

Getting a Life coach

You may have it in you to be a really big success but do you need a personal coach to bring it out? A booming coaching business indicates that more and more executives are opting for this route to self-enlightenment. By Erika Lucas

Having an executive coach on your arm is fast becoming the latest business status symbol. But is coaching just an up-market form of navel gazing - or can it make a real impact on a manager's performance?

Big business certainly seems to have discarded its previous scepticism about coaching and become something of a convert. Recent research by Hay Group suggests the market is booming – with over half the organisations it surveyed reporting they had increased their use of coaching over the past year.

According to Susan Bloch, head of executive coaching at Hay, the trend has been prompted by an increasingly pressurised work environment, where already hard-pressed executives are expected to deliver more, better and sooner.

"The financial community is increasingly judging leaders on adaptability and vision as well as profit-making capability, and not all top bosses know how to use their skills wisely," she says. "Many people who get to the top miss the support network they had at less senior levels, and feel too inhibited

to discuss personal performance with colleagues, leaving them to face difficult decisions alone. Coaching provides them with an independent ear and honest feedback, without fear of judgement or hidden agendas."

Research by the Institute for Employment Studies suggests that organisations are bringing executive coaches in to tackle a variety of issues. They might be called in to help a senior manager settle into a new role or boost their skills in a specific area. Organisations are also using coaching strategically – to underpin change programmes, for example, or to reward and retain key staff.



Finding an appropriate coach can, however, be something of a minefield. The industry is as yet unregulated and there is no one professional body that registers or accredits coaches, although there are a number of networking groups that offer information and advice.

Coaches themselves come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Several of the big name consultancies now have coaching practices, but the field also includes academics and a whole clutch of independents who may hail from either business or counselling backgrounds.

Methods of delivery vary too. Some coaches operate face-to-face, while others offer telephone or 'virtual' sessions. As you would expect with any tailored, one-one form of development, price tags tend to be hefty. A year's coaching programme from a reputable consultancy, for example, would probably cost around £20K per executive.

This might sound like a very expensive form of management development, but according to coach Carolyn Free-Pearce, the results justify the investment.

"If you go along to a training course you get a big dose of something, come back all inspired – and then nothing happens," she says. "But coaching is a developmental change that is substantial. It takes root and then proliferates throughout the organisation, so in the long run it is a better investment."

Professional Manager spoke to three executives who have used the services of an executive or life coach to find out what it has done for them:

Andy Smith

Andy Smith (pictured left) is head of the School of Sports Science and Psychology at York St John College. He worked with coach Alan Gorringe from RightCoutts to help him embed a new management team.

"I manage some relatively big projects for the college so it was right for them to invest in me – and I wanted to do something that was a lot deeper and richer than the usual type of management training activity. So there was a mutual decision between us that this would be a good thing. It has to be a two way process. Your employer has got to think you have a pivotal, strategic role and you as an individual have got to be open to new ways of developing and training.

I am, however, very task oriented and wanted to do something that was going to have a real impact and enable me to do a better job. The first part of the process was almost like a needs analysis, where we looked at what needed to be done. But it wasn't about technical issues like time or budgets management – it was looking at deeper issues, which were at the heart of my performance as



an academic leader. We got to some deeper meanings, but that took time. You have to develop a relationship and the confidence and the trust, because we were discussing some very sensitive issues at times.

Alan was also very good at helping me work through how I manage my own workload and how I could get a better work-life balance. It was a bit like pulling an onion ring apart. He helped me unwrap different layers and get to the heart of the issue – which was quite difficult, but immensely rewarding in the long term. I don't think I work any less hours now, but I have found it easier to jump out of role so that when I am at home relaxing I am at home relaxing and not thinking about work.

I have also got a lot better at delegation, in terms of the actual emotionality of letting go of a project,

and knowing that different people want to be delegated to in different ways.

The impact still feels very real and the techniques that I learnt and conversations that we had still affect the way I go about things day to day. It's almost like I can hear Alan's voice at the back of my head at times. So it has had a profound and long-lasting impact. And also I really enjoyed it. I looked forward to Alan coming to see me because it was something I wanted to do and it added enjoyment to the week."

Jan Spencer

Jan Spencer (pictured above) is head of the Commercial Training Centre at West Herts College. She enlisted the services of life coach Carolyn Free Pearce three months ago, to help her 'shift up a gear' and re-energise her performance.

