

Is a Coach In Your Cards?

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As you ramp up or expand your practice, you may run short on working capital or waking hours, but you're not likely to experience a shortage on advice. Solicited or not, worthwhile or merely well-intentioned, advice is one resource you'll find in abundance.

You have advice available to you, for the asking, from trusted colleagues and esteemed mentors. You may be paying for the professional advice of lawyers, accountants, or marketing strategists. No doubt you've endured the "advice" of concerned parties who feel obligated to share their cautionary tales of business failures and financial ruin.

Need advice about all this advice you're getting? You have a virtual advisory board accessible 24/7 via the Internet—an irrepressible infofest of Do's, Don'ts and FAQ's about every conceivable aspect of your entrepreneurial endeavor.

So why would you want to add a coach to this chorus? Because you don't need advice—you need an **ACE** up your sleeve. A competent and committed coach:

Accelerates you toward the realization of your preferred future.

Challenges you to stretch beyond familiar beliefs and habits, where you'll discover new levels of effectiveness and satisfaction.

Encourages you through the inevitable diversions, dilemmas, and disappointments that can complicate the life of a soloist.

Does the word "coach" evoke distant high-school memories of a mildly disgruntled gym teacher wearing a baseball cap and wielding a whistle as a weapon? If you've been an organizational insider in recent years, perhaps you believe "coach" is just the newest HR euphemism for "boss." If so, let's first supplement your information about coaching.

What is Coaching?

Utilized with great success in the arenas of sport, art, and business, coaching is a powerful partnership that facilitates positive change, the achievement of goals, and full enjoyment of a balanced, purpose-filled work/life. Although a coach may possess similar skill sets, the perspective and the process of coaching differs from that of most consultants, mentors, counselors or therapists.

Consultants are typically hired for their expertise in a specialized area. They are expected to—and often do—come to the table with prescribed, proven ways to solve a problem or implement a system. Clients want consultants to replicate the success they've achieved with other clients who had similar needs. *Coaches elicit strategies from you, not for you, that are uniquely suited to you, rather than recommending, adapting or retro-fitting strategies that were designed to work for someone else.*

Mentors have personally "been there, done that", or are currently living the life and doing the work to which you aspire. Their support can resemble the master/apprentice relationships of centuries past, or it can mirror the teacher/student model. Many mentors

today serve as seasoned travel guides, sharing first-hand information about the pleasures and potholes along the journey. *Coaches, unless asked, do not advise from their own story; they stay grounded in your experience, your issues, your challenges.*

People seek out counselors or therapists to feel better, to get “unstuck”, to achieve or regain mental/emotional health and well-being. The past is often explored to understand and improve the present. *Coaches bring a future-oriented perspective to stable, fully-functioning clients, helping them propel their lives to the next level by taking appropriate, effective action in the present.*

A family member, friend, or life partner may be a superb listener and asker of great questions, providing a sounding board for your dreams and schemes. They may provide something else that is less helpful—their own agenda. Whether your new venture succeeds or fails, they may have concerns that it will put the relationship at risk. Success may move you up and away from them into new, exciting circles. Failure may threaten their own financial security and limit their future choices.

Unfounded or not, their fears, as well as the beliefs they hold about you, your abilities, and your potential can taint the support they lend. *Coaches have your agenda at the center of the process, and bring a safe, unbiased container from which to grow. They are not operating out of their own needs, fears, or assumptions about you.*

You may need or want these individuals, in addition to a coach, as permanent members of your support team, or call upon them if specific needs emerge.

How Might A Coach Benefit You?

A coach can partner with you at any or all points in your business development, supporting you in the start-up, sustainment, renewal, and/or reinvention of your professional practice. The “coachable issues” will vary from phase to phase and can include:

Start Up

- Developing a strategic plan
- Finding your unique niche in the marketplace
- Identifying and attracting your “perfect” clients
- Creating a relevant learning agenda
- Accessing people and resources to enrich the learning process
- Getting a “reality check” on your income expectations
- Prioritizing the endless tasks prior to and following your launch
- Polishing your professional image, getting ready for “prime time”
- Bringing closure to unfinished projects that could drain energy
- Being accountable to someone other than yourself

Sustainment

- Managing time, commitments, information
- Working less, earning more
- Maintaining alignment of mission, goals, strategy, and systems
- Evaluating new opportunities and collaborations
- Leveraging your strengths
- Outsourcing tasks/projects for which you have no interest or skill
- Establishing success milestones
- Recognizing and celebrating progress
- Balancing work/life
- Building resilience and creating reserves for lean times

Renewal

- Regaining confidence, optimism and hope after a setback
- Identifying alternate routes around obstacles that emerge
- Showing up more authentically with clients and colleagues
- Acknowledging, assessing and learning from mistakes
- Updating or refining your marketing materials
- Dealing with feelings of loneliness or boredom
- Maintaining or regaining support of family when business is slow
- Mastering the art of self encouragement
- Rethinking your strategic plan

- o Fanning the flickering flame of passion for your work

Reinvention

- o Taking your business to the next level
- o Bringing more of yourself to the work you do
- o Integrating new products and services with existing offerings
- o Thinking differently about how you add value
- o Distinguishing the best from many great ideas
- o Identifying new markets in need of your expertise
- o Analyzing trends that could impact or improve your bottom line
- o Attending to both the “doing” and “being” aspects of work
- o Creating an escape hatch or an exit strategy
- o Transitioning to your next endeavor

Where Do You Find a Coach?

Like you, most coaches are soloists and may be trolling in the same waters for new clients. Listen attentively as people introduce themselves at *networking events and association meetings*. There are many sub-specialties in the coaching field; make note the individuals who describe themselves as business or entrepreneurial coaches and start a conversation.

