

Special Focus

Published December 14, 2010

COMMENTARY – Business Times

COACHING VERSUS COUNSELING VERSUS CONSULTING VERSUS PSYCHOTHERAPY.

Coaching is about helping people achieve a heightened sense of self-awareness and using this awareness to achieve their goals

By PAUL HENG

'Now that I have been performing the most senior role in Asia for the past eight years, what's next?' 'Now that I've listed my business, and handed over the reins to my CEO, what's next?' 'Now that I've been running this business successfully for my employer for the past decade, should I take that quantum leap into entrepreneurship?' 'For the first time in my 25-year career, I am being outplaced. What shall I do next?' THESE are just four possible scenarios that may prompt leaders to seek the expertise of a life coach.

Coaching has been around for centuries, in various forms and shapes. Given the challenges of the world we live in today, life and executive coaching is fast becoming much more known and prominent here in Asia. Companies have, over the past half a decade, or even longer, increasingly sought the input of coaches. Some have experienced much success, while others swear never to mention the word 'coach' again!

The retail market for coaching i.e. self (versus corporate) sponsorship is in its infancy - the litmus test being not too many people are willing to fork out the hundreds of dollars, and sometimes even four-figure fees, for a professional coach.

There are no statutory requirements for someone to venture into this field of practice. Like HR, however, some form of training and paper qualification/certification is preferred - so say many corporate users of coaching. For companies which are exploring the intervention of coaches in their talent development efforts, it is a case of caveat emptor.

What are life coaches, and what do they do exactly?

Life coaching is about helping the coachee achieve a heightened sense of self awareness - of one's habits, behaviours, thinking style, etc - and to utilise this awareness to achieve overall life goals, including areas related to personal aspirations, career goals, relationships, emotional and mental health, and to uncover hidden potential.

Pertinent questions

The use of psycho-profiling and 360 degrees feedback tools is common. The coach may also perform a career influence interview (career because this typically makes up the largest chunk of one's life), bringing the coachee back to his childhood days to look at the kind of growing-up years he had, what influenced his decisions on academic and career directions, what activities he likes, and dislikes about each job that he held, why he left the organisation, etc.

Coaching is different from consulting, as it is different from counselling and therapy. The key difference is that the coach does not provide the answers - he facilitates the thinking process, asks pertinent, thought-provoking and powerful questions to encourage the coachee to stretch his mind and think, and to arrive at some possible answers/options.

The responsibility then falls squarely on the shoulders of the coachee to critically assess each option and to take action - the coach can, and usually does, continue to facilitate the process to arrive at the best solution to the issue at hand.

In coaching, the spotlight falls on the coachee, not the coach. If the coachee arrives at a 'destination' or answer which he had set out to find, this most likely makes for a success story. When the coachee succeeds, so does the coach.

Taking you through a close-to-real life coaching assignment will probably best explain the process of life coaching . The name and certain aspects of the situation have been changed to protect the identity of the coachee - something sacred in

the coaching profession.

Jasmine, who was Asia president of a Fortune 50 firm, came to me in 2009. She had been successful in climbing the corporate ladder ever since she started working. Her career took her to three continents, for the most part, with her family in tow - the US, Europe and Asia. In Asia, she was one of the few senior leaders I coached who had worked and lived in five major countries, including her latest posting in Singapore.

She speaks fluent French, Thai, Japanese, Mandarin and, of course, English, her mother tongue. Fortune had always smiled on Jasmine and she has had few setbacks in her life. She is married to an Englishman and they have three teenage children, all studying in different parts of the world when we met. Her husband possesses a portfolio career, with the main activity being Nasdaq trading.

Challenging situation

At the age of 51, Jasmine's career was set to be derailed. She had rarely tasted setbacks in her career, and found the prospect of losing her job to a colleague very difficult to accept. To make the situation even more challenging, it was not a performance issue - she had always exceeded her numbers. At her level of seniority, it was clear to her that politics was at play and she had got the short end of the stick. The new global CEO wanted to bring in her own people.

Through the process of coaching, Jasmine arrived at a couple of 'Ah-ha' moments. One key one was that it dawned on her that there was a period in her children's growing up years which she had missed out on. On further reflection, she pinpointed it to the three years when she was based in a foreign country amid ambitious colleagues who had no qualms about putting her down whenever the opportunity presented itself.

She had to work very hard, watch her back constantly, and also bring in the numbers. She succeeded but it meant travelling to Asia for business often and being away from her family for many weekends.

I then coached her to arrive at four options to help her move forward:

- Take the severance package offered and find another job;
- Go to court and make a claim for wrongful dismissal and victimisation against the employer;
- Resign and become a full-time home-maker; and
- Last but not least, take the package, leave the company and find a less-than-fulltime job.

The fourth option eventually won the day. Jasmine justified it thus: it allows her to continue to remain active (mentally), do something meaningful with her wealth of experience, spend more time with her children and husband, and be able to help supplement the family income.

It has been close to two years since I coached Jasmine. We continue to stay in touch, and as far as I can tell during our irregular catch-up meals, Jasmine has re-invented herself, working part of the week as a kindergarten relief teacher, and is much happier for the change that 'forced' her out of her job. A blessing in disguise on hindsight, she always says.

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