"I felt coaching would help me be more effective as a manager and would also help me to harness the untapped potential within my team. I wanted to become a better and more supportive manager for them so that they could get more out of their working lives, which in turn could only benefit our organisation and its clients.

I have very much led the agenda in terms of the issues we have focused on, but Carolyn has encouraged me to look at my life holistically, explore how the various aspects of it inter-relate and to start trying to get them into a balance. So even though a lot of the work we have done has been looking at personal issues, it has had an impact on my working life and I have seen a huge difference in the way I perform at work.

One area we have worked on quite a lot is stress and how I deal with it. I was finding I was working long hours but it wasn't quality working time because my energy levels were so low. I now work ►

The DO list

- **Be clear about why you are looking for a coach e.g. to improve your leadership skills**
- **Find out whether you have a choice of coaches available to you. You may want to find somebody who is a similar/different age/ethnic background to you, for example**
- **Ask about the qualifications and experience of the coach. Although the industry is not regulated, there are recognised qualifications that are useful for coaches to have e.g. counselling accreditation awarded by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (www.bac.co.uk);**
- **Ensure that the confidentiality of your coaching sessions will be respected – try to keep the person responsible for managing the relationship with your company separate from the person doing the coaching with you**
- **Check that your coach will be externally supervised**

◀ fewer hours, but I work smarter – so I get far more out of my time.

I have also become much more aware of how I manage relationships at work and I now feel I handle them more effectively. I can give better feedback and I am a more open and honest communicator.

People have commented that I am more laid back and relaxed – so I do think the coaching has actually made a real difference to me and the way I appear to people. I am an optimistic, positive person, and I now feel that way more often, so I guess that authenticity is coming through to other people.

One of the huge benefits for me has been having somebody to act as a sounding board, who is totally dedicated to me and my agenda for change. As a manager you sometimes work in a bit of a vacuum. You don't necessarily have good quality feedback or feel that you are able to talk to colleagues about things that are worrying you at work, so to have someone to whom you can express these things is enormously supportive and empowering. It allows you to refocus and see things in a different and more positive light."

John Drysdale

John Drysdale (pictured below) is director of learning and development at leading insurance broker Aon. He first used the services of an external coach several years ago, when he was working as a consultant on a major change programme.

"My coach showed me that I needed to be aware of the impact I have on people and how I needed to sometimes challenge my own assumptions about what I should do and why. It was a bit



The DON'T list

- **Agree to work with a coach without meeting them first - you need to have a clear idea of their approach and check that you feel comfortable working with them.**
- **Go for the cheapest coach, or the person you located most easily. There are a lot of coaches around – do your research to find the one that will suit you best. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development is a good starting point**
- **Believe they will fix the problem for you – your coach is a facilitator**
- **Go for somebody with a rigid approach. Ensure they will tailor the coaching sessions to your needs, and have a strong portfolio of models, techniques and learning styles that is right for you**
- **Assume you need a coach! If you are looking to gain a specific skill or knowledge, a training course may be more beneficial and cost effective.**

like working with someone who could hold up a mirror and say if you take this particular course of action; you might not get the result you want.

It gave me a much greater awareness of what style of leadership I am particularly attuned to and how I sometimes need to stand back and be more flexible.

Sometimes when you are very results oriented you can get a bit single-minded in pursuit of a goal and you have to slow down and make sure you are taking everyone with you.

I am now working in a very commercially successful, entrepreneurial, client-focused organisation. We have grown very fast by acquisition over the last few years and we now need to demonstrate that we can grow organically. This poses new leadership challenges for our executives, and they need to develop new capabilities and skills to take the organisation forward.

I felt that coaching could really help with this, so I have now engaged the majority of the top 100 people in the company in this form of leadership development. I wanted to create a safe environment where they could deepen their understanding of what makes them successful, what holds them back and how they need to change.

I have brought in a group of coaches with diverse backgrounds because I think it's important to get a good blend and to

give executives a choice of who they work with. We have some coaches who are specialists in inter-personal behaviour and others who were CEOs and have subsequently trained as coaches, bringing business knowledge and a harder edge into the equation.

People are using it to tackle different issues. We have one executive, for example, who does a fantastic job running his part of the business, but needs to be better at managing relationships with his peers. Others have needed help in encouraging co-operation across departments or support in making important strategic decisions.

Virtually everyone has engaged in it whole-heartedly. It's efficient, it's confidential and we are investing time in the people who really shape the climate our employees work in and who can make a huge difference to the way the business is run." PM

Further information

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