

Need a Business Coach? Three things to look for!

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Introduction:

There is a lot of buzz about “coaching” in business and popular literature. Coaching has been heralded as a great boon to personal performance and satisfaction. Is it true, or just a new flavor of snake oil? In this article I’ll try to separate some of the sizzle from the steak.

“Get everything you’ve ever wanted!” This is generally how the coaching pitch starts. You are capable of meeting your dreams, you’re just holding yourself back. Generally, you hold yourself back because of “fear”. So coaching is all about digging out those fears and overcoming them. If you are disorganized, you fear organization. If you are a procrastinator, you fear completing tasks. And on it goes. Every hurdle is because of a fear. Coaches also spend an inordinate amount of time differentiating coaching from therapy. Coaching focuses on the present and the future, therapy is healing old wounds in the past. I never quite understood the big deal about the difference, nor do I buy into the fear based coaching theories. This more or less led me to conclude that most “life” coaching is about paying someone, (the coach) to listen to you (the client) complain about your life. You have fears (the cop out) that keeps you from the totally fulfilling and satisfying life you desire. Obviously, I have a pretty low regard for life coaching—it really does belong with nail salons and tai chi water exercise—the pursuits and palliatives of the exurban yoga mom set.

So what about business coaching? Here is where coaching can make some change and improvements. The difference between a good executive/business coach and the self-help guru is really about three key differences.

First, an effective business coach has played the game. They are generally from the industry or discipline and know from experience the issues, problems, and real hurdles the client is experiencing. Look for somebody who is a domain expert first and a coach second. If you’re in the commercial real estate business—find a coach who was a successful broker and is also a coach. If you are an attorney starting a practice

and want coaching on getting up and running—find a coach who was a successful attorney. Most people proclaiming themselves coaches don't have credible expertise in the discipline they are “coaching”. The bar is very low for people to get into the “industry”.

Secondly, the effective business coach has meaningful credentials. Coaching is a skill that can be trained. Most successful business coaches have degrees in Industrial Psychology or a related discipline. Somebody who just graduated from one of the “coaching schools” is not qualified. The basic requirement to get into coaching school is the money to pay the tuition. The requirements for accreditation come from the International Coaching Federation- a group with its own credibility issues. Until coaching is a regular part of a recognized accredited university program - I'd look for a coach with those graduate degrees in Industrial Psychology or Organizational development

Thirdly, there are the instruments used to uncover your hidden skills, talents, weaknesses, or personality preferences. All coaches have their favorite instruments that they have been trained to interpret the results. A coach basically has you take the instrument so that they have something to talk to you about. You can measure your emotional intelligence, discover your strengths, or categorize your personality traits. Many of the instruments haven't been proven to really measure the characteristics that they claim, that they give repeatable results, or have been verified with a statistically meaningful test population. The other issue I call is “so what”. If you take the instrument and it says you are introverted and judgmental and right-brained—what are you going to do about it? Also how does it apply to work? Much of this stuff is obvious and immaterial. The other big feature is 360-degree feedback. You get your supervisor, peers, and subordinates to profile you. You can then see how you appear to others, decisive, compassionate, flexible, or some other sign on the zodiac. This is profoundly inaccurate in that most peers, subordinates, or supervisors will probably not give objective feedback. For that you need a coach to talk to those people.

As an executive at a Fortune 500 company I had a very good experience with coaching. My coach talked to my staff and brought back actionable feedback. The coach also pointed out the styles of some of the other executives and “coached” me on how to communicate more

effectively with them. We did do some instruments with the staff, largely as icebreakers rather than to gain powerful insights. The coach was an expert in the environment and knew the culture of the organization. They didn't generate big expectations on how we would perform as a team or otherwise lower costs and raise profits. We just would work together better and not screw up because we didn't communicate. Modest goals but meaningful benefits of a professional business coach who knows the culture and had the educational credentials.

As somebody who has been there—get a business coach with in-depth domain knowledge, professional credentials, and realistic claims. I would avoid anybody who has been on Oprah.