

Last updated: June 13, 2011 10:45 pm

When leaders need coaches

By Anthony Goodman

I had a coaching call today. Don't worry, there is nothing wrong. I am just trying to be more creative in my work. That's where my coach comes in.

It appears that I am not alone. The coaching industry has grown massively in the last ten years. The International Coach Federation estimates that there are over 30,000 professional coaches worldwide, half of them in the US.

Why are perfectly capable people seeking the help of a coach? According to a comprehensive survey of leading coaches in the US and UK in the Harvard Business Review, the most popular reason is to develop the capabilities of high performers or to facilitate transition (48 per cent). Other reasons include to act as a sounding board (26 per cent) or to address behaviour that is likely to derail a career (12 per cent).

Michael Bungay Stanier, senior partner of Toronto-based Box of Crayons and a former Canadian Coach of the Year, says that an important role for a coach lies in "helping a leader understand what's really going on. This is particularly important for those suffering the loneliness that goes with being the senior leader."

Matthew Stone, a leading coach in the UK, told me: "People get promoted because they are good at something, not necessarily because they have personal insight. That can create problems throughout the organisation."

There are many different types of coaching – including outplacement, onboarding, performance, development and transition coaching – and it is important for a potential user to determine what they actually need.

One of Mr Stone's clients, a senior executive in the UK subsidiary of a major US bluechip said: "Like so many others considering the idea of working with a coach, I didn't see any need at all. All I saw was the risk of sinking money and time into some fluffy, ill-defined HR-related bunkum. But, my word, I did need it."

A partner in a Boston-based consulting firm who is currently working with Katharine Halpin, a leading US coach and former board member of the International Coach Federation, told me he wanted, "a sounding board to surface and discuss challenges,

priorities and relationships. Someone who is unbiased and has no self-interest and who can expose blind spots.”

Clearly, identifying the right coach is critical to a successful outcome. The consultancy partner told me: “It’s not clear how you would know for sure whether you have the right coach. It’s a bit like asking how you find the right doctor. You definitely know if the coach is ‘wrong,’ but assessing ‘rightness’ is more difficult.”

Ms Halpin, advises: “Look for colleagues who are successful and that you respect. Ask directly if they have worked with a coach or if they can recommend a coach.” Mr Stone suggests that leaders ask potential coaches, “about the experience you will go through. Ask for access to three of the coaches’ clients to get their feedback on the process and the results”.

Mr. Bungay Stanier adds: “Set a trial period. And if it’s not working as well as it should, fire them and find someone else.”

According to the Harvard Business Review survey, most coaching assignments last between seven and 12 months. For Mr Stone and many other business coaches, the assignment starts with “a 360-degree appraisal of strengths and weaknesses, communication style, and an understanding of how the client manages others”.

Mr Bungay Stanier says the process “varies from coach to coach, and for each coach from client to client. But if there’s one thing that tends to be a constant, it’s more questions and less advice than the usual conversations. What’s powerful about that is, for many leaders, thinking time is one of the most precious commodities they have.”

So, having secured the right coach and worked through a process over several months how do you judge success? That’s a tough question for coaches who don’t tend to have elegant methodologies for measuring return on investment.

A much-quoted study a decade ago by Joy McGovern and others identified that “the majority of the 43 participants who provided a numerical estimate reported between \$100,000 and \$1m as the return on their investment in executive coaching.”

The consultancy partner confided that he was “not sure how to measure objectively, though ultimately the measure is probably whether an individual is closer to achieving his or her full range of goals (which are not always financial, by the way).”

What about our UK executive? His answer was purely qualitative: “I became happier, had less confrontation at work, and influenced and collaborated more easily. I also feel

more equipped to deal with stress. I transformed my relationship with my boss, who became and remains a fan and a promoter.”

However, the result is not always so positive. Sometimes the individual seeking coaching comes to the realisation that they are in the wrong organisation. As Mr Stone observes: “If their style is so counter to what the organisation needs, and they can’t be moved because it would be so unnatural to them to behave differently, there will be a parting of the ways.”

According to Mr Bungay Stanier: “Coaching going wrong most typically results in mediocrity rather than disaster. It goes wrong for lots of reasons: lack of chemistry; loss of the connection to the purpose of the coaching; falling into familiar and safe routines; betrayal of trust. In other words, it’s just like every other relationship, both working and personal.”

I’ll take care to remember that as I prepare for my next coaching session.

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