

# FASTCOMPANY

## Are You Being Coached?

From reality TV to rock bands, coaching has gone mainstream. A guide to get you started, if you're ready to play.

**From:** [Issue 91](#) | February 2005 | Page 83 **By:** Ryan Underwood **Illustrations by:** John Hendrix

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Close your eyes and envision a perfect future. Are you rich? Are you fulfilled? What you won't imagine, no matter how hard you try, is that the path to perfection might involve a Dr. Phil wannabe delving into the most personal aspects of your life -- and you don't even get to be on TV. As people seek better lives for themselves, either personally, professionally, or both, they're more likely to find outside help to get them there: a professional coach. The practice is more popular than ever; the International Coach Federation, the most widely recognized organization that offers bona fide certifications, boasts about 8,000 members, up from approximately 1,500 in 1998.

Coaching has even entered the realm of pop culture. This year's breakout hit on daytime television is a reality series called *Starting Over*, in which a pair of life coaches counsel six down-on-their-luck women living together in a house. Even the aging rock group Metallica has discovered deeper meaning beyond sex, drugs, and rock and roll, thanks to multiple sessions with a "performance enhancement coach" named Phil Towle, as chronicled in the 2004 documentary *Some Kind of Monster*.

With coaching all around, we wouldn't blame you for wondering, Is it time for me to get a coach? Consult our FAQ of the good, the bad, and the ugly of coaching before you jump in.

People seek out coaches for two common reasons: navigating some *transition* in their lives or careers, or having some inkling that they're jerks, and that antisocial behavior is *holding them back*.

### Who are these people?

There are an estimated 20,000 coaches around the globe, and perhaps the only thing they have in common is that they use the word "coach" to describe what they do. Most coaches have a sociology or psychology degree, but there are no rigid requirements. "Coaching is a vocation that's just now evolving into a profession," says coach Steve Mitten, B.ApSc, P.Eng, CPCC, MCC, whose string of letters after

his name meld together in a kind of alphabet soup of obscure credentials. (For the record, Mitten holds a Canadian bachelor's in applied science, a Canadian engineering license, and two coaching certificates.)

Although coaching certificates are good things to look for, the most important credential a coach needs is your trust. "For coaching to work, you have to get to know a coach and they have to get to know you," says M. Rose Jonas, a coach and the author of *Can I Lie on My Resume?* No wonder then that many coachees go through multiple coaches in their career.

## What kind of coach is right for me?

There are executive coaches and life/career coaches. Executive coaches, who typically work with big CEOs through executive-placement firms such as Korn/Ferry International, are brought in as (mostly) agenda-free surrogate mentors. That's become especially important in this mobile age when it's rare to find a lifelong veteran available to offer support and guidance.

Elisabeth Svanberg, a vice president at the biomedical company Serono International in Geneva, says she had never even heard of coaching until she began discussing her own path into the executive ranks with members of an internal HR team.

The idea was that coaching would help Svanberg shift her mind-set from that of a medical director, in which she acted in the narrow interests of her own team, to that of an executive more concerned with the company's overall health. For example, Svanberg's coach taught her that when budget time rolled around, she'd have to pull a mental 180: Instead of fighting to keep every dollar in her department, now she'd have to be the one championing larger cuts. "Coaching helped me eliminate all these mistakes I would have made on my own," Svanberg says. "It really helped speed up the transition into this new role."

Life coaches, on the other hand, represent the "I want to be happy" side of the business, populated by touchy-feely types with a weak spot for comfy sweater shirts. In this realm, people usually find life coaches on their own. Stan Schultz, who owns a successful civil-engineering company in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, brought on a coach to help him reorder his life after his wife unexpectedly gave birth to triplets a year ago. "My whole life once revolved around financial success," he says, having fast-tracked his firm to the Inc. 500 list in 2003. "Now my happiness comes from seeing my wife smile and from laying down on the floor to let all those kids crawl over me like a bunch of puppies."

What the coach made abundantly clear to Schultz was that in order to balance his life, he would have to delegate more control of the company to others -- something he was always loath to do -- and he'd have to turn down new projects to keep operations manageable. Happiness comes at a price.

## Who needs a coach?

People seek out coaches for an infinite variety of reasons, but there are two typical coachees: people

navigating some significant transition in their life or career -- such as Svanberg and Schultz -- and jerks who have at least some inkling that being a jerk is holding them back. After helping build Funrise Toy Corp., a Los Angeles toy manufacturer, from a startup in 1992 to a global business working with some of the biggest names in retailing, Martin Kruger turned to a coach last year to help him fix what he felt was an increasingly ineffective leadership style. He had the barking-orders-to-underlings part of his job down cold, but fell far short when it came to inspiring employees to follow him.

The coach interviewed five of Kruger's coworkers and came back with a devastating assessment. "I came off as nothing short of abusive." Today, Kruger is grateful for the "shock and awe" of that experience, because it woke him up to his own bad behavior, something he says only an outsider could have done.

## **What does coaching cost?**

Executive-coaching engagements typically cost upward of \$10,000 per person over a set period of time and include several face-to-face sessions between coach and coachee, followed by email and telephone discussions. To help develop executives internally, rather than look for outsiders, companies are often more than happy to foot the bill to fix dysfunctional leaders.

But enterprising fast-trackers can and do shell out for their own advancement. Gerard van Grinsven, a vice president and regional manager for the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Co., has spent "a couple of thousand" dollars out of his own pocket on a coach. "This is definitely worth the money I spent," he says, "if for no other reason than it has sped up the course of my own professional development." Ritz-Carlton is now in the midst of establishing an executive coaching program of its own. (No word on whether the hotel is paying him back for his advance scouting.)

As the price scale slides downward, though, the buyer should beware. Steven Morse, a 24-year-old literary publicist for Phenix & Phenix, an Austin PR firm, found a coach through the Yellow Pages just before graduating last year. He went to three 45-minute sessions with a career coach at \$50 a pop. "She just gave me basic advice," he laments.

## **What should you expect?**

Many coaches say that their profession is best understood by what it's not. It's not a substitute for therapy. And it's not business strategy. Don't expect great epiphanies on a silver platter. Coaches say it's the clients who do the heavy lifting.

David Thomson, now a vice president at Hewlett-Packard, worked with an executive coach when he moved from a general manager role at Nortel Networks to a senior position focused squarely on sales. As with Svanberg, Thomson says the company didn't suggest coaching as any sort of punitive measure but rather to help him manage his transition into a role populated with "amiables," as he describes salespeople in the patois of personality typecasting. A coach, Thomson says, knows the right questions

to ask, "but you're the one who ultimately has to figure out what behavior needs to change and how to change it."

## Does coaching work?

Coachees tend to be a self-selecting audience, so the answer is usually yes. But not always. Michelle Tennant, who owns a small PR firm near Asheville, North Carolina, spent the better part of 12 years in one coaching program or another, trying to uncover her true calling. Finally she threw in the towel when a coach she found through the classified ads of the *Utne Reader* made romantic overtures over email. "After that, I was done with coaches."

The lesson, then, is that even true believers should maintain a guarded edge during the coaching profession's woolly growth phase. "If a coach can't handle your skepticism," says executive coach Marjan Bolmeijer, "then by all means, throw them out."



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