

Put me in coach

More entrepreneurs and operators of small businesses are hiring business coaches to unlock their potential.

By Charles Boisseau

THE ISSUE: More business owners and executives are hiring coaches to help guide them and make better decisions.

Tiger Woods has one. Pete Sampras has one. So why not small business owners?

More business executives are hiring their own coaches help improve their performance, act as a sounding board, boost their company's profits and make better decisions about everything from personnel to strategy.

The trend is catching on at fast-growing companies in the age of the Internet, when decisions are made quickly, staffs are lean and managers crave guidance.

The International Coach Federation, the Washington, D.C.-based association of personal and business coaches, estimates there are 10,000 coaches nationwide and the number is skyrocketing as business and executive coaching has become one of the hottest trends in management. The federation has more than doubled its membership to 3,200 in the past year.

In one form or another, business coaching has been around since the 1980s, when it first became popular with executives looking for outside help in climbing the corporate ladder. Some needed time-management skills. Others needed help learning how to manage people.

Now business coaches are guiding entrepreneurs, and corporate coaches are training managers to coach employees from the production lines to the highest levels of management.

Fast-growing companies are hiring coaches because "they don't have time to make mistakes," said Marcia Reynolds, president of the International Coach Federation and owner of a Phoenix-based coaching firm, Covisioning.

More money, more fun

Unlike business consultants, who focus solely on the business, coaches say their role is to unlock the potential of their clients both professionally and personally -- though coaches are quick to distinguish between coaching and therapy.

"What is the definition of a coach? Basically I call it a partnership, where the coach operates as champion, cheerleader, advocate and sounding board for the client," said

Sandy Vilas, coach and owner of Coachinc.com, which conducts teleclasses for coaches under the name Coach U. He operates the business from his homes in Longboat Key, Fla., and Steamboat Springs, Colo.

“When people come to a coach there are two things they want out of the coaching process: They want to be able to make more money in less time and to have more fun. That’s it,” Vilas said.

Works for some

Matt Flemming of Houston, who was grappling with many issues at once after he started a pharmaceutical distribution firm in 1994. A friend suggested bouncing his ideas off somebody so he hired Vilas as his coach.

Flemming said the experience helped him make better decisions and analyze situations, particularly in creating his management team.

He said he got so hooked on the concept that he eventually hired businesses coaches for all the other members of his management team -- with mixed results.

“Some liked it and others did it because the boss wanted them to,” he said. “Some CEOs and entrepreneurs don’t feel comfortable opening the kimono and that sort of thing. Others do.”

Flemming, now 31, is chief executive of Worldbynet.com, a Houston-based company that provides country-specific content to expatriates and immigrants living in the United States. He said since he joined the company last summer he gave up his business coach because his young company can’t afford to pay for it yet.

Mostly by phone

Coaches typically meet with their clients once a week by the phone for about half an hour. Most provide unlimited e-mail consultations. They charge about \$250 to \$500 a month.

The <http://coachfederation.org/> International Coach Federation provides a search feature on its Website to search for coaches in various categories of expertise -- such as small business, personal and corporate coaching -- by fee schedules and regions.

Coaches come from a variety of backgrounds, and have a wide-level of training and skills. Some coaches worry about so many coaches entering field without having the proper skills.

“So many people are out there calling themselves coaches we think certification is important,” said Reynolds. She is a “master’s certified coach,” which means she has completed about two years of course work at a school accredited by the federation.

Some coaches bring an array of skills and educational experience to help their clients. For example, Stever Robbins, owner of VentureCoach, a Boston firm that specializes in coaching operators of fast-growing companies, has a computer science degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a master's from Harvard Business School. He also has worked at several start-up companies before starting his own coaching firm two years ago. He says he enjoys working one-on-one with clients, many of whom are grappling with the same issues he has tackled.

Developing talent

Time management and over work are among the big issues many clients face, especially at a time when many small companies have flat organizational charts and people are doing so many tasks at once, said Molly Gordon, a Seattle coach.

She said she worked with one executive who went to work at 3:30 a.m. and spent three hours working on e-mail. "We worked on putting up some boundaries on incoming information and meetings," said Gordon, a former business planning and PR consultant.

Among her clients is Paul Travis, 35, who recently left his job as a marketing executive at a start-up company to become a full-time marketing consultant. He said he hired Gordon as a coach about a year ago because he saw some areas for improvement and didn't feel comfortable discussing this and larger career issues with his boss.

"What I saw was my career was bigger than my relationship with this one company. It was something I wanted to do to have an advocate to support me and to make changes I wanted to make and hold me to the fire," Travis said.

Gordon said she loves working with people who hire coaches.

"They're highly motivated, extremely talented and are committed to working smart rather than hard, and they know how to ask for help," she said.

"To steal a line from the U.S. Army, they want to be all they can be. They want to be developed the same way a great runner or singer wants to be developed."

Charles Boisseau writes weekly about entrepreneurs and emerging businesses. E-mail him with column ideas or comments.

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