

CEO

A man in a dark suit, white shirt, and striped tie is shown from the chest up on the left side of the cover, looking off to the right. In the background, a large, leafless tree stands in a snowy field. A small figure of a person in a suit is walking away from the viewer towards the tree.

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EXECUTIVE COACHING

Guiding light

A few years ago, Mike Page knew that in many ways he had a good thing going, enjoying his new job as CFO of the UK arm of AstraZeneca, the pharmaceutical multinational. But he couldn't help thinking that something

was holding him back. "I've always had a high level of motivation and have been quite successful," he says. "But at that point, I had the feeling that I was a presence who wasn't being listened to." What's more, Page sensed that this was not something that he could openly discuss with colleagues.

That's why he signed himself up for an external executive coaching programme organised by AstraZeneca's human resources department. Not long thereafter, Page and his coach began one-on-one sessions to get to the bottom of the problem. "It was really about understanding the different characteristics of people, and how I needed to relate to them so that I could meet my business objectives," Page recalls.

BUSINESS BENEFITS

Not only did he immediately begin seeing a big change in his ability to deal with difficult situations with colleagues, he also put into practice with his own staff some of the management techniques he had seen his coach use on him. The experience was enough to convince Page of coaching's benefits—among the many hats that he wears as UK finance chief at AstraZeneca, the 20-year company veteran oversees the career development for some 400 finance staff, and coaching forms a key part of many of his training initiatives. "It really helps people go that extra mile," he says.

Not everyone is so sure about that. Julie Naismith, a London-based senior consul-

tant at Towers Perrin, who includes coaching in much of her work, says: "Coaching needs to serve an individual need and a business need. Some people doubt that this balance can be achieved, and can only serve one or the other."

Sceptics, meanwhile, also say that the benefits of executive coaching aren't always easily identified, and it's not cheap—sessions typically cost anywhere between €300 and €500 an hour. Times that by the three- to six-month period that programmes usually last and the outlay gets substantial.

Coaching is a big investment, grants John Mellree, head of HR for Merck, the UK arm of the German drugs firm, which began using coaching at the executive level last year: "You could be looking at a fairly significant five-figure sum. But you're getting good focus on a key individual that you don't get in

group training."

Yet even HR experts and executive coaches concede that sessions need to be managed with a firm grip. That's why it makes sense to identify personal and business objectives before any coaching takes place. The choice of coach is key, too. Along with the coach's industry knowledge and experience in working with similarly sized organisations, "coach/client chemistry" must also be considered, advises coach Cécile Nève de Mévergnies of Nève and Company International in Paris.

That's only the beginning, adds John O'Brien, executive coach and managing director of Hanover Executive in London. He goes so far as to recommend "sending in an independent person—a psychologist—who can really ask tough questions and audit the session." The idea is that the "auditor" will be able to sense whether the coaching "is drifting into a cosy relationship, when the coach is no longer delivering the hard messages that the executive needs to hear."

DRIFTERS, BEWARE

However, Sabine Dembowski, a Cologne-based director of The Coaching Centre, says there's no reason a relationship should be allowed to drift. A good way to ensure coaching adds value is to use what she calls her "72-hour rule." "The chances of success

diminish if a client doesn't use what we've discussed within three days of a session," she says. "If I find out that nothing has been done, I'll get on the phone immediately."

Page agrees that one of coaching's biggest attractions is that people can apply its lessons quickly. At the same time, he warns, time-strapped executives shouldn't think of coaching as a short-cut to success. Page says he spent around 50 hours in coaching sessions over several months. A big commitment, certainly, but one he says paid off handsomely. "If I look at what the company and I gained from it, [the time spent] is really not a lot," he asserts.

✪ JANET KERSNAR

