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Top 10 Professional Life Coaching Myths

Life coaching is all the rage. Harvard Business Review reports that coaching is a \$1 billion a year industry, but just what is a personal coach, professional coach, or life coach and why are so many executives and individuals using them to catapult their careers, break free from 9-5 jobs, and to create better, more fulfilling, richer lives?

First, what is a professional coach? The International Coach Federation (ICF) -- the leading global coaching organization and professional association for coaches -- defines coaching as "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential."

Second, who's using coaches? In a 2009 study of the professional coaching industry by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD), they found that coaching was used by 90% of organizations surveyed and that even in the economic downturn, 70% report that they are increasing or maintaining their commitment to coaching. Coaching is clearly popular, but what does a professional coach do?

As with any growing profession, there can be a lot of confusion. To help distinguish fact from fiction, click through the pages to read the top 10 personal coaching myths...

Myth #1: Life coaches are professionals who can help you achieve your goals.

Fact: Some, but certainly not all coaches are professionals who can help you reach your goals. One of the problems in the coaching industry is that anyone can call themselves a professional coach, life coach, personal coach, etc. Jennifer Corbin, the president of Coach U, one of the largest and oldest coach training organizations in the world, has said, "Technically, anyone can hang up a shingle as coaching is not regulated. Many people 'coaching' have no idea what coaching is as they haven't been trained or haven't been coached by a professionally trained and credentialed coach. There are 'schools' that will offer a credential after three hours of training and people read a book or watch a TV program and decide 'I'm a coach!'" As a result, the quality of coaches vary dramatically. I strongly suggest working with a coach that has been accredited by the International Coach Federation (ICF). The ICF provides independent certification that is the benchmark for the professional coaching industry.

Myth 2: Executive coaching is a nice employment perk.

Fact: Coaching is as much a perk to your employees as are their computers. Employees may view coaching as a value added benefit, but the successful organizations see coaching as something much more than a perk. Done right, professional coaching can drive sales, employee engagement, creativity, workplace satisfaction, and bottom line results. Wellness programs have been shown to provide approximately a 300% return on investment (ROI). In other words, companies who spend \$1 in a wellness program (e.g., exercise clubs, personal trainers, smoking cessation workshops) earn \$3 as a result of decreased turnover, fewer sick days, reduced health insurance costs, etc. It's no wonder wellness programs have experienced such tremendous growth -- it makes financial sense.

The ROI from professional coaching is even more astonishing. According to a Manchester Consulting Group study of Fortune 100 executives, the Economic Times reports "coaching resulted in a ROI of almost six times the program cost as well as a 77% improvement in relationships, 67% improvement in teamwork, 61% improvement in job satisfaction and 48% improvement in quality." Additionally, a study of Fortune 500 telecommunications companies by MatrixGlobal found executive coaching resulted in a 529% ROI. The CIPD concludes "coaching is not just perceived as a nice-to-have intervention."

Myth 3: Personal coaches can only help you reach personal goals / Professional coaches can only help you reach business goals.

Fact: A good coach is someone who is an expert at helping others create positive change in their lives. For some clients, the positive change they most want may be focused on personal goals such as relationships, time management, work-life balance, stress reduction, simplification, health, etc., but other clients may be more interested in professional or business goals such as leadership, getting a promotion, starting a business, etc. An effective coach works with the client to help them live a better, richer life - regardless of their type of goals.

Myth 4: Professional coaching is for "problem" employees.

Fact: Coaching used to be a euphemism for "you're doing lousy work, but before we can fire you we need to show that we've done everything we can to support you so we don't get hit with an employment lawsuit." No more. According to Paul Michelman, editor of Harvard Business School's Management Update, "whereas coaching was once viewed by many as a tool to help correct underperformance, today it is becoming much more widely used in supporting top producers. In fact, in a 2004 survey by Right Management Consultants, 86% of companies said they used coaching to sharpen the skills of individuals who have been identified as future organizational leaders."

