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by Monci J. Williams

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Are You Ready for an Executive Coach?

by Monci J. Williams

THE AGE OF Customization, which has brought us the personal computer, personal trainer, personal shopper, and personal dater—formerly “match-maker”—now offers the ultimate educational service for managers: the executive coach. In a trend that’s been growing for more than a decade, individuals and companies are seeking the counsel of coaches with a mixture of zeal and trepidation that only career-shaking change in the workplace can bring.

There is no definitive count on the number of coaches practicing in the U.S. and abroad—by now, it may well be in the four figures—and no certification that guarantees quality or qualifications. In recent years, their ranks have been swollen by outplacement specialists looking for new work. If you’re thinking of hiring one, herewith a brief primer on what coaches can do for you.

Why a coach? Managers in the flat and fluid organization of today can’t get work done by giving orders; they must finesse relationships with people throughout the organization. For their part, organizations driving for productivity demand high, and consistent levels of performance from each employee. And today’s increased focus on short-term results, says Robert J. Lee, a longtime coach who now heads the Center for Creative Leadership, has “eliminated the tolerance for insufficient and idiosyncratic behavior.”

The growing presence of coaches in the business world also signals a major shift in organizational attitudes toward the management of employees. At least in some places, coaching

reflects an enlightened recognition that people can grow and change. “The attitude used to be, ‘That’s just Joe. That’s who he is,’” one training and development specialist says. “Now it’s ‘Joe has some developmental needs he has to address. How can we put Joe on a path to growth?’”

Because coaching can have real impact on a manager’s performance—even more than training courses, many human resource professionals say—proactive companies such as American Express, Corning, Hewlett-Packard, Morgan Stanley, and Philip Morris have begun to offer private coaching as part of leadership development. But the bald fact remains that most managers who are selected for coaching are targeted because, in the non-blaming language of the trade, “something’s not working.”

Coachees go through a process that includes an assessment, the setting of goals for change and improvement, a plan for achieving those goals, and anywhere from three months to a year of sessions with the coach. The most thorough assessment is 360-degree feedback, in which the coach collects information about what Joe is like to work with from everyone around him—peers, bosses, and subordinates. The feedback session, in which the subject hears the results, often occurs off-site over the span of two or three days, and for good reason: Though coaches are careful to dish up the good along with the bad, there is nothing more disconcerting than meeting up with oneself. Says Kathryn Williams, a partner in KRW International, a coaching firm based in Winston-Salem, “Sometimes people get angry. Sometimes people cry.” Then they get to work.

While 360-degree feedback may be the assessment vehicle of choice when the coachee is, say, a key senior executive who has no idea of the devastating impact his inability to trust subordinates has on productivity, it is only used in about 10% of coaching situations. The reason: It’s expensive and soaks up the time of about 20 other employees per recipient.

Binders full of feedback data may help legitimize a business service that, in some eyes, may stray too much into the realm of the touchy-feely (and some justification may be called for when the price tag runs from \$175/hour to 10% of the executive’s annual compensation). But coaches say that most career pitfalls are predictable enough for the experienced eye to spot even without all the paper.

As an alternative to 360-degree feedback, some coaches “shadow” their coachees, following them around and taking notes. For managers whose problems are less critical, even that level of assessment may be neither necessary nor cost-effective. Many coaches get feedback only from the boss who retains them; then they focus exclusively on working out the kinks in the coachee’s relationship with that boss. Other coaches say they can size up the situation just by talking to the person to be helped. One is Marilyn Puder-York, a clinical psychologist in New York City, who is most often hired by individuals themselves rather than by their employer. “People have patterns of behaviors and beliefs,” she says. “When they talk, I can hear their themes.”