Check your database for Human Resource executives, consultants, trainers, and speakers. Many coaches emerge from those professions, and your contacts may be able to recommend a former colleague who is now a coach. HR execs in large or progressive organizations are often asked to hire coaches for the “high-potentials”, or to augment a leadership development program. Chances are they have contracted with a coach for their own development, and would be willing to make the introduction.

Take note of *local seminars and keynotes* that feature a coach as the speaker. You’ll find coaches in attendance that you can connect with, and you may be so impressed with the speaker/coach that you introduce yourself at the break and

request information about their coaching services.

Coaching Certification programs list graduates on their website; you can search by location or by specialty. If you’re undecided, a call to the program director describing your specific needs might help narrow the selection.

A search on the *internet* using combinations of the key words “coach”, “business”, “entrepreneur” and words related to your specific needs will bring forth a bevy of coach candidates. If they reference their certification, check out that program’s website. Most coaching relationships are confidential, but if the coach has worked in an organization, you may be able to speak not to the individual(s) coached but to the person who contracted with the coach. If they are forthcoming, you can gather enough information to make an informed choice. You can ask the coach for references you can call, but you’re unlikely to get anything but a glowing report.

Increasingly, coaches are advertising in *business journals, telephone, church, and neighborhood directories*. Articles written by or about coaches provide more information; if that particular coach doesn’t specialize in business coaching, they probably can refer you to someone who does.

Attend a local chapter meeting of a *coaching support network*—you can remain a relatively anonymous observer and check out the people in attendance. If you identify yourself as a potential client, your challenge will no longer be finding a coach—it will be selecting the right coach for you.

Selecting the Right Coach for You

Coaches, perhaps to a greater extent than many other professionals, are evaluated and selected based not just on the education, experience, and credentials they bring to the relationship, but on who they are as human beings, and the level of mastery they have demonstrated in their own work and life.

Although you may be initially drawn to a coach who has had a similar career path, is familiar with your industry, or has succeeded in a business like the one you hope to build, that may be less important than finding a highly competent coach who instills confidence and makes you feel comfortable. It may even be preferable to work with someone who doesn't bring a lifetime of related experience to the table—they won't be tempted to shift into that advisor role.

Depending on your needs, a short-term contract with a coach who has expertise in a specific area—sales, strategic planning, relationship management, or communication skills, for example—could be just the ticket. A business, life or personal coach may be a better choice if you want a traveling companion for the long haul. You choose the destination, and your coach will help you plan the itinerary, choose the best route, and clear the path along the way.

Most coaches offer a no cost/no obligation 1-hour +/- consultation during which you can ask questions about fees, payment options/schedules, frequency, duration, and location of the sessions. That, however, is not the main purpose of the meeting. Your mission is to collect data about who this person is, why and how they became a coach, and the skills, tools, and processes they have used to move clients forward.

No less important is your assessment of their style—their approach—their personal presence. Do they have a way of communicating that resonates with you, intrigues you, affirms you? Sounds like a first date, doesn't it?! In one key way, it is. You are looking for evidence of the "click factor,"

Don't underestimate the importance of the "click factor." It is dependent upon far more than just compatible communication styles—it can be endangered by significant differences in the way people think.

For example, if you are an entrenched "rows and columns" kind of person, you may chafe over time with a coach who is

more creative, iterative, and divergent in approach. They may function effectively as a catalyst, pushing you out of that proverbial comfort zone, but will that wear you out over the course of the contract? Yes, the best coaches can flex their approach, depending on the coachable issues in play and where you are in the change process. Just watch and listen for differences big enough to be deal-breakers.

In the midst of your dogged data collection, a good coach will create opportunities to ask a few questions of you. Be prepared to answer any, all, or a version of the following questions:

- What holds you back or gets in the way of accomplishing your goals?
- What changes are you considering that would enhance your work/life?
- What is not in place today that you would like to see in your future?
- What are your expectations of a coach?
- Have you worked with a coach before, and if so, what was the outcome?
- By what measures will you know if/when coaching has been successful?

If the coach asks no questions, monopolizes the meeting, or seems to favor monologue over dialogue—run, don't walk. You've got all the data you need; move on to the next candidate!

Getting the Most out of the Coaching Relationship

You will encounter few relationships in your life that will be as intense, powerful, and purposeful as the relationship between you and a great coach. You will be listened to in a way that people seldom experience. In addition to providing an ear, a coach is poised to offer a shoulder, a second set of eyes, a nudge, a kick, or precisely the right words to help you excel. Your commitment to the process, however, is the key to achieving stellar results. Following are 10 suggestions to help you reap dividends on your investment of time and money:

- Create a 30-minute appointment with yourself before each meeting to review your notes and prepare your agenda.
- Capture your thoughts in writing immediately after each session.
- Tell at least one other person about the “a-ha moments” you experience while in coaching conversation.
- If you commit to a homework assignment suggested by your coach, follow through.
- E-mail your coach if you have questions—or answers—that are too important to sit on until the next session.
- Give prompt and honest feedback if you have concerns about the process or your progress.
- Give prompt and honest feedback when your coach has asked the perfect question or made an astute observation.

- Be open to new ways of seeing, thinking and working.
- Be helpable—operate from a learner’s curiosity, not from the assumption of mastery.
- Be authentic—show up as your real, best self and always speak your truth.

You’re already holding a good “hand”—you’re talented, hard working, and you’ve got a great business concept. If you weren’t, you probably wouldn’t be pursuing the risky business of your own business. Whether you are a naively optimistic, newly minted soloist, or a well-worn veteran of the entrepreneurial game, working with a coach can provide the *ACE* you need to win...in your work and in your life.