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How to

Benefit from coaching

Autumn 2006

by Sabine Dembkowski

In the commercial, industrial and public sectors the provision of coaching support for the development of senior leaders is well established. Successful coaching empowers and motivates people to develop skills and knowledge, solve problems and make decisions – and thus fulfil their true potential.

Organisations, as well as individuals, benefit from coaching. In fact, studies in the US and Europe demonstrate that executive coaching is the single most effective development tool organisations can use, netting them a healthy return on investment of 600-1,000 per cent.

The top five benefits for the organisation are a positive impact on goals, higher effectiveness of teams, increased organisational effectiveness, greater job satisfaction and increased loyalty to the organisation.

For the individual, the top five benefits are higher self-esteem, development of clear goals, recognition of behavioural options, improved work-life balance and increased performance.

Engaging a coach is a serious investment in terms of money (a six-month programme can cost anywhere from £6,000 to £15,000), as well as your own time and energy. So it is important to make the right decision when choosing a coach.

What to look for in a coach

As the coaching profession is still relatively young, professional quality standards are only just emerging, which means that there is no one "kitemark". In addition, the coaching market is very fragmented and many coaches are sole practitioners. While this is not necessarily a problem, it is worth bearing in mind that they may not be able to provide a substitute coach should the relationship founder.

To help guide your choice of coach, consider the following five areas:

1. Education and background

Many people are attracted to coaching as a career and they come from different walks of life. Make sure that your coach has a solid educational and professional background that meets your requirements, so that you can personally benefit from his or her experience. Although they don't have to know how to do your job, it is important that they understand the context and challenges of the area in which you work.

2. Training programmes

There are a wide variety of coach training programmes available. Make sure that your coach has successfully completed at least two of them, each lasting ideally a minimum of six months. A coach has a broader spectrum of tools and techniques if they can demonstrate that they have completed more than one programme.

3. Real-life coaching experience

We all have to start somewhere, but you probably don't want to be the "guinea pig" for your coach. There simply is no substitute for real-life coaching experience. Find out which organisations your coach has worked for and at what level.

Are these similar organisations and positions to your own?

4. Ongoing supervision

Coaching is a profession where it is paramount that knowledge is updated on a regular basis. More and more professional coaches who operate at the cutting edge have regular supervision. In fact, this is also regarded as a quality criterion by most leading coaching organisations. Ask your coach about his or her supervision arrangements.

5. Ethical standards

Does your coach belong to a professional organisation with ethical and quality standards to whom you can appeal if something goes wrong?

Making the relationship work

If your organisation is sponsoring the coaching programme then it is advisable that the goals and roles of each party are agreed upfront. However, as the person being coached you have to accept responsibility for the process.

To gain maximum benefit from the programme, you will need to invest time and effort in developing self-awareness and an understanding of your current and desired situations, preparing for each face-to-face meeting (which at the beginning of a programme can last up to three hours and take place every two to three weeks), and then reviewing what you have learnt.

Coaching relationships are interactive and require you to be committed to setting, and then achieving, your goals.

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