

Giving men a little nudge

Life coaches reach execs with power on the job, but 'blocks' elsewhere

BY MARK SCHEFFLER



At the office, you're the boss – master of the universe. But in your personal life, you feel unfulfilled. When you bark out an order, the world simply doesn't snap-to like your middle managers do.

Moving from the work realm into the domestic one can leave even the most agile-minded male executive in a quandary of Fortune 500-sized proportions.

Enter the life coach, the point person in an expanding industry designed to coax professionals out of their shells and help them be not just better businessmen, but better human beings.

That could involve making time for hobbies, curbing an anger streak or dealing with turf issues at home. And nobody ever said it was easy.

"It's difficult for individuals to separate one domain from the next. A lot of times, what makes someone successful in one area, doesn't in another," says Mount Prospect-based life coach John Goodman who, through his Center for Internal Change, works with commodities and futures traders. "An authoritarian manager who is very successful because of his power and ability to get direct results may come home trying to use the same communication style, and he may run into problems."

The solution advocated by life coaches is talk, talk, and more talk – everything from Q&As and personality profiles to paying close attention to word choices.

They are also big on action plans and helping clients take accountability. Mr. Goodman even incorporates a kind of

quasi-chaos theory into his sessions: "We look at what one can control, and what one can't."

The life coach services list is big on acronyms: You can get coaching for CALM (career and life management), pursue your BHAG (big, hairy audacious goal) or dispel your NUT (negative useless thought).

Most client-coach hookups happen by word of mouth, at networking meetings or through human resources departments. A typical session involves a one-on-one conversation in person or by phone, usually once a week. Sometimes it's nurturing, sometimes confrontational.

"Is this type of executive coaching hard to do? Yes. This isn't the common path," says Scott Stephen, executive vice president for the entertainment group at Playboy Enterprises Inc. His coach is Bob Wright, co-owner of the Chicago-based Wright Institute. "I experience higher highs and lower lows, and hear things about myself that I don't like to hear."

Mr. Stephen, 39, who has received coaching from Mr. Wright for eight years, says there are times he leaves his session "hating Bob for what he brings to light. He'll tell me something I'm blind to, and it takes me a while to open my eyes and see what I need to deal with to improve and grow."

Insights like that don't come cheap. Mr. Stephen's leadership, life and couples training adds up to \$4,000 to \$6,000 a year. In total, he says, he's probably spent about \$60,000 – the same amount he spent on

his MBA from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. But the Wright training is for his emotional intelligence, which he says has just as many applications in the business world.

SETTING PRIORITIES

A good coach, says Mark Sklenar, 56, a chief information officer at a Chicago corporation, "can help you prioritize things for yourself. We all make assumptions, put up our own barriers."

Mr. Sklenar's coach, Wilmette-based Ron Porte, whom he met through colleagues, helped him recognize that beyond his myopic focus on work were other avenues he should be pursuing. Education, Mr. Sklenar says, was a passion of his, but he could never motivate himself to do much about it. "For years I've talked about it, but until I worked with (a coach) and laid out a game plan, not much happened."

Mr. Porte was "forcing me to say, 'If you're serious, then decide what it is that you think you could do with it.'" As a result of his newfound focus, he's now on the advisory board at the College of DuPage in Glen Ellen.

For his part, Mr. Porte sees his role for all his clients as a kind of objective backstop.

A PLACE TO VENT

"The thinking is that even though they may want to share, they're not going to get unbiased feedback at home or work," says Mr. Porte, co-owner of New Ground

LLC. "A spouse might be fearful of a situation an executive is in because they don't want them to lose their job, for instance. So they'll have a certain take on it."

The idea of guys sitting around talking about their feelings conjures images of grown men beating drums in a forest or laying on a couch spilling tear-filled secrets. Not surprisingly, coaches say what they do is different, starting with the name.

"I saw that men are way more open to hire someone who's a 'personal executive coach' than a 'personal therapist,'" says Michael Stoller, whose clients include bank executives and owners of medium-sized companies. He says the semantic sleight-of-hand helps guys open up.

