

# A business coach could make you an all-star

Marketing Intelligence / Joanna L. Krotz



They were scarcely heard of 10 years ago. But executive coaches now seem to be everywhere, promising jet-propelled careers, feel-good success and always-on services via phone or e-mail.

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Lots of hard-charging executives and entrepreneurs are heeding the call. Rather than making managers look weak or defensive, coaching is now seen as a smart tactic to boost individual performance.

"Coaching is catching on because of how much people are being asked to do," says Russ Long, a coaching veteran based in Charlotte, N.C., who runs Change Innovations and also trains other coaches. "The speed of change now causes information overflow. There's no time to think or process, to share work and ideas. Fewer people can do it all so fast."

The burgeoning demand for coaches, not surprisingly, has spurred a jump in the number of people who want to *be* coaches (for details, see [this article](#)). The nonprofit [International Coach Federation \(ICF\)](#), which bills itself as the world's largest association of personal and business coaches, has seen its membership double in recent years, to more than 5,000 members in 36 countries. The Washington, D.C.-based federation offers a popular online referral service that includes a searchable directory for people seeking coaches.

Could a coach help you?

Like anything else, that depends on whether you find the right coach for you. If you give the coaching process your full commitment and — this is key — you work with an appropriate as well as qualified professional, odds are good that you'll be able to conquer your most serious business challenges.

Here are some tips and things to consider before you embark on a coaching search.

## **Finding a qualified coach**

First thing to mention is this: All coaches are not created equal. All someone needs to do to call himself a "coach" is print business cards and look credible in a suit and briefcase (or, for the ex-dot-com clientele, pass muster in Gap casual and messenger bag).

No one really knows how many so-called coaches are out there. But while ICF and other bona fide groups are busy developing standards and certification benchmarks, clients can easily be flimflammed.

So, by all means, check credentials. A number of groups, such as the ICF, offer licensing and credentialed training courses worth verifying. That will help you winnow the pros from the amateurs. But it's not conclusive. Make sure you ask for recent references.

Also, ask pointed questions about the coach's experiences. If he or she spent the past 20 years in Europe and your business is all-American, that terrific relationship won't drive you anywhere. You want experience that supports your particular business needs.

### **What coaches can do**

In the end, you may have to commit some time in order to find a coach that is qualified, properly trained and has the particular business experience relevant to your needs. But the client satisfaction rate for using coaches is generally high.

In 2001, global coaching firm Manchester Inc., based in Jacksonville, Fla., surveyed 100 executives, mostly from the Fortune 1000, who had received its services through company-paid programs. The results showed an average return on the company's initial investment of 5.7 times, or more than \$100,000 each.

Benefits to the participants included:

- Better working relationships with direct reports (77%) and supervisors (71%).
- Improved teamwork (67%).
- Deeper job satisfaction (61%) and conflict reduction (52%).

### **Developing game plans**

Generally, business coaching is useful when companies or staff members are in the throes of transition, when a manager is warring with himself or with superiors or subordinates, or when market conditions or personal goals require you to ramp up to the next level — like an athlete preparing for the Olympics.

Business coaching is not psychological therapy. Coaches don't focus on the past or help you to heal. Nor is coaching like management consulting, where the expert's recommendations are designed to change the organization or solve company problems. Instead, the business coach partners with clients to help them achieve individually shaped goals. Those are defined and agreed to before coaching begins.

You may have gobs of smarts, vision, expertise, charm and perseverance, but if you also have trouble getting action or loyalty from people (think: peers, customers, employees, bosses, vendors), your success can only be limited — at best.

"The implementation of business is largely interpersonal," notes Kerry Sulkowicz, a psychiatrist and coach with New York consulting firm Katzenbach Partners.

### **Getting court time**

Don't think for a moment that this coaching stuff is for folks who can't quite make the grade. Every top performer can improve with a coach, experts say.

Yvonne Tocquigny founded her marketing company in Austin, Texas, back in 1980. Today, Tocquigny Advertising bills about \$25 million a year, employs 80 and recently

opened a Chicago office. Tocquigny has been working with coach Katie Lane for about a year.

"My coach charges \$200 an hour," Tocquigny says. "That sounds like a lot, and for the first six months of being told I would benefit from this, I thought it was outrageous and a trip to Europe would be a better use of the money. However, I now believe the changes she has brought to me are the best bargain on earth.

"I learned that what people sometimes see in me as very intense, impatient, critical behavior comes from a fear that we will fail," Tocquigny says. "Exploring that fear, learning about it and explaining it to my team has helped them to see me differently. I can now express myself completely honestly without inciting defensiveness in others. The freedom and effectiveness of honesty and the productivity that it leads to is very powerful."

### **Going through the warm-ups**

So, why not just take a hard-nosed look at yourself, get a 360-degree review from the nearest-and-dearest and simply embark on your own path to enlightenment?

Because nine times out of 10, it doesn't do the trick, experts say. "Most business owners and executives are too immersed in details, too busy or rigid or full of preconceptions to do it on their own," says Herb Greenberg, founding chief executive of Caliper, a Princeton, N.J., psychological testing service that's assessed more than 2 million people for 25,000 companies around the world. "You need outside objectivity and observation." (Check out [this article](#) by a bCentral colleague who disagrees.)

Experienced coaches stress the need for a trusting, intuitive fit between coach and client. It's the relationship, the rapport that drives the process. Make sure you instantly feel comfortable with the coach. Some coaches also insist on written assessments and personality evaluations.

### **What the gate fees are**

Like credentials, fees are all over the lot, ranging from \$75 to \$500 or more per hour.

Many coaches recommend retainers or project fees, rather than hourly rates, so the meter isn't running for every conversation. "Yes, that guarantees income for the coach, but it encourages clients to use the coach more and to feel free to e-mail," Sulkowicz says.

Typically, the coaching process includes half-hour to one-hour sessions held weekly or monthly. A program of six to 10 face-to-face hours and open-ended e-mail or phone calls for six months can run \$5,000 to \$15,000, depending on the coach's experience and the level of your strategic needs.

Most coaches will willingly get acquainted in an initial consultation or phone conversation. To find one, canvas associates for recommendations. Or, ask for referrals from the ICF and similar organizations, including the American Society for Training and Development, the [Society for Human Resource Management](#), and the [American Psychological Association](#), all of which have coach memberships.

Ready to play? While you mull over the idea, consider this from veteran coach Russ Long: "Coaching means dealing with the personal and real issues that separate success from comfort level. It can be the difference between doing things by default and doing the right thing the first time.