The simplest coaching situations involve fit: Josephine came from a rough-and-tumble culture that put a premium on individual performance and a macho stance, which may have meant yelling at the boss when he yelled. But her new job at Collegiality Inc. requires a more laid-back style. Or the move necessitating coaching may be not from one organization to

Coach . . .

another, but from one rung of the ladder to the next. Managers most often need help, says Kathleen Strickland, CEO of the Strickland Group, a New York City human resource consulting firm, at three points in their career: when they first ascend into management, when they move into senior management, and when they make it onto the executive team.

At each point the subtle rules and requirements for success change. “As you move up in your career, communications and relationships are increasingly important,” Strickland says. “Most people don’t get that. They’re still hell-bent on performing.” According to Lauren Ashwell, a vice president of training and development at Morgan Stanley, “New managers are successful as individuals, and now they need to manage through other individuals. It’s not clear to developing leaders what they’re gaining. They know, however, what they’re losing—the lifeline to what made them successful.”

Coaches can also help common personality types be more effective—and less irritating—on the job. The stand-out dysfunctions occur at both ends of the human spectrum: people who are aggressive, abrasive, domineering, and/or so task-oriented they don’t develop good relationships with colleagues, and people who are introverted and shy. Coaches even act as the organizational equivalent of a marriage counselor, teaching people how to surface issues and resolve conflicts up and down the chain of command. “The conflict resolution in most organizations,” says Kathryn Williams, “is abysmal.”

Consider the experience of a 40-year old banking executive whose hard-charging style didn’t fly when he changed companies: “I had come from a fast-moving, results-oriented culture that embraced change—a very natural fit for me. This culture wants change, but is scared by it. It wants to be results-oriented, but it isn’t yet.

How you get there is still more important than what you do.”

The discomfort of poor fit exacerbated natural tendencies that can irritate colleagues: “I became short, adamant, and was just driving things through. I was tense, stressed, and came across as aggressive and tough. I was missing what was going on in the room around me—interpersonal dynamics, subtleties that were important to getting buy-in on my ideas.”

Confidentiality is critical. Ask for an up-front agreement about what the coach will tell your employer.

The key benefit of coaching was making the executive aware of what was happening. “You don’t charge into a restaurant and say, ‘I want food now! Serve me,’” the coachee says. “You can’t do that in the workplace either.” Or, as the coach pointed out, you can—but it doesn’t work.

If you are selected for coaching, the attitude, as they say, is gratitude, albeit laced with a dollop of caution. You have, after all, just been handed a customized map of the road to success. And fortunate you are heading into the 21st century in the employ of a company that values you despite your flaws, and actually—*mirabile dictu!*—wants to invest in you.

Now for the caveat: Confidentiality is critical. Unless you are paying the coach yourself, you are not the coach’s client. The organization is. Ask for an up-front agreement about what the coach will tell your employer. Information appropriate to be

shared includes the goals that have been set, whether you’re showing up for your appointments, working toward your goals, and making progress. Inappropriate reporting includes personal problems such as depression and marital difficulties.

If you’d like to hire a coach for yourself, contact the human resource professionals at your company or at the local chapter of a professional association like the American Society for Training and Development. Pick a coach who has formal education in psychology or organizational development as well as experience in the real-world dynamics of business.

While it may not be as challenging as performing brain surgery on yourself, coaches recommend not being your own coach. “It’s very hard to know what we don’t know,” says Strickland. It’s also true that, human nature being what it is, most of us tend to toss out the truths we most need to hear.

If, however, you have already been jolted into self-awareness, the Career Architect, a system that helps people create their own career development plans, may help you move along. It is based on ground-breaking research into how and why people succeed and fail conducted at the Center for Creative Leadership by Mike Lombardo, a former coach and trainer, and his partner Bob Eichinger. It’s available in workbook and software formats through Lominger Ltd. in Minneapolis.

As for those of us who prefer the lovely cushion of oblivion that comes with believing the problem is always someone else, may this article introduce you to the possibility that you, too, might benefit from a dose of managerial self-scrutiny and growth. The days of sweeping everything under the organizational rug, including one’s shortcomings, are gone. ■

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