Good coaching focuses on an individual's strengths and aims to help the client achieve what they want more of in life and at work. The goal? To help the client identify and achieve their greater goals and to help them live a better life. A good coach isn't there to "fix" anyone, but to help the client navigate toward a more engaged and compelling future.

Myth 5: Personal coaching takes too much time.

Fact: Professional coaching is a high-leverage activity. Clients can achieve remarkable progress toward their desired future in less than an hour per month of coaching. There is a wide spectrum of how coaching is delivered. Some coaches prefer to meet one-on-one with clients in an office, but most recommend telephone sessions for the ease of use, minimization of distractions, better privacy, greater efficiency, and for (yes, apparently) better connection to the client. Best practices in coaching call for between two and four sessions per month that last at least 20 minutes and up to 60 minutes. A sweet spot for many coaches and clients seems to be three sessions per month for 20 to 45 minutes a session - a miniscule investment of time for the results achieved.

Myth 6: Life coaches are like having a good friend to bounce ideas off and to keep you motivated.

Fact: Your coach may be friendly, but they are not your friend. Your coach is your advocate. They want the best from you. They will work with you to help you reach your goals and to succeed. Your coach will hold you accountable and challenge you to grow and do more than you think you can do. They may push, pull, and stretch you in ways that may feel uncomfortable. And unlike a friendship, the coaching relationship is unilateral - it is exclusively focused on you and your goals, not the coach, his family, his golf handicap, or what she did over the weekend.

Myth 7: Executive coaching is only good for upper management / Coaching is only good for entry level employees.

Fact: Coaching is good for anyone who is motivated to create a better life. Initially professional coaching or executive coaching was for upper management, and some organizations still focus their coaching efforts on their top performers. For example, a column by the Economic Times titled "A Personal Coach" says coaching is "designed to help senior leaders create and execute breakthrough ideas, develop strategic pathways and set milestones. Companies across the board are similarly opting for coaching to help their high-potential executives perform in larger, rapidly-changing roles in a globalized world."

But professional coaching isn't just for the executive suite. The CIPD research study shows just under 5% of coaching is restricted to senior executives. Now, more and more companies are recognizing the powerful benefits of providing coaching to rank and file employees. For example, online shoe and clothing company Zappos.com, known for their outstanding commitment to creating a culture of unparalleled customer service (they even teach this through Zappos Insights), has a full-time goals coach who works with any employee - not just management - on helping them create better lives.

Myth 8: Professional coaches tell their clients what to do and give them advice.

Fact: Bad or inexperienced coaches tell their clients what to do and are constantly giving advice. Good coaches do not. Most clients realize they don't need another parent, sibling, friend, or co-worker telling you what you should be doing. Instead, coaches help their clients explore and come up with the best choices for them based on where they are and the client's vision for their future. Coaches are experts at the process of changing behavior, which is much more valuable than giving instructions.

Myth 9: Executive coaching is expensive.

Fact: Coaching can cost a great deal of money. Harvard Business School's "What can Coaches do for You?" research whitepaper reports some executive coaches cost up to \$3,500 for an hour of coaching. While this is an extreme, most personal coaches charge a monthly retainer between \$500 to \$2,000 a month. What this means is that either there are a lot of really stupid people wasting their money on coaching each month or they are getting results worth at least the cost of their coach. I have trouble paying \$12 a year for a magazine subscription I don't read, so I'm guessing coaching is paying off. According to the ICF Global Coaching Client Study commissioned by the International Coach Federation, individual clients reported a median ROI of 3.44 times their investment in coaching. Bottom line, coaching is an investment that can produce monetary rewards above and beyond the cost.

Myth 10: Professional coaching is spiritual and relies on "harnessing the energy in the universe."

Fact: I have no idea what "harnessing the power of the universe" means, and my guess is that most professional coaches don't either. When I first started researching coaching, I was under the impression coaching involved lots of chanting, incense, meditation, and other spiritual practices. While there are many great spiritual coaches that may incorporate these practices into their session, most coaches are practical, professional, business people who are focused on tangible results, not airy-fairy mysticism. You can leave your granola and Birkenstocks at home.