

Choose a coach with care

By BARBARA MOSES

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Carole's manager sent her to see a corporate coach because her performance had suddenly declined. "I told him this nuanced story about getting over my father's recent death, how my marriage was in trouble and I was having difficulty coping with it all. And that basically my job was the least of my problems, because I didn't really care much about it any more."

The coach's response? Carole sighs. "He asked me what my passion was."

Executive coaching has become a booming multibillion-dollar industry in North America. Daniel Martinage, executive director of the International Coach Federation, reports that his organization's membership has increased to about 7,000 from 1,500 in the past 2½ years. Similarly, the Association of Career Management Professionals International, which also counts among its members many who call themselves coaches, has seen significant growth.

It's not difficult to understand the growing interest in and demand for coaching. The bloodletting of managers has left those remaining with backbreaking portfolios and wide spans of controls. The result is to make today's managers often "invisible managers" when it comes to the traditional role of coaching and developing their people. Gone also are the days of the well-thought-out-management curriculum. Most of my HR clients tell me: "We're lucky to get them for a day, much less the several days required. And half drop out at the last minute because of time conflicts."

People seek career and business coaches for many reasons, including help in better balancing their work and personal lives, dealing with stress, improving communication skills, navigating office politics and becoming better executives. Many organizations also send staff to coaches -- primarily senior managers, but also those considered high-potential -- to help nurture leadership skills and identify and work on behaviour interfering with their effectiveness, such as poor delegation or lack of boardroom presence.

Coaching is not cheap. If an individual is paying, he or she may be looking at anywhere from \$250 to \$500 a month, while the corporate tab usually comes in at \$5,000 to \$10,000 for a typical six-month contract. (Many coaches do not work on an hourly fee basis.)

But to really understand the coaching phenomenon, we have to understand the implicit promise and its context. Look at Web sites selling coaching services and the phrases that appear frequently are "achieve your full potential," "get the life you always wanted," "be happier, more effective, and work less" -- heady promises when you consider philosophers and analysts have devoted lives to studying these subjects.

These promises are pitched to insecurity and ambition in a quick-fix society where everyone wants a leg up ("no matter where you are in life, there is always a desire for more. More success, more money, closer relationships") and framed in a language that is highly goal-focused and

performance-based and borrows heavily from sports coaching ("a coach challenges you to find out what winning in life really means to you").

This mass marketing of personal coaching has led to rising concerns among coaching and career professionals. In a column about coaching in 1999, I observed that many career professionals were changing their titles from therapist and counsellor to coach because of the growing lure of coaching. Now, several coaches I spoke to said they are thinking of changing their titles back to counsellor, strategist or facilitator.

Coaching is a high-profit enterprise. It is also almost entirely unregulated, despite the efforts of the major professional organizations, which variously certify training programs, provide training, accredit individuals and require members to abide by ethical standards. But currently, as one coach told me, "anyone who is unemployed and has a telephone can call themselves a coach, and the field is full of them."

Indeed, many talented professionals are concerned about the influx of untrained, self-styled coaches into their profession. As Karen Wright, president of Parachute Executive Coaching, says: "I spent four years studying to be a coach. I read professional journals, attend and present at conferences regularly and take my professional responsibilities very seriously. But now anyone can take an Internet course which promises them an easy income."

Similarly, Rey Carr, founder of Peer Resources, says: "Coaching reflects natural tendencies so many people have of listening and asking questions. So some people say, 'Heck, I may as well be paid for it.' With minimal outlay, you can be a coach. You can even do it by telephone, work at home and never have a face-to-face interaction. They get the basic skills but don't have the ability to engage in deep listening, or the important life experiences to understand the variety of things that can happen to a person."

There are numerous distressing, off-the-record accounts about the behaviour of these instant coaches, from the 27-year-old who boasted how he was working with a suicidal middle-aged woman, to the tone-deaf and tool-happy: No matter what the presenting issue, they use time-tracking checklists and batteries of tests unrelated to the presenting issue, from which they interpret the results to their clients as "truth," despite having little or no training in testing.

That said, there are also many stories of people who attribute an enhanced emotional state and increased effectiveness to seeing a coach. Indeed, according to Mr. Carr, there are fewer instances of public complaints about coaches than there are about other helping professionals.

Perhaps the biggest concern is where inexperienced coaches tackle problems best left to others. As Mark Venning, president-elect of the Association of Career Professionals International, comments: "Coaches need to understand their professional boundaries, and many lack the necessary training to know when they are out of their depth."

As any skilled practitioner knows, often the presenting issue is not the real underlying problem. Inexperienced and poorly prepared coaches will fail to recognize deeper psychological issues, such as the depression that sometimes accompanies life changes, and lack awareness of when to

refer a client to a psychologist. And although coaches go to great pains to distinguish themselves from psychologists, therapists and counsellors, claiming they work on the present and not the past, in practice it is often impossible to separate the two.

Consider, for example, a relatively common story. An executive seeks a coach's advice because he cannot decide between career options A and B. Option A offers the potential to make huge money but work that by his own description would bore and embarrass him; Option B is more interesting and challenging but less lucrative. The coach helps him examine his values and the tradeoffs involved in each. And yet the executive remains stuck. He will be unable to make a meaningful decision unless he can drill down to the real issue here: He is driven to compete with his highly successful father, even if it means doing work he despises. If the coach cannot help him understand the past, he will be doomed to repeat it.

In writing this column, I spoke with numerous coaches and representatives of professional associations, as well as people who have worked with coaches. There is probably more variability in talent and training in this field than in any other I have been exposed to.

Many are seriously committed, skilled and compassionate professionals. They understand the pressures and impact of the contemporary workscape, and can sensitively support clients in resolving conflicts and maximizing their success and satisfaction. They can identify the factors interfering with effectiveness, inspire people to mine their internal and external resources, and support them in getting to where they want to go and have the capacity to get to.

But there are also many who don't have the training or the capability, are insensitive to individual differences and lack understanding of the complexity of life challenges.

They've got the glib lingo and the quick hit tools, but they don't know what they don't know. They may have arrived in the field with a genuine desire to help. But with all their evangelical zeal, cheerleading for self-actualization, and fervent regurgitation of such pat phrases as "finding your passion," "core values" and "stretch goals," I wonder if they can make a meaningful difference in someone's life.

If you think you can benefit from a coach or are sent to see one by your organization, take advantage of the free "let's check each other out" session many coaches offer, and choose carefully.

Finding the right guide

Google "executive coaching" and you will get 120,000 hits. These resources on coaching, selecting a coach training program and finding a coach will get you started:

<http://www.acpinternational.org>

The Association of Career Professionals International provides training and professional certification, and has a referral service of career professionals clearly described by location and areas of expertise. ACP International is an excellent source of information and resources.

<http://www.coachfederation.org>

The International Coach Federation issues credentials to coaches, provides accreditation to coaching training programs and has a referral service of coaches listed by location and coaching category.

www.peer.ca/coaching.html

Peer Resources (Navigation Tools for the Heart, Mind, and Soul) is an excellent source of information and material on coaching and mentoring. Check out the comprehensive list of conferences, reviews of top books and discussion of key issues and trends.

<http://www.linkageinc.com>

The just-released book **Profiles in Coaching** examines 50 well-known coaches divided into five areas of expertise: behavioural, leadership development, career/life/transitions, organizational change and strategy.

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