

My Coach and I

By Des Dearlove and Stuart Crainer

Health, wellness, and wisdom are all fair game in the executive suite.

Just a few years ago, news that a CEO or senior executive was using a coach would have raised eyebrows in the boardroom. Now it is the height of corporate fashion to assign an executive coach to improve leaders' management performance and/or overcome their personal development deficiencies.

Among the high-profile leaders who have used coaches are David S. Pottruck, CEO of the Charles Schwab Corporation, who worked with ex-IBMer Terry Pearce; eBay Inc. CEO Meg Whitman, who was coached by John Thompson, head of the San Francisco consulting company Human Factors Inc.; and Paul O'Neill, the former treasury secretary and former CEO of Alcoa Inc., who was coached by Dan Ciampa, himself a former CEO of the consultancy Rath & Strong.

Coaching is most prevalent in the United States, but it is spreading globally. A 2002 survey of human resources professionals by the Hay Group, an HR consultancy, found that more than half the 150 organizations polled in Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America had increased their use of coaching in the previous 12 months; 16 percent were using coaches for the first time.

Executive coaches with the requisite skills (and some without them) charge anywhere from a few hundred dollars to \$15,000 a day; a handful of telephone conversations can cost thousands of dollars. The current coaching market is largely unregulated. Inevitably, the scent of money has attracted charlatans and sharks to executive coaching. The International Coach Federation (ICF), established in 1995, is the closest thing to a professional body for coaches. It boasts 5,200 members — up from 1,500 in 1995 — and estimates that there are around 15,000 coaches in North America. It offers certification courses and recognition for coaches.

Step back from the hyperbole, and executive coaching may be seen as a combination of mentoring, professional development, and support offered through a one-on-one relationship between a coach and an executive. These relationships focus on behavioral changes to hone leadership skills, enhance personal effectiveness, and correct unhelpful behaviors to improve job performance.

Terry Pearce famously helped David Pottruck rewire himself as a leader, evolving the finance company chief's leadership style from bruising to authentic and open. Their one-on-one coaching sessions included time at a sweat lodge in the wilds of northern Washington state, where a shaman led them in "spiritual cleansing." Along the way, everything from Mr. Pottruck's failed marriages to his personal values were pulled apart and examined. The duo later took their relationship a step further by writing a book, *Clicks and Mortar: Passion Driven Growth in an Internet Driven World*, which was published at the height of dot-com mania. The book focuses on Mr. Pottruck's experience in leading Charles Schwab in the early days of its e-business development. Although *Clicks and Mortar* is somewhat dated now, in it Mr. Pottruck offers some timeless and useful leadership insights for CEO peers, including reflections on how leaders can inspire passion in employees. He also presents some candid revelations about his personal failings as a business leader and a husband and how he changed.

Coaching to achieve behavioral change is just one area that falls under the broad umbrella of executive coaching. There are also personal productivity coaches like David Allen, author of *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*. His book offers a practical organizing system and supporting tools for managing information and obligations. His personal coaching consulting practice, the David Allen Company, designs and implements productivity tools and programs for people to use in their personal and professional lives.

There are even "energy coaches." Indeed, much of the coaching literature borrows, unsurprisingly, from the world of sport. Witness the number of former athletic stars on the management seminar circuit. Some leaders, as a neat justification for having an executive coach, use the fact that Tiger Woods has a coach. (Even the best can get better.)

Coaches of top athletes also work directly with business leaders. Performance psychologist Jim Loehr and his partner Tony Schwartz, authors of *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal* and founders of Orlando, Fla.-based LGE Performance Systems, have applied years of experience in coaching and training world-class athletes, including tennis star Monica Seles, speed skater Dan Jansen, and golfer Mark O'Meara. Using a model for managing physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual energy and changing behaviors — a model that has reinvigorated the achievements of sport's elites — they put executives through a training program to help them become what they call corporate athletes. *The Power of Full Engagement* is a rare example of a self-help book that gives readers substantive guidance they can use immediately, regardless of whether they choose to partake of LGE's more extensive onsite programs and services.