"Men will talk about their fear of not being the man of the household and being dominated by their wife, or what's not working in their sex life – or not having a sex life in the first place," says Mr. Stoller. "They talk to me about their health and how unsatisfied they are with how they look."

But coaches go to pains to maintain that they're different from therapists in more than name. People who tend to seek their services tend to already be "high-functioning," says Bloomington-based coach Jan Elfine. "They aren't saddled with old baggage or problems. Therapy is looking back and resolving. These people are moving ahead and they just want to be conscious about it, they want to stay awake and be at the top of their game."

"That's an antitherapy way to put it," says John Klein, editor of the newsletter Psychotherapy Finances, which tracks trends in the field. "Therapists would not be that dismissive of therapy."

LACK OF LICENSING

Another distinction is that psychotherapists have to go through a state-regulated licensing procedure. A psychologist must have a Ph.D., which requires seven years of training plus post-doctoral supervision training. By contrast, anyone can simply proclaim themselves a life coach, and voila, they are one.

"The public needs to know the difference between a life coach and a credentialed mental health professional," says an American Psychological Assn. spokes-

woman. "The APA doesn't set any standards or offer certifications for life coaches," although, she says, it does offer continuing education courses for those psychologists interested in adding it to their offerings.

OPENING UP

To back up their title, most coaches tout their work history or education. Mr. Porte's bio mentions a bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and 35 years of business experience; Mr. Goodman has two master's degrees from Loyola University Chicago. There are also several dozen certification companies, such as Coach U and the Coaches Training Institute (CTI), that have sprouted up in an attempt to establish some industry benchmarks. For \$7,500, CTI will issue credentials to those who complete five three-day training seminars and 100 hours of "supervised" training, which could mean taping a session and playing it back to an instructor over the phone for feedback. Since the company started in 1992, 17,000 people have taken classes; 2,000 have gone all the way though to certification.

The International Coach Federation (ICF), which is as close to a governing body as the extremely loose-knit and broadly defined coaching profession has, reports that 10 years ago there were 300 coaches in North America, compared with 5,300 today. That's not including many far-flung practitioners – former consultants, school counselors – who have sprouted up and claimed the term "coach."

One major challenge for all who fall under the banner is getting men, the less verbally inclined gender, to talk about their concerns. Life coaches point out that the office, home and corner bar aren't necessarily safe havens for discussing pressing personal issues.

"Hearing someone say 'I don't want to talk about the Bulls, I want to talk about my wife, and she's really upsetting me' – it's so out of the norm," says Mr. Stoller.

Men risk embarrassment when they decide to decide they want to speak their minds.

"You're opening the door to your life and telling them things that apply to you as a person and how you feel," says Greg Getz,

40, a mortgage broker in Schaumburg who has worked with Jim Accetta, the Wheeling-based proprietor of Truly Human Coaching. "It's not easy to do. The reason I started is because I had frustrations with where I was at in my life, and needed to talk to someone about it. I could have taken a pill or drank out of a bottle."

The Price of Enlightenment

How much will a life coach cost you?

Each practitioner has a different rate structure, depending on frequency and the nature of the issues being addressed. Coaches usually work on an hourly basis, either in person or on the phone, with fees ranging from \$150 to \$500 an hour.

Life coach John Goodman looks for a commitment of several months, depending on the topics under discussion. Michael Stoller, who says "coaching is a luxury service," charges \$600 a month for four to six hours ("We do an hour a week over the phone"), and clients must sign a six-month contract.

Ron Porte says pricing runs the gamut, based on frequency and how sessions are put together. His rates might range from \$400 to \$700 a month. But there are situations where he might conduct a one-on-one session (which he believes is less efficient than a phone session) for \$200 an hour.

The Wright Institute is less a straightforward coaching forum than an entire business model. The company, which took in \$2 million in fees last year, attempts to get buy-in on a whole host of events, seminars and sessions. Part of Wright's sales pitch is that the best way to understand its teachings is to take enough classes to enable clients to become teachers themselves.

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