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COACHING THE BIG BOSS

Business owners and CEOs are hiring executive coaches to sort out business and personal problems. Not everyone thinks that's a great idea.

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It could be a promotion that requires a new set of social or communication skills. It could be simply that it's lonely at the top. Whatever the reason, more than a few executives these days are opting to pay outsiders for personal advice and counsel. And that trend has nourished a small but growing subset of the consulting trade—executive coaching.

We're not talking Final Four here. We're talking about feel-good strokes, astute or not-so-astute observations, constructive or destructive criticism, a number to call and a shoulder to cry on, figuratively at least. Someone, says Raymond Noe, a professor of management and human resources at Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business, "to help the CEO see some of his or her blind spots and help improve them."

Sounds helpful. And some business folks think executive coaching is the greatest invention since personal trainers. It isn't that the coaches become surrogate CEOs, proponents say. Coaching is less about telling execs what to do and more about engaging them in dialog: What is it you would really like to accomplish? Who do you want to be as you're getting that accomplished?

That's the positive spin. But executive coaching has critics, too, and their verdicts are harsh. Carole Tomko, for example, says much of the gospel preached by executive coaches is nonsense, "and they don't even know what they're saying is non-



Christopher Slankovich, left, brought focus back to the Gahanna Police Department and Deputy Chief Larry Rinehart.

sense." Tomko, an attorney, has a sociology degree and is a former senior vice president of human resources for Cardinal Health. Since 1999 she has run her own consulting firm, Customized Organizational Solutions with offices in Columbus, Boston, Indianapolis and Providence, R.I.

Tomko thinks business consultants should stick to business. "I know a lot of this new sort of coaching trend is about coaching the executive as an individual, not necessarily as it relates to the business, and I guess I don't buy that," she says. "I think that's something for professional Ph.D.s, psychologists, ministers—and I guess my opinion is that's where that ought to stay."

Whether executive coaching turns out to be a valuable resource or a boondoggle, a passing fad or an emerging industry, it's definitely on the rise. In 1990, there were an estimated 500 coaches nationwide. Today that number has ballooned to somewhere between 16,000 and 20,000. And more wannabe coaches are printing up business cards every day.

Should *you* hire an executive coach?

Should you *be* an executive coach?

Read on.

NO CREDENTIALS

Critics point out that anyone can call him-

self or herself an executive coach. A coach may have a postgraduate degree, or not; may have management experience, or not. There is no required educational level. There is no official certification or licensing procedure. There are no qualifications at all, and that's what rankles many—even among the ranks of coaches.

"As an emerging profession, frankly there

tute and University in Cincinnati.

Tomko is more strident. "Okay, there's a real certification you go through to become a doctor or a lawyer or an accountant or a psychologist," she says. "But [executive coaching] is just some made-up thing. These things drive me nuts."

The International Coach Federation (ICF) in Washington, D.C., claims it's "the

Founded in 1992, Coach U is a "classroom-without-walls school" that charges \$3,595 for a 133-hour corporate coaching program done entirely by "teleclasses," which are basically conference telephone calls. Susan Cantwell, director of marketing, says Coach U's corporate coaching program has 750 students, many with business backgrounds.

are not a lot of barriers to entry," says Barbara Braham, president and owner of Braham Associates in Columbus. "So, it's true, pretty much anyone can say, 'I'm a coach.'" Braham says she has done clinical social work at North Central Mental Health in Columbus and is now working on a Ph.D. at Union Insti-

largest nonprofit professional association worldwide of personal and business coaches with more than 5,000 members and more than 191 chapters in 36 countries." Staffers there are all too familiar with the credentialing debate.

The ICF itself offers no training pro-

grams. Instead, it endorses 15 schools that offer degrees—from Associate Credentialed Coach (60 hours of training and 250 hours of coaching experience) to Master Certified Coach (200 hours of training and 2,500 hours of experience). ICF executive director Dan Martinage says coaches are not psychologists, nor do they need to be. "I'm certain there are lots of practicing psychologists or therapists who feel [psychology training is] important," Martinage says. "But there are just as many, if not more, who don't feel that is important—that having a strong business background, for example, may be more important, or coming from a background in the industry where you're doing the coaching."

Critics say coaches who lack formal psychological training may actually do more harm than good by unwittingly helping the executive mask serious psychological problems. "About 75 percent of the time we deal with a 'coaching issue' we find a legitimate psychological concern," says Kurt Malkoff, an executive coach with a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. Malkoff is president and founder of Columbus-based Matrix Psychological Services Inc., a national organization of 6,000 clinical psychologists.

"The problem with this profession is that there's no license, there's no format, there's no nothing," Malkoff says. "Someone who takes a weekend course or goes on the Internet for \$1,000 and gets some bogus certificate certainly is not competent in either ascertaining if the person has a [psychological] problem or what to do with it if they hit upon it. That seems to be the cardinal, overreaching problem with executive coaching, or whatever you want to call it this week."

Even if coaches don't do psychological harm, Tomko argues, they may not be equipped to provide sound *business* advice. "These [executives] are reaching out for help," Tomko says. "Maybe in some cases they are getting help. Good for them. I think in most cases they aren't. But more disturbing, what they'll do then is say, 'That was a waste of money.' And rather than take it to the next level and learn what they really needed was an industrial psychologist or a business lawyer, they won't ever know what they needed. They won't ever know why it was a waste of money. They'll just go, 'I'm never doing that again.' But their problem still won't be solved."

TESTIMONIALS

To counter criticisms, coaches cite success stories. A couple of years ago, for example, the Gahanna Police Department was in serious trouble. "It was during one of

the most troubled times at the agency—new chief of police, new direction, new way of doing business," says Deputy Chief Larry Rinehart. "We were right in the midst of a big cultural shift. Morale was nose-diving."

So the Gahanna PD called in clinical psychologist Christopher Stankovich, founder of Columbus-based Champion Athletic Consulting Ltd., to do some coaching. "He provided a real good conduit for the officers to discuss what they were going through, what their fears were, and I think he was able to bring them back into focus about why they're even here," Rinehart says. "He opened up some really good lines of communication between the chief and me and our officers. It was very effective."

Stankovich, who worked in the OSU Athletic Department for four years, does a lot of peak-performance coaching with

Raymond Noe, a professor of management and human resources at Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business, says executive coaches are useful "to help the CEO see some of his or her blind spots and help improve them."

athletes and likes to use sports as a metaphor. It worked for the Gahanna Police Department. "He used a lot of athletic analogies that really worked well with our main group of people," Rinehart says. "It served us very well."

Jan Allen, who calls herself a "life and executive coach," launched her new business, Jan Allen Unlimited, in 2002 after three decades in politics, lobbying and public relations. A lawyer with a master's degree in social work, Allen was communications director for Ohio Gov. Dick Celeste, then partnered with lobbyists Dennis Wojtanowski and Curt Steiner (who's also her husband) in successful government relations and PR ventures.

Last year, Allen decided to take a new path, one that (among other things) allows her to work primarily from home. She's