Talk of shamans and speed skaters notwithstanding, executive coaching has legitimate roots in psychology. Much of today's best work derives from the research of three organizational theorists: psychologist Harry Levinson, chairman of the Boston-based Levinson Institute and clinical professor of psychology emeritus in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School; group dynamics pioneer Kurt Lewin and his Field Theory; and Edgar Schein of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management.

Professor Schein says coaching covers a wide spectrum of activities, from helping people learn a new system to helping them broaden their outlook on what the company is doing. "I think of coaching as establishing a set of behaviors that help the client to develop new ways of seeing, feeling about, and behaving in problematic situations," he writes in his essay "Coaching and Consultation: Are They the Same?" (which can be found in *Coaching for Leadership: How the World's Greatest Coaches Help Leaders Learn*, a collection of essays edited by Marshall Goldsmith, Laurence Lyons, and Alyssa Freas). The coach, Professor Schein argues, has three key roles. At times the coach might be an expert who simply passes on the benefit of his or her experience. At other times, he or she may be a diagnostician and prescriber, identifying problems and offering remedies. Finally, there is the coach as "process-oriented therapist," helping clients gain insight into their situation and helping them improve their behavior. According to Professor Schein, the proper balance and timing of these three roles depends on the individual situation.

In the corporate world, however, theory is less important than outcome. In *Coaching: Winning Strategies for Individuals and Teams*, Dennis C. Kinlaw defines coaching as "a disciplined personal interaction with one or more persons which produces winning results for individuals, teams, and organizations by focusing and refocusing them on performance goals and facilitating their achievement of these goals."

Coaching's lure for pressured executives is the opportunity to safely forget about the usual baggage and be frank. "An executive coach provides a safe place. Who else can CEOs turn to? They are surrounded by senior managers who drink from the same water fountain," says Robert C. Berkley, who has been coaching executives for more than 10 years and runs his company, GroupMV LLC, from West Tisbury, Mass. Mr. Berkley, a former instructor at the online coach training organization Coach U (who has also served as chief information officer at Pearson PLC and Simon & Schuster Inc.), is a master certified coach — an ICF certification held by fewer than 1 percent of its members.

Often the executive coach is a corporate father confessor. Because there are not enough confessors with credibility to go around, creative minds are at work trying to scale the process. For example, the HR consultancy Hewitt Associates Inc., which manages what is reputed to be the world's largest executive coaching network, is now using Marshall Goldsmith's coaching methodology.

Executive coaches cater to different echelons of business leaders. Some specialize in middle managers. "You can think of it as entry-level executive coaching," says Mr. Berkley. Demand is also growing for coaches who can help talented but inexperienced business leaders in their 30s and 40s who struggle with team building and need to develop their management and leadership skills but have few mentors. They tend to burn out quickly in their jobs. "These executives often come to me in a fog. They tell me they should be excited about their work, but they're struggling to put their heart into it," Mr. Berkley says.

Just as there are different sorts of clients, Mr. Berkley identifies three main categories of coaches. First is the mentor coach, typically someone with strong experience in business. The second kind is a trained coach who may or may not have been an executive, but is someone with skills unique to the executive coaching industry. Program coaches, finally, are hired to do a specific job; an executive who must give a lot of

presentations might hire a public-speaking coach. Debra Benton, who bills herself as a speaker, author, and consultant, coaches executives on how to present themselves; her client list includes Pepsi, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, and NASA.

