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Balancing Act

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Personal coaches offer lessons on living

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When Roger Livermont was recovering from cancer, dealing with divorce and leaving his bank job to become a contractor, his life was not what he wanted it to be.

"I needed someone without their own agenda to help me manage my life," Livermont recalls.

So Livermont hired a life coach, a Dr. Phil on call. Someone to feel his pain, map out his future, strategize steps to get him there.

With so many of us overwhelmed in our jobs or relationships, the concept of having a personal coach has appeal. Once reserved for executives, personal coaches are trickling down to the average American worker struggling to build a small business, get out of dating rut, restore balance to their lives or find an alternate to retirement.

"People watching the Olympics see the coaches working with the athletes," says Barry Demp, a Troy, Mich., business coach. "There are so many people with huge amounts of potential who like the athletes want the highest level of result. On their own, they just can't do it. With a coach, they have a shot at it."

Unlike therapy, coaching doesn't look back. Instead, life or business coaches work with clients to create an action plan, look forward and stay focused.

Monte Kane, 55, hired a business coach to help him build his Miami accounting firm and his stature in the community. Kane says his coach surveyed his employees and urged him to reexamine how he talks to others. He began listening more and giving his staff and clients more of a chance to voice their opinions. Better relationships, he learned, are crucial for growth and networking. So is thinking bigger.

"I would have hired one or two people at a time," Kane says. Instead, Kane's coach encouraged him to think long term to his goal of building a business that could one day carry on without him. "He helped me think outside my comfort zone and project out and overhire."

Coaching as a profession is exploding as the concept moves into the mainstream. There are more than 40,000 coaches worldwide.

But hire with caution: Qualifications vary as widely as the reasons people seek a coach. Some are former psychologists, others former business people or personal trainers. Some hang a shingle without credentials or expertise.

Look for a coach who has certification from the International Coach Federation, background in the area you most

want help with and who clicks with your personality.

"It is different from friends or family who may have trouble looking at your situation without judgement," explains Denise Braunstein, a Coral Springs life coach.

Kane's business coach, Barry Demp of Troy, Mich., spent two days with Kane plotting professional and personal goals. "Just like a company, he now has a strategic plan," Demp says. `` And someone to support him and hold him accountable."

One believer in coaches, Tom Washburn, hired Pat Morgan when his business partner retired and he got bogged down in every emergency that arose at his Miami insurance company. After a divorce, he also felt he needed direction in his personal life.

Morgan helped him come up with goals. Washburn says he has hired a designer to remodel his home, has become active in business groups to make more contacts and meet women to date and has hired salespeople. No longer is his life all about work, he says. `` I'm finally making progress now that I have someone to talk to and bounce ideas off of."

Research shows the majority of U.S. companies use formal coaching as an employee development method. And 95 percent of businesses that use coaching have increased their use over the past five years, according to a 2005 survey of human resource managers by the College of Executive Coaching. Small and medium businesses were just as likely to employ coaches as large ones, the survey shows.

As for Livermont, he, too, says his life now has improved: `` What I pay on a monthly basis is well within my budget. After all, how much is my life worth?"

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