



SHOULD YOU FIND YOURSELF A CAREER COACH?

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As a manager, you make hundreds of decisions every month regarding your staff, your projects, and use of your company's resources but what about decisions regarding the big picture of *your* career? With the help of a good career coach, only a few hours a month can help keep you focused on your goals and moving steadily toward them.

The Sports Model

Top professional and Olympic athletes have personal coaches to help them perform to their maximum potential and deal with competition. The better such athletes become, and the more elite their status, the more they need and rely on coaches. The higher

they rise in their fields, the more critical their moves become, and the more vital personal feedback becomes in avoiding mistakes. A personal coach offers a competitive edge.

Business is highly competitive as well. In response to increased competition, many businesses are adapt-

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ing and changing; some are being drastically overhauled. The Internet is changing everything, and rapid change generally breeds insecurities. The career-conscious manager must strategize more carefully and effectively than ever before to ensure success and career advancement.

A career coach can help diagnose and sort out your situation, offer new strategies for dealing with office politics and competition from other firms, and help you with vital stress management skills. A good career coach helps you discover and capitalize on new opportunities, provides new tools to improve your communications, and helps chart your goals and career path. Your coach is your personal consultant, resource, and confidant.

Afraid of Losing Control?

Many high achievers see using outside help as a weakness, as if using a personal consultant or coach strips them of their independence or somehow diminishes their value. Far from it. The career coach simply works behind the scenes, helping you do your job better without actually doing your job.

Earlier in my career, I used career coaching services and although the \$60/hour was expensive, the sessions proved to be

well worth it. We'd meet for only a short period each session, but I'd leave supercharged!

On your own, it's tough to stay objective. Self-analysis is limited and faulty because of self-protective "blind spots." A coach increases your objectivity. Also, because of a coach's background and training, he or she can address a broader range of personal and career issues than you'd be inclined to do by yourself. The coach's primary roles are as trainer, listener, observer, motivator, and sounding board.

Making the Decision to Hire a Coach

What can a coach do for you? A good coach will help you discover your mission, assist you in mapping out your goals and strategies, and will monitor your progress. You will get objective, honest feedback on an adult-to-adult basis without moral judgments. The coach will neither command you to do something nor let you flounder. He or she will help you sort out options clearly and objectively. The ultimate decisions and actions are always your own. So, your goals and needs are the specific foundation of your relationship with the coach. A good coach is committed to doing all in his or her power to help you meet those objectives. You alone need to decide if hiring a coach makes sense for you. If you encounter any of the following, the answer is probably "yes":

1. Changes within your organization, directly affecting you.
2. Acquisitions, mergers, and joint ventures.
3. Expansion into new markets.
4. Diversification into new products or services.
5. Increased competition to your organization.
6. Increased management or supervisory responsibility.
7. Increased leadership opportunities.
8. A recent or soon-to-be-available promotion.
9. A new boss or leadership shake-up above you.
10. Changes in your role within your organization.
11. In-house competition and power plays.
12. Blockades of your progress by feuds or political processes.
13. Excess stress on the job.
14. A new project you lead or participate in developing.
15. Being a woman, an ethnic or racial minority, or disabled.

How to Choose the Right Coach for You

Once you're convinced that it makes sense to hire a coach, you can begin the important process of finding one. First, determine your needs so you can direct the coach as to how he or

continued from previous page

she can help you most. For example: Is your career plateauing? Could you use some objectivity? Have you been complacent of late? Are you at a career crossroads, with a life-changing decision to make? Your coach can also help you define your needs more explicitly. Next, search for someone who can address your particular needs. The best way to begin is to seek referrals. If this approach isn't successful, try one of the numerous coach associations and organizations that have sprung up recently. Otherwise, use Internet search engines or try the Yellow Pages under headings such as "Coaches," "Counselors," "Advisors," or "Consultants."

Variation on a Theme

In addition to career coaches, there are also "life coaches." They, too, come with a variety of names: "counselor," "advisor," and the generic "coach." A life coach helps you integrate both work and domestic issues, and takes a holistic approach to advising you. Caution: Don't confuse this with seeing a psychiatrist, psychotherapist, or psychological counselor. If you feel the need for this kind of assistance, by all means seek out these healthcare professionals. The life coach or counselor is not necessarily degreed, licensed, or certified. Rather, he or she provides much of the same type of direction to you that a mentor might provide, but the process is more formal. As with the traditional career coach, you meet with the life coach at regular intervals and pay a fee. You may be given exercises that you're supposed to complete between meetings. While using a life coach is not as widespread as employing a career coach, don't let that stop you from finding someone who can help you achieve your goals in all aspects of your life.

Ask Away

After you've done some groundwork (if you want to read up on coaching, see the resources list at right), and have identified some coach prospects, be prepared to ask a lot of questions. And don't be shy about it. Most professionals today are used to being questioned by prospective clients and you want to ensure that you retain the right coach for you. Here are typical questions to ask:

- How long have you been in coaching?
- What is your training? What is your specialty?
- How does your specialty relate to business (if it is not apparent)?
- Who have you coached? May I contact them?
- Do you have direct coaching experience in sports, theatre, or public speaking?
- Do you have direct coaching experience in my industry?
- What is your fee/payment arrangement? Hourly/retainer basis?

When you feel that someone is not the right match for you, the coach probably senses it, too. Ask for time to consider the arrangement the coach may have proposed. Such a request will not offend a professional coach. Whatever you do, recognize that career-minded managers are seeking out coaching more and more all the time. The chances are that some of your key competitors have already been getting coaching for years!

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