizing that it was having a negative consequence.

Jessica Skon: Well, what happened?

Jennifer Porter: He's significantly better. None of us is going to change decades of experience and patterns overnight. He is at the place of what I'll call "conscious competence": when he pays attention, he does a very good job of empowering his team and staying out of the way. Every once in a while, when stakes get super high, and the stress gets super high, he slips, right? And he goes back into saving the day. And so, he's better at seeing it and adjusting, and when it goes awry, but I think that will be a constant bit of effort for him.

The big shift for him with his relationship with his manager was [that] Mark had to change his expectations of what he wanted from this person. He tried explaining to his manager the kind of development he wanted, the kind of feedback he wanted, and he was unsuccessful. His manager was not changing. And so, the big shift for Mark was to really recognize that, if he wanted feedback and development, he needed to find other places to get it.

Jessica Skon: Personally, working with a couple coaches, and then also meeting with potential partners in the market and talking to clients, I do think that given the proliferation of coaches, right, over the last maybe decade or two, has caused a bit of confusion around: what's the expectations? What is exceptional coaching look and feel like?

Jennifer Porter: We are ridiculously selective when it comes to having folks join our team. Depending on who you ask, it's either rigorous or onerous. Those who think it's onerous don't go through the process, which is just fine with us.

It starts with a core set of standards that we require for all the coaches we even talked to about joining the team, [including] being trained and certified by one of the top international coach

federation accredited programs that are super rigorous in their approach.

Second is [that] folks have prior leadership experience. Third is they've been coaching full time at the senior leader level for at least five years.

And then, we're of course looking for folks who align with our values and our operating principles. We're also looking for diversity. I'm very proud of the fact that over 50 percent of our team right now self identifies as being from an underrepresented community, not including gender. (We don't include gender because coaching is such a female-dominated profession.)

So those are the, the sort of bare minimum that we're looking for.

Once we identify coaches that meet that standard, we have an introductory conversation with one of our senior coaches and see what their interest is, how they would fit with our operating model, etc.

If that conversation goes well, we ask them to submit a coaching recording to our coaching practice leader, who scores it on a five-point scale. [The] passing grade has to be a 3.0 or better. And we compare the coaching – their actual practices and methods and tools with our practice model – 90 to 95 percent of the first calls we get do not get a 3.0 or better. Those that [do] have a feedback conversation to assess that candidate's receptivity to feedback.

If that goes okay, we then invite them to submit two more coaching recordings for scoring and evaluation, as well as have structured interviews with three of our senior coaches. The three coaches each follow a separate interview protocol, and get scored on a five-point scale as well. The candidate has to score a 3.0 or better on all three interviews, and then, subsequent to coaching recordings, has to be scored a 3.0 or better.

If all of that works, they get to have a conversation with me to make sure we're really all on the same page in terms of values and expectations. And if that goes well, we ask them to join.

Over the last year or two, our acceptance rate is 1.6%.

Jessica Skon:

Yes, but it's, it's wonderfully rigorous. It makes me feel great that we don't take chances with quality.

Jennifer Porter:

We do not. We do not. And that standard and that diligence continues even after folks join us.

So, we collect quality data on all of our engagements from the leaders that we coach. We sit down quarterly with our coaching practice leader, and we review all that data. We send follow-up summaries to each of the coaches. Each coach gets their quality survey as it comes in, so they can talk with the leader about how to get better and what, you know, what do we need to do differently together.

And then they get their quarterly data, and we ask them to review it. Occasionally, we have a coach who has some persistent scores below our expectations, which are still quite high. If they're not able to adjust their coaching approach, we ask them to leave the team.

Let's imagine I was coaching you, and in the survey under, you know, my coach challenges me, you said, neither agree nor disagree. In our next conversation, I'd say, hey, Jess, it sounds like you might not be getting enough challenge. Like, what? What, what does that look like? What can I do better here to make this a more meaningful experience for you?

