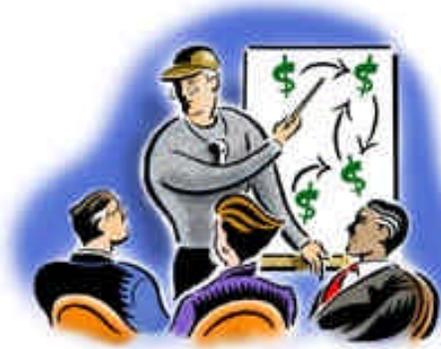


Why a CEO's Game Plan Now Includes an Executive Coach



With the U.S. economy in the doldrums and corporate news of layoffs and financial scandal commonplace, it would seem that now would be one of the worst times for an executive coach to hang out a shingle. Surprisingly, however, the crisis in Corporate America appears to be creating a demand for these specialized career consultants. Peter Topping, director of Executive Education and a senior lecturer in organization and management at Emory University's Goizueta Business School, says, "Bad economic times tend to put more stress and pressure on executives, thus providing a greater need for external coaches to help these executives perform at their highest level."

As if the business environment wasn't already difficult enough, the Hay Group, a management-consulting firm based in Philadelphia, notes that today's CEOs have an average tenure of only 18 months, and are about "three times more likely to be fired than CEOs appointed before 1985." Considering these statistics, there is little wonder that top-level professionals are seeking out executive coaches to appropriately deal with the stresses of the job.

Where the CEO or CFO may not have previously considered using the services of a coach, today's corporate leaders are more open to the process. Topping notes that anecdotal evidence suggests the "complexities of business, as well as media coverage and word-of-mouth" are boosting the cache of the profession. (Unfortunately, Topping says that since many executive coaches work as independent consultants, rather than with a management consulting or coaching firm, gathering specific data on the field remains difficult.)

While the difficult economic times have caused many companies to cut back on group in-house sessions with executive coaches, individual use of these professionals appears to be strong, according to Deborah Brown-Volkman, a career coach based in Long Beach, New York. She says that the "process of executive coaching is a very personal one, where the executive explores career options, creates a game plan and ultimately implements that plan." Brown-Volkman describes her typical client as "a senior executive or manager who wants to transition into a new position either within their present or in a different industry, or an individual looking to get the passion back into their present career."

Brown-Volkman also notes that many more of today's overworked and stressed out company executives are concerned about time management and work-life issues. "They are turning to executive coaches to help them work on the satisfaction level at their job, and to try to find more balance in their life," she says. For some of these individuals, the answer to the time crunch and lack of control that comes from working for others may be found in becoming an entrepreneur, she notes.

In-house company-sponsored executive coaching initiatives are less likely to address personal issues, and are usually geared more toward leadership, communication and team building training, says Augusta Horsey Nash, managing director of Co-active Process Systems (CPS), a professional coaching practice in Atlanta. She adds that while independent coaches also focus on this sort of work, unlike the in-house coach, they can provide a fresh view on the client's situation. As well, Nash notes that the executive may feel better able to discuss company problems with an independent coach, more so than with an in-house employee. Nash has coached potential executives in the Emory Executive Education Leadership Program, as well as executives at a variety of U.S. companies.

But whether an individual uses the services of an in-house or independent executive coach, Nash believes that the coach should aid the executive in finding ways to achieve career satisfaction, in addition to reducing on-the-job stress. Managing a company in the midst of widespread layoffs or in the process of a difficult merger and acquisition, can certainly create tremendous stress for executives. Nash says that company managers and team members left behind after a downsizing or restructure can benefit from sessions with a professional coach. A coach can help them look at what gaps have been created in the business, or show those left post-merger how to collaborate in a restructured business.

An executive coach can be particularly helpful in instructing the client in ways to effectively manage the psychological pressures that come with leading a company in a state of flux. Rick Gilkey, a professor in the practice of organization and management at Goizueta, says, "The psychological and political arena at work, if not well managed, can take a lot away from the job performance." Gilkey also holds an appointment at Emory University's School of Medicine as a professor of psychiatry.

In his forthcoming (and as yet untitled) book on executive coaching, Gilkey takes a look at the psychological principles involved in leadership training. Jason Aronson Publishing will publish his book in the spring. Says Gilkey, "The impetus for the book came from a call by professionals in the field of mental health – psychoanalysts, psychologists, and social workers – all interested in this area of the practice. Top-level executives often wield tremendous impact on their work environment." But, sometimes the large egos common to upper-level executives can create problems in the workplace or impede on effective leadership of the business. It then becomes key for the executive to learn how to effectively use their "strong personality to positively influence the work environment,"

Despite the pressing demand, locating a reputable executive coach requires a little investigative work. Topping points out, "With all of the downsizings among human resource functions, there are more and more people going independent as coaches -- or joining private companies that specialize in these areas." He adds that with a variety of organizations offering coaching credentials, with no one professional license or certification process required, anyone could hang out their shingle and claim to be an executive coach. (However, Nash does note that some of the larger coaching organizations, that do provide certification, can act as a good starting point to "understand and explore different varieties of coaches." Such organizations as the International Coach Federation, Birkman International, and Coach U offer a variety of certifications for executive coaches.)

Gilkey suggests that those interested in obtaining the services of an executive coach look to references from their peers or from someone in their company's human resources department. However, in the interest of confidentiality, the coach should maintain a direct and personal relationship with the executive, and not the company's human resources person.

According to Topping, a good executive coach should have "a servant leader orientation" and should not simply be looking to build his or her resume in the process. The coach should also have a personality that is a good fit to the executive's personality and demeanor. Most importantly, a good coach needs some understanding of the business or industry of the client, in order to put the proper context around their coaching. "The coach also needs to have credibility with the client -- due to their experience, wisdom, style and referrals," says Topping. "Coaching is among the more intimate relationships we will have in business; if there is a clash of styles, behaviors, and attitudes, then the relationship will not be successful," he says.