Well-known U.S. executive coaches come from a variety of backgrounds. Some are business academics, such as MIT's Professor Schein and the University of Michigan's Noel Tichy, who coached Jack Welch and had a controversial relationship with former Ford executive Jacques Nasser in the 1990s. Others, such as Dan Ciampa, are consultants or former executives who have found a new niche. Many coaches are psychologists or counselors. They include life-planning coaches such as Richard J. Leider, author of *Repacking Your Bags: Lighten Your Load for the Rest of Your Life* and *The Power of Purpose: Creating Meaning in Your Life and Work*. Mr. Leider is a founding partner of the Minneapolis-based training firm Inventure Group, which lists AT&T, Caterpillar, and General Motors as clients. Some coaches even coach coaches. Mr. Leider, for example, coaches Marshall Goldsmith.

The coaching field also boasts self-proclaimed experts on motivation, assorted medical practitioners, and a host of others from the health and wellness fields. The mix of disciplines, practices, terminology, and aspirations suggests coaching is in a state of excitable flux, on par with the state of psychotherapy at the beginning of the 20th century. Although the Jung and Freud of coaching have yet to emerge, it is not for want of trying.

One of the problems with any populist trend is that many hitch a lift on the passing bandwagon. Because executive coaching is growing fast, some coaching professionals with business backgrounds worry that there are too many people moving out of psychological counseling into business coaching who may not have the requisite knowledge of management and understanding of the particular demands on executives.

At the same time, coaches who focus on people's physical and emotional health warn that coaches without psychological training often do executive clients more harm than good. One coach offering such a caution is Steven Berglas, a researcher and instructor at the Anderson School at UCLA who spent 25 years in the psychiatry department at Harvard Medical School. He is the author of *Reclaiming the Fire: How Successful People Overcome Burnout*.

Books and videos are a means by which coaches can share their techniques with a larger audience. The gung-ho, can-do attitude of the self-help genre is evident in many of the works on offer, and the messages in most are quite similar and mostly common sense. Talane Miedaner's *Coach Yourself to Success: 101 Tips from a Personal Coach for Reaching Your Goals at Work and in Life* is a typical title. Debra Benton's books, which include *How to Act Like a CEO: 10 Rules for Getting to the Top and Staying There* and *How to Think Like a CEO: The 22 Vital Traits You Need to Be the Person at the Top*, have sold well. However, CEO autobiographies are hard to beat. Why read what an executive coach has to say on the subject when you can read Jack Welch or Larry Bossidy?

No book can replicate the human touch. A more promising avenue may be interactive technology that could be used to bridge the interpersonal gap between the executive in need of coaching and the expert. For example, the University of Maryland's National Leadership Institute offers an 11-week leadership development program that combines online classes and in-person coaching. HeartMath LLC, based in Boulder Creek, Calif., has a variety of interactive e-learning tools focused on helping executives in high-stress jobs be more effective leaders. The company's "Executive Strategies for Coherent Performance" combines interactive software with individual coaching by telephone.

Videos are another resource that executives can use to assimilate the messages of business leaders, management thinkers, and executive coaches. For example, the Stanford Graduate School of Business offers its Executive Briefings series on video. Filmed at monthly presentations on the Stanford campus, the series features leading business minds, including Bill Gates, Harvard professor Clayton Christensen, and Terry Pearce. Although it was recorded in 1994, Mr. Pearce's best-selling *The Mastery of Speaking as a Leader* is a master class in contemporary public speaking.

All of this marketplace activity can deflect attention from the issue of whether coaching actually works. Amid the publishing detritus, persuasive research is thin. The fact that at present almost anyone can set himself or

herself up as an executive coach means that for those considering using executive coaching services, caveat emptor applies — in spades.

In the corporate world, inputs inevitably are weighed against outputs and investments judged on their returns. Right now, it is too early to tell whether coaching is essential, or whether it is just a passing fad. As was the case with many corporate fashions before it, the danger for today's growing executive coaching market is that its own momentum could derail it. Hyperbole and snake oil beget disappointment and cynicism, as surely as success breeds success.

Robert Berkley believes that the bandwagon effect can last only so long. "Eventually that will reach a plateau," he says. "But the coaches with the experience, skills, and temperament to sit across the table from a CEO, having been there themselves, will remain."