

The Coaching Phenomenon

By Catherine Fox

There is no stopping the popularity of coaching. The question is, where is it all heading?

Coaching is big, and getting bigger. There were no spare seats at a three-day conference on the subject, featuring a team of speakers from around the world, in Sydney last month. The Australian Institute of Executive Coaching is constantly answering calls from people wanting to either find or become a coach.

And some of our biggest companies, such as Westpac, Ford, Insurance Australia Group and Coles Myer, are converts to this new corporate phenomenon. Little data is available on the size of the executive coaching sector in Australia, although the **2001 Leadership, Employment and Direction Survey found almost 20 per cent of Australian business leaders and 10 per cent of senior managers have an executive coach.**

Australia may have been late to catch on but we are now firmly in the grip of coaching fever. Despite the tough economic conditions, it shows no signs of abating.

Complaints about the quality of coaches and regulation of the booming sector, however, also are on the increase, as are concerns about the cause of this increasing demand – coaching is an easy option for a company that has not properly supported its staff through a restructure, allowed its traditional training to deteriorate or simply does not have adequate talent in crucial roles.

The buck stops with the individual

Superficially, coaching is a handy way of getting more from senior people with less messy emotional bloodletting or time-wasting in the office. But there is increasing unease that coaching masks deeper structural flaws in downsized companies or acts as a crutch for senior management unwilling or unable to shoulder the burden of coaching their staff.

Australian Graduate School of Management professor of management Roger Collins says modern perceptions of sport and education have given coaching some of its boost.

“In sport, coaching is seen as legitimate, and not just dealing with dysfunctions but taking people and improving their performance,” he says. “And we are becoming increasingly aware of the limitations of classroom teaching – most learning takes place in the real world. When someone sends you off to a program it doesn’t change behaviour, but coaching does.”

Another cause is leaner management. “In an effective organisation, the buck stops with the individual,” Collins says. “What’s happened in downsizing, people are under stress and those levels of stress have accentuated performance problems, which are more visible now than 10 years ago.”

To accentuate the problem, the coaches they find sometimes cause more bad than good. “People setting up with no qualifications will be one of the main reasons for a cutback in the area because there are a lot of pretenders in there, and they can do a lot of damage,” he says.

It’s easy to spot a bad coach, the experts say. “It’s definitely a big concern,” says Margot Cairnes, chair of coaching firm The Change Dynamic. “It’s an industry which has a very variable quality. It’s the same with any industry which self-regulates – there are some very good coaches and some very bad ones. In fact, some are dangerous.

“At the moment the market is not very discerning and very uneducated.” Standards vary because there are low barriers to entry to the profession, little training for prospective coaches and only rudimentary accreditation (The International Coaching Federation does specify standards but they are considered too rigorous for the Australian market). Because they only deal with one person at a time, coaches are able to develop significant, powerful relationships. The potential for damage is significant.

Australian Institute of Executive Coaching director Anne Gorman receives regular complaints about coaches. “We’ve been going for three years and we originally set up because we were worried about the quality of coaching in Australia. A lot of consultants are jumping on the new, new thing. Consultants have gone into a dive and they are looking for the next thing.”

When she is not fielding calls from dissatisfied coaching clients, Gorman is telling former management

consultants or executives that there is more to becoming a coach than hanging out a shingle. “They need some training instead of thinking anyone can coach. We get approached all the time by people like that. They don’t know what the essential qualities of a coach are.”

Bob Cole, who coaches the nine Coles Supermarkets executives responsible for southern NSW, says he was not hired to solve specific problems. “We are not talking about people who need a lot of help here – they don’t,” he says. “They are very skilled already. I’m just here for them to have someone to talk things over with. There’s no actual issue. It’s just a matter of improving on a very high level. We’re not dealing with a problem, we’re dealing with an opportunity.” Good coaching, he says, has a “double-edged” quality because the positive experiences can then be replicated when the executives are dealing with their own staff.

The AGSM’s Roger Collins says coaching has become a crucial part of management. “**Australian managers, according to research, are not as good as they should be in confronting poor performance or problems with staff,**” he says. “They say, ‘I don’t have the skills or the time’. That’s a cop-out. In business organisations, an integral part of the management role is to coach the people.”

Margot Cairnes says her biggest criticism of executive coaches is their tendency to teach people to do the same things better, when the times demand a new way of thinking about work. “The era we’re coming into is one where what you can’t see is what matters. A good coach can change the way the executive thinks. Otherwise you are training people for redundancy.”