



Shopping For a Coach

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Introduction

Everyone has a dream that she would like to fulfil: to get a better job, or to lose some weight, or to get her life organized. But sometimes that goal seems too big and scary to achieve by yourself. So who can you turn to for help in achieving that dream?

Imagine a best friend who wants nothing more than your complete success, who always listens with interest to what you have to say, and who gives you the feedback you need to make tough choices and changes. This is the essential job of a coach, to help you state the problem clearly and understand it, to plan an approach to solving it, and to execute that plan. Coaches believe that you already have the knowledge and skills you need for its solution, and that their job is to help you bring out the skills and use them effectively.

Most coaches work almost exclusively over the telephone, without ever meeting their clients face to face. At first, it may seem strange to be working through issues with someone you can't see, but almost everyone gets used to it, because coaches are trained to use their voice to communicate more than words. Coaches are also trained to listen to the meanings behind the words you are using, and can read the tone of your voice as naturally as you could read someone's face. Trust me, it really does work well, and it is much, much more convenient than

having to come to an office. You can be coached in any setting you want, even if you're still in pajamas and fuzzy slippers.

What Do You Want To Work On?

It will help your search greatly if you can think about the goal and write it down as clearly as you can. So, you might start with, "My job stinks - I hate it!" but you should try to get clear about why it stinks and what you would like to do about it. Your next try might be something like:

"I've been doing the same job for five years and I'm getting really bored with it. I want a job that will be more challenging for me and will pay better than this one does. I would rather not leave this employer because I have a lot of seniority, but I would be willing to leave for the perfect job."

Now you have a clear objective and you're ready to start shopping for a coach. Your next goal should be to get generally familiar with the coaching profession.

How to Find Coaches

This almost seems too easy - if you Google "personal coach" you will get thousands and thousands of hits, and you will easily drown in candidates. Instead, try a more targeted approach. Ask your friends if they have had a coach, and if they were satisfied: personal

recommendation is priceless. Coaches are very big on public speaking as a promotional tool, so if you look in your local paper you may find someone giving a talk on job stress or beating procrastination: there's a good chance that he or she is a coach, and you can have a chance to check them out. The coaching registry at the International Coaching Federation's web site is a good place to do comparison shopping for coaches - they list their credentials and specialties without elaborate advertising, and you can search for the combination of specialty and price range that you want.

You've Got a List of Candidates - Now What?

When you have a list of four or five coaches that sound likely, it's time to comparison shop. Every coach in the world will be absolutely delighted to spend half an hour with you to let you get a feel for his or her style and to see if there's good chemistry between you.

Typically, the coach will ask you a little about yourself and your issue, and do about ten or fifteen minutes of real coaching with you. She will also be happy to answer any questions you might have about coaching in general or about her specialties and coaching style. In this time, you should trust your instincts - if you feel easy talking to the coach, and if she seems to understand your issue and is able to help you with it even a little bit, then there's a good chance that she will make a good coach for you.

You don't have to make a decision at the introductory call - it is perfectly all right to say, "Thank you for your time - I want to call some other coaches for comparison, but I'll let you know my decision in a few days."

Not All Coaches Are Well Qualified

Coaching is not like psychotherapy, with regulations and licensing; anyone can call himself or herself a coach, put up a web site, and start doing business. Sadly, many people have done just that, and they have no more training in coaching than you do. It's not dangerous to work with an untrained coach, but it's not likely to be very productive either. So you need to ask the coaching candidate some questions. First, find out if they have had specific coaching training, how much they have had, and where they were trained. A coach typically becomes competent after about a year of training, and reaches real expertise after about two years. And use your intuition - if you get the feeling that the coach is promising magical solutions to all your problems, you should probably try someone else: coaching is very effective, but it's not magic.

Should My Coach Be Certified?

You will find that many of your coaching candidates use "Certified" in their credentials, and you should pay attention to this. Unfortunately, because coaching isn't yet standardized, the term "certified" may mean any of several things. It's all very complicated, but if your coach is certified by the International Coaching Federation or any of its accredited coaching schools, you can assume that she has been trained in coaching, has passed an exam, and has at least two years of actual coaching experience. If she isn't certified, it doesn't mean that she's not competent - she may still be in training, or she may be finishing the required coaching experience. Base your choice on careful questioning and your intuition, and use certification as one

more piece of information in making your choice.

About Fees

Different coaches have different fee structures, so comparing their rates might be a little more tricky than just getting a dollar figure. A typical coaching package might consist of three or four sessions per month, plus a reasonable amount of email contact, for a fixed monthly rate. Some coaches offer half-hour sessions and others offer 45-minute sessions: just be aware that the longer session is not necessarily a better bargain than the shorter - a good coach can get a lot done in a half hour.

Most coaches ask that you pay by the month, rather than the session. This is mainly to simplify their bookkeeping and accounting and, because coaching is a long-term relationship, it's a pretty reasonable request. Some coaches will insist (or recommend strongly) that you agree to a minimum of three months of coaching. They aren't being greedy - they just don't want to waste your time and money, because most coaching issues take a minimum of three months to resolve satisfactorily.

Having said all this, a good coach should be willing to customize her offering for you. If you can't afford her standard package, you might ask for a reduced rate for a two-per-month package. If you would rather have two hour-long sessions than four half-hour sessions, she should be flexible enough to accommodate you. Within reason, she should adapt her package to your needs, rather than the other way around.

You'll find a wide range of coaching fees: from two hundred dollars per month to two thousand dollars per month. In my

experience, cost is not a good predictor of the coach's talent or effectiveness, so stay within your budget - you should be able to find a good coach in your price range.

And finally, if you're really short of cash and really need some coaching, ask the coach if she will reduce her fees for you. Most coaches will accept a few clients for reduced rates or for free, for a good cause - anyway, it can't hurt to ask.

The Final Word

Hiring a coach should be just like buying a car - it's important that you find one that suits your needs, feels comfortable, and is affordable. And most of all, be a good consumer - shop around until you find just the right coach for you. You'll know when you find her.

About Bruce Taylor



Bruce Taylor is the principal of CoachingProgrammers.com, an executive coaching firm located near Boston, Massachusetts. Bruce helps software organizations of all sizes to create low-stress, supportive, adaptable working environments, so that the engineers, leaders, and managers can work as effectively as possible. He provides executive coaching for senior managers who are creating superior organizations, management coaching for technical leaders who are adapting to new agile practices, and individual coaching for engineers who are upgrading their skills. Bruce has a Masters in Computer Science from Duke University, a Masters in Community Psychology, and a Certificate in Job Stress and Healthy Workplace Design, both from the University of Massachusetts.