

Business Coaching Catches On

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In the world of goal setting, Michael Kesner thinks big. When he had the chance to run his own business, then a second and then a charity, he did all three. At once. So, when Mr. Kesner decided he wanted higher profits three years ago, he did what he typically does—seized a hot opportunity. He sought out a business coach, a trend that's exploding among small businesses and entrepreneurs nationwide.

It's estimated that up to 20% of American small businesses are using them, up from 4% just four years ago.

"It's the only time all week when I focus on the big picture," says Mr. Kesner, who is trying to concentrate on his primary company, Greater Chicago Group, an employee benefits agency in Bannockburn. "I'd be apt to get off track and not spend the appropriate amount of time toward each (enterprise)."

The result of the coaching sessions: Profits in his benefits agency are growing between 35% and 40% annually, up from 25% in his pre-coaching days.

Increased interest in business coaches is reflected in the scramble to churn out more. In 1996, Colorado-based Coach University, a virtual college that trains business coaches nationwide, had 500 students. This year, the number jumped to 5,000.

The National Assn. of Business Coaches, a professional organization based in Clear Spring, Md., with 400 members, counts 1,100 small businesses among its clientele.

And Chicago's chapter of the International Coach Federation has grown from four members to 150 since its launch four years ago. Member Cynthia Stringer, who is Mr. Kesner's coach, estimates that 50% of her clientele is composed of small businesses.

Many factors are driving the trend. Among them is the virtual marketplace, which puts small businesses on a competitive field with large ones. The price—a need for sudden expertise in marketing, distribution, financing and other issues—drives many small business people to seek help. "People are realizing that to be competitive and effective, they can't do it alone," Ms. Stringer says.

Fans of business coaching say the services roughly parallel those of a consultant, but without the high fees. While a consultant often demands thousands of dollars an hour, coaches generally charge between \$200 and \$600 per hour. While a consultant may appoint a team to do the marketing plan and other tasks, a coach simply points toward the experts or resources needed. It's up to the business owner to do the work. **"In consulting, I'm the expert. In coaching, you're the expert," says Timothy Ursiny, Ph.D., a Chicago business coach.**

In essence, Dr. Ursiny notes, coaches help small business people set their own agendas. "Some people just want to be a one-person shop. Other people want to be a huge business down the road," he says. "I help them start picking paths to complete that vision."

Coaches say small businesses' problems often spring from growing pains. For example, a firm's success may outpace the skill level of its employees. Coaches, who typically focus on personal as well as professional issues, can help in a many ways. Beyond sending employees to training seminars, a coach helps them learn time management, deal with difficult clients and co-workers and discover their personal and professional goals.

For Ming Sison, a Chicago women's clothing designer who owns Designs by Ming, a need to develop confidence with clients led her to Ms. Stringer. "She said, 'You have to be strong and you have to show them that you know what you're talking about,'" Ms. Sison recalls. Coaching has given her a personal boost and helped her company become more financially stable, she adds.

For others, focus is the issue. That's especially true for highly creative entrepreneurs, coaches agree. "As the business begins to grow, more and more opportunities come into their field of vision," says Chicago business coach Amy Ruppert. "The entrepreneur has a tendency to want to grab all of them, and it dissipates the energy and the momentum of what they originally set out to do. Almost every entrepreneur will have a history of failed businesses behind them because of that."

A business coach helps "keep the client connected to who they are," Ms. Ruppert says. Sometimes, that leads to dramatic life changes. **Dr. Ursiny says that in one case, an employee he coached at the request of a manager ended up resigning and pursuing a different career. "I was scared to death as to how the company would react," Dr. Ursiny says. "However they realized that person had been in the wrong**

place for 10 years. It wasn't a good match."

Despite those kinds of risks, **many companies increasingly are using coaching as a perk.** Jeff Sucec, president of Lombard-based Frontline Group FTR, persuaded four employees to take advantage of coaching, as he has this year. The best approach, he says, is to present it as an option, not a requirement. "You say, 'I'm going to introduce you to three or four coaches, and here are a variety of questions you can ask,'" Mr. Sucec says. "Then, they view that their destiny is more in their hands than that their fate is dictated." Mr. Sucec, who hopes to refer more of his 75 employees to coaching, adds that strict confidentiality is critical. "I don't know anything that goes on in the coaching sessions," he says. "And I don't want to know."

Dominique Raccah, publisher of Naperville-based Sourcebooks Inc., said about 15 employees including herself are receiving coaching from Dr. Ursiny. **"We've been growing 60% to 100% per year (in gross revenues) for the last five years," says Ms. Raccah, who also manages 60 employees. "That's hard. When you've got that kind of a stress on your organization, you want to make sure you've got (safety) valves on it, too."**

Working with Dr. Ursiny, Sourcebooks employees have learned critical skills from properly interviewing job applicants to negotiating for high-quality printing services at reasonable prices, Ms. Raccah says.

In some ways, small companies are better positioned to take advantage of coaching, practitioners say.

Since they don't yet have an entrenched corporate culture, they may be more receptive to creative solutions. But coaches offer this caveat: Coaching is never easy. On the contrary, it demands growth.

As Ms. Sison notes, "When there is somebody there who is really after you, you are more inspired to do things."

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