We would [then] co-create how to work differently so that you were getting more challenge if that's what you wanted. So, as a coach, I'm getting that at the two-month and six-month mark with every leader I'm coaching, in addition to getting the summary data quarterly.

Jessica Skon:

Jennifer, I'm curious in terms of your life history. You started off in consulting, as you mentioned, and then you were Chief Operating Officer. I would love to hear your thoughts on both why you pivoted to founding an executive coaching firm, but also, perhaps, how some of your past experience helped you

to bring this sort of organizational rigor to setting a high performance bar and the [need for] continuous improvement?

**Jennifer
Porter:**

So, I got into coaching by accident. At my last COO job, I was chief operating officer of Sentient Jet, which is a private jet membership business. And I left there thinking I would go get another COO gig, and an old friend of mine from my consulting days... was running a software company. He reached out and asked me if I would air quotes coach his VP of operations. I told him that I would do it under two conditions: that if I was terrible, he would both fire me and still be my friend. He said, sure.

Uh, he did not fire me. He's still my friend. And so I was, and I'm gonna use air quotes again, coaching this VP. And then other people started calling me and asking me to coach them.

I realized that although I had had two very good executive coaches myself, as an executive, I didn't know what coaching was. **I went and did my training and certification and realized that what I had been doing before was really mentoring, helping, and friending, [but] it wasn't really coaching, but I really liked the art and science of coaching as I got into it, particularly the science, right, because they're deeply rooted in neuroscience and psychology and adult development and motivation theory.**

I was on my own for many years and then was part of another small firm and I didn't have a great experience. That was helpful to me because I could look at what wasn't working well and think about what I wanted to be different. Because at that point I had started or helped start a couple of other businesses, I thought, well, I'll just start a business.

We started Boda in 2011 with the premise of coaching is a profession that should have exceptionally high standards; that we should be measuring our progress and our quality and our impact. We should be continuously improving. We should be forming deep partnerships with our clients. And, we should have a lot of humility about our work. We should treat our clients with incredible dignity and respect – my job is not to judge them, but to support them.

The COO lens is, I think, in systems and data and processes. And so when we started putting together the pieces for how to create that vision, for me, it

came to what are the processes, what's the data we're measuring, how do we track it over time? All the stuff that I like so much.

Jessica: Oh, but it's, it's worked. It's worked.
Okay, one last question for you. Boda. That's a unique name. How, how, how'd you come to that?

Jennifer Porter: When I left my time at Sentient Jet, I was really burned out, and so I decided to do a volunteer vacation, and I signed up to teach English to Buddhist monks in Kathmandu, Nepal, uh, which turned out to be a great adventure. I didn't speak any Nepali, and had never been there, and had never been a teacher.

Every day, I would walk from the guest house where I was staying about four miles to the area where all the monasteries were, and that walk was a lot of stimulus. There are cars honking, and there's exhaust fumes... And when you got to the area where the monasteries were, it was an area called Boda, and it suddenly got very peaceful and quiet.

I thought metaphorically that many of the leaders that we work with – their work lives are like Kathmandu – highly stimulating and intense. The space we create with them in coaching is a lot like the area of Boda, right? It's a little quieter, a little slower, and a little more conducive to reflection.

So, the Boda name stuck, and we changed the spelling because the Nepali spelling tends to have people pronounce "Buddha." And while that's a lovely reference, it wasn't the reference we were going for.

Jessica Skon: I love that. thinking back to my coaching moments... I have come into a coaching conversation stressed. My brain's firing on all cylinders. I've had seven different conversations.

Jennifer Porter: You usually come in hot.

Jessica Skon: [Yes], you come in hot. It's quite remarkable at the end of the 45 minutes or the hour, how the, the forced reflection, right? Calms me down, but [also] gives [me] some clarity, which is pretty critical to how I show up in my next meeting.

Well, thank you, Jennifer. I can't wait for the team to listen to this.

Jennifer
Porter: Appreciate it. My pleasure.
