



Rowena Crosbie, C.I.M.

## Caveat emptor

### *Choosing an executive coach - let the buyer beware*

One of the emerging trends in the field of professional development is the focus on the individual employee. In stark contrast to training for the masses, this individualized and customized approach often calls for the engagement of an executive coach.

What is driving this trend? As organizations seek to define their key market differentiators, they frequently identify intangible things such as leadership, adaptability to change and speed of innovation. These attributes are not found in the traditional asset section of the balance sheet but, rather, in the hearts and minds of employees. In the face of this, a heavy investment in services like executive coaching makes perfect sense.

While the trend is encouraging with clear benefits for organizations, employees, and customers served, there is a 'let the buyer beware' caution this author would like to highlight.

Executive coaching is very personal. Much more personal than training workshops that are designed to serve a group of people. It also tends to be more expensive when calculated on a per person basis. This naturally means that the beneficiaries of executive coaching are often executives themselves or senior people targeted for top jobs in the future. When these elements conspire, the outcome is an environment where senior people, privy to confidential matters, are encouraged to disclose private information, company secrets and closely-held strategies in a relationship of trust - all with the admirable goal of growth and development.

Can the executive coach be trusted? It is a good question and one that anyone contemplating hiring a coach should thoroughly explore.

The profession of executive coaching is not regulated. For that matter, the entire field of corporate training is not regulated. Compare this with professional fields like law, medicine, psychology and accounting that have processes for sanctioning their members and holding them to strict professional standards. Further, they have a process for preventing their members from practicing when behaviour doesn't meet ethical, technical or industry thresholds. In unregulated industries the code of ethics is left for the practitioner to decide.

In other words, there is nothing to prevent anyone at anytime from announcing to the world that they are an Executive Coach. There are no higher education mandates, no professional standards to meet, few certifications available and none that are required, no license to earn, no continuing education requirements, no experience needed, and no agency to report to. A shingle on a building isn't even necessary. A business card from the local print shop, a website, a cell phone, and the newest executive coach is prepped to call on prospective clients.

Whenever individual practitioners are responsible for defining and then policing their own standards, there are some critical questions clients should be asking to ensure their own interests are protected.

What should you look for when selecting an executive coach? Beyond competency, subject-matter expertise and experience, three deal-breakers to address early in the relationship are confidentiality, discretion and ethics.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Confidentiality, although important, is frequently overlooked when an outside provider is entrusted with closely-held information. In training workshops, and especially in executive coaching, trainers and coaches often learn details about an organization's strategic plan, customer lists, competitive advantage, market differentiators, acquisition/divestment goals, new product launches, employee relations issues, customer complaints, risk exposure - and the list goes on.

While it may seem like common sense to assume that a training vendor or executive coach would maintain confidence, common sense is not always common practice. In an unregulated industry, populated heavily by extraverts who sometimes speak first and think later, the risks of your confidential information ending up in the wrong hands are higher than you might like to think.

#### **DISCRETION**

Similarly, a track record on discretion is also worth investigating. While confidential information is often black and white, can be short-listed, contractually agreed

and enforced, discretion is a more elusive topic.

Discretion is the ability to determine what to share and with whom. It is about caution, judgment and good taste in communication. How important is it that the relationship itself be kept confidential? Will the vendor reveal your relationship and the nature of the coaching goals to others (perhaps to your competitors)? What type of conversations are taking place around the water cooler? What is being revealed in small-talk during networking or other social interactions? Do the communications shared in the coaching relationship stay in the coaching relationship? Are your experiences and thoughts shared in training or coaching finding their way into other training/coaching relationships the practitioner has - without your permission?

### ETHICS

The word 'ethics' is derived from the Greek word *ethos* (character). Many professions have highly detailed and enforceable codes of behaviour for their members. Some of these codes have been incorporated into the law. Generally, failure to comply with a code of professional ethics may result in expulsion from the profession or some lesser sanction. Since there is no widely accepted code of ethics shared across the coaching and training profession, it is a topic that should be discussed prior to embarking in an executive coaching relationship.

How do you determine if the executive coach you are working with shares your standards of ethics, confidentiality and discretion? Ask some of the following questions and listen carefully to the responses. Check references. Consult your own network to gain perspective from parties you trust and whose only agenda is to help you.

- How do you handle confidential client information? Give examples.
- Do you carry professional liability insurance? How much?
- Do you guarantee your work?

- Do you belong to the Better Business Bureau?
- Do you have a standard client contract that addresses confidentiality?
- What do you do to ensure confidential client information is protected?
- Are others in your organization required to sign confidentiality agreements to protect client information?
- How do you handle breaches of contract?
- How are disputes handled?
- What is your code of ethics?
- Tell me about your other clients (listen for how much is being disclosed about other clients and the appropriateness of the disclosures)

A decade ago, the fields of corporate training and executive coaching were struggling to define themselves and their value. Today, they are mature and contribute meaningfully to business success. Now an established and respected function, corporate training and executive coaching can be proud and must also realize that with maturation comes responsibility.

In the absence of regulation, self-regulation is imperative. If practitioners fail to hold themselves and their colleagues to high standards, they risk the day when regulations are imposed upon them by a third party in the wake of a scandal. To date, the professional associations that number trainers and coaches among their members have done little to influence industry-wide standards. For those of us who take the trust placed in us by clients very seriously, we anxiously await the day when confidentiality, discretion and ethics are the norm in the corporate training and executive coaching industry. Until then, caveat emptor.

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