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WORKING

UP THE LADDER; Even Executives Can Use Help From the Sidelines

By DIANE COLE (NYT) 998 words

WHEN a colleague told Julie Day, a lawyer in Fairfax, Va., that she was consulting an executive coach -- a new breed of personal trainer who helps clients develop business acumen and people skills -- Ms. Day was not impressed.

"'Boy, that sounds self-absorbed,'" she recalled saying to herself. "I was very skeptical."

Yet Ms. Day is now a believer. Nine months ago, she hired an executive coach, Ellen Ostrow, a psychologist in Washington who helped Ms. Day redefine her marketing style and to "think out of the box." Dr. Ostrow provided tips on controlling paperwork and other administrative tasks. Perhaps most important, the results have been quantifiable, Ms. Day said: she has become a partner in her firm.

Depending on whom you ask, executive coaching has many definitions. To some, it's a buzzword, a relabeling of practices that used to be handled informally by mentors or more formally by consultants. To others, its strength is the combination of the practical informality of the former and the objectivity of the latter. Coaches range from those with specific goals (some are dubbed "speech doctors," working exclusively on polishing presentations) to the general (offering to "optimize your performance").

But consultants veer from psychological counseling. "Coaching isn't therapy," said Dr. Dee Soder, the president of the C.E.O. Perspective Group, an executive coaching consultancy in New York. "It's objective advice and guidance from a knowledgeable outsider."

For Peter Kiernan III, a former managing director at Goldman, Sachs, and a founding board member of the Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation, the advice he received from Dr. Soder focused on choosing among several career and board options. Mr. Kiernan is now the chief executive of Kiernan Ventures, a venture-capital firm, and a co-chairman of the charity World TEAM Sports.

With a different objective in mind, Doug Fagin of Long Beach, Calif., wanted advice about how to expand his business, Sunburst Analysis, an expense-reduction company. He sought the services of Dr. Wayne Hart, an executive coach at the Center for Creative Leadership, based in Greensboro, N.C. The advice led Mr. Fagin to invite a partner into the business, resulting in growth for the company, he said.

When Dr. Soder started her business in 1986, the phrase "executive coaching" had yet to be invented; no shorthand explanation existed for what she was then calling executive consulting. Now, if you type in "executive coaching" on the Internet search engine Google, about 80,000 links come up. That amount stems from the larger boom in the coaching industry as a whole. The word "coach" has become coin of the realm, spurred by the popularity of personal coaches like Cheryl Richardson, the self-help guru who appears frequently on television. There is also Coach U, the International Coach Federation and CoachVille -- all founded by Thomas J. Leonard, another prominent coach. But so far there is no overall regulation of the coaching industry, standardization of requirements or uniformly recognized accreditation.

Fees can range from \$70 to \$500 a session, and into the thousands for a comprehensive evaluation and long-term consulting. Some coaches work mostly on the telephone, others primarily through personal consultations or a combination of the two.

"With dozens more people entering the field every day, per the Syms logo, you need to be an educated consumer," Dr. Soder said. "You can't dismiss the whole industry just because there are a few quacks."

On the contrary, more and more companies seem to be embracing the concept and footing the bill. "Executive coaching is becoming mainstream," said Rick Gilkey, a professor at the Goizueta Business School at Emory University in Atlanta. "It fills a gap."

Teri McCaslin, the executive vice president for human resources and information systems at the ContiGroup Companies, one of the largest privately held agribusiness corporations in the world, estimates that about half the 60 middle and senior managers at the New York headquarters have undergone company-sponsored executive coaching. In addition, she said, "every one of our businesses, across the board, uses executive coaching in one capacity or another, from the top down, starting with senior management."

She explains the benefits this way: most executive coaches begin by providing feedback, essentially, how you and your performance are viewed, through the eyes of bosses, colleagues, subordinates and clients. In the absence of feedback, mistakes tend to be repeated. Worse, those mistakes can cost the company in lost business, inefficiency and, possibly, the expense of firing, hiring and training someone new.

That expense, Ms. McCaslin said, "far exceeds the price of investing in coaching." Using another analogy, she said: "If you have physical assets, such as a manufacturing facility, you continually upgrade and invest in the latest technology. As a result, you would expect an increased return from that asset."

Alicia Whitaker, the managing director of global human resource programs at Credit Suisse First Boston in New York, also views coaching as an investment.

"We have a lot of people who are rocket scientists, great strategic thinkers or great with clients," she said. "But very few business schools prepare people for the messiness of managing people, and a lot of coaching is about effectively managing people."

Not every employee welcomes a company's decision that he or she needs coaching. But Ms. Whitaker said she thought the offer was a badge of distinction, not a stigma.

"We've heard from the grapevine that people who get coaching see it as a positive, a benefit," she said. "And more and more people are coming forward and asking, 'Can I have some, too, please?' "

CAPTIONS: Photo: LISTEN UP -- Dr. Dee Soder, an executive coach, advised Peter Kiernan III on choosing among several career options. (Frances Roberts for The New York Times)

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