

ThinkTank

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Reprinted from HR Magazine
October 2002 Vol. 47,
No. 10 p. 55

Coaching HR

HR professionals turn to coaches for time management tips, delegation skills and strategic help -- even if they have to foot the bill.

I was overwhelmed at work. I'd leave at 8 o'clock at night and still have mountains of work I couldn't get done," recalls Sunny Gatz, an HR generalist at a biotech company in Seattle. "I hired a coach to get help improving my situation."

Gatz says she always had trouble delegating responsibility and learned from her coach how to do that more effectively. "HR people are often asked to do so much with so little that we get very good at being self-reliant," she says. "The trouble is that the workload can overload you. My coach helped me see the value of delegating and asking for help. She got me over the fear of reaching out for help."

Gatz is part of a growing number of HR professionals who are turning to coaches to sharpen their career smarts. A coach can be part adviser, part ally, part confidante, part counselor and part friend. And it's the complexity of this relationship that makes it so satisfying to Beverly Kaye, who has used a coach for years. Kaye is founder of Career Systems International, a management consulting firm in Los Angeles. As president of her firm, she is acting HR director, managing 20 full-

time employees and 30 consultants around the country.

"My coach is someone I can bounce ideas off of, brainstorm with and jump-start my energy with," Kaye relates.

Between 25 percent and 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies hire executive coaches for their employees, according to Philadelphia-based Hay Group, an international consulting and research firm. Although there are no known figures on the number of coaches working with HR executives, experts within the coaching field say the number is on the rise.

Many companies, however, still do not pay for coaches for HR, even though they will pay for managers in other functions. But that hasn't stopped some in HR. Even if they have to pay out of pocket, they'll hire a coach to help get the skills needed to become a more effective practitioner.

Defining an HR Coach

Perhaps the most pressing need for HR professionals to seek coaches is to help them prove their value to the bottom line. "HR professionals

often look for help with things like strategic planning, ROI [return on investment], evolution of initiatives and corporate communications—how to make the case for the importance of HR programs,” says Beth Bloomfield of Bloomfield Associates, an executive coaching firm in Annapolis, Md.

“Coaches assist with goal setting, encourage action, act as a sounding board and give feedback,” explains Jo Miller, a former HR professional, who is currently a coach specializing in HR management issues and is president of the Silicon Valley Coach Federation in Mountain View, Calif. While coaches can assist HR professionals at any level, experts agree that they are most useful to senior human resource executives.

“There are plenty of training resources for people just starting out. But for those who are moving up, there are very few resources for people to turn to,” says Richard Ashworth, president of Rochester, N.Y.-based Strategic HR Counseling and former HR manager at Johnson & Johnson and Eastman Kodak.

“The higher up you go, the lonelier it is. There are fewer people to talk to,” laments Kaye.

Moreover, senior HR executives usually are responsible for leading the human element of major organizational changes, such as mergers, layoffs and changes in upper management. Those transition times often prompt HR professionals to seek out coaches.

“In the current climate, many internal HR people are turning to [coaches] for help dealing with the stresses of budget cutbacks, job insecurity and ‘survivor syndrome’” felt by those who remain after layoffs, Miller says.

For instance, employees at Arthur Andersen have been dealt an enormous blow in light of the current financial reporting scandals. The accounting firm provided coaches to its HR professionals to help them navigate through this tough time.

One of the people who benefited was Susan Jayne, SPHR, who has since left the firm. “As a result of the significant number of Andersen layoffs during

2002, I was looking for guidance through this transitional time period, which coincided with a portion of my job search time,” says Jayne, who was senior manager at Arthur Andersen Learning & Personal Growth Center in St. Charles, Ill. “As a human resource professional, I felt that it was important to have some kind of professional support network in place for myself, and I saw coaching as a way to do that.

“I am often looked to as a support person in transition times,” she notes, “and I knew that I should seek that kind of support for myself.”

Jayne was coached by Timothy E. Ursiny of Advantage Coaching & Training Inc. in Wheaton, Ill. “The main work I did was to help Susan as an HR professional work through transition and use this time in her life to really dream about her personal fulfillment,” he says. “Susan and the others we coached at Andersen were reeling from multiple changes in their lives. The employer who always had the image of integrity and producing ‘cream of the crop’ employees now had a tarnished image. The job security that they thought they had was taken from them abruptly. I coached Susan through the process of exploring her losses as an HR professional with a highly prestigious company.”

The majority of Ursiny’s work with HR individuals has been in dealing with workplace conflict, marketing HR programs, giving bad news to employees and developing their skills to coach employees.

Indeed, HR professionals are increasingly being asked to become coaches to their employees and can use their own coaches to enhance this skill.

“Clients can learn new techniques and different approaches to help them develop their own tool kit for coaching internally,” says David Lasiter, founder and president of the Washington, D.C.-based Leadership Advantage, an executive consulting firm focused on leadership building.

Gatz agrees: “Working with my coach definitely gave me practical experience about the right kinds of questions to ask [when I coached] and how to

draw people out and get them motivated to make changes.”

Being coached also allows HR professionals to bring firsthand experience to formal coaching programs at their organizations. Over the past decade, organizations increasingly have offered coaching to managers as a recruiting and retention tool, with HR creating and managing the program.

“Coaching helps HR ‘walk the talk’ of coaching,” Lasiter says. “It’s one thing to talk up the value and benefits of coaching to others and another thing altogether to have the experience of being coached. It gives HR professionals more credibility with their customers if they can speak of the value it had for them, rather than sound like they are promoting another HR program.”

Selecting an HR Coach

It’s important for HR professionals to be clear about their coaching needs because they often differ from managers of other functions who use coaches. HR professionals typically do not have trouble with interpersonal relationships, a common area in which managers receive coaching. Rather, they are looking for planning, professional and personal help as well as work/life balance.

While it can be helpful for a coach to have human resource experience, especially when dealing with technical issues, it is not always necessary. Many HR professionals seek out coaches to enhance non-traditional HR skills and to help balance work and life priorities, things a coach with any background can work on. “A coach does not necessarily need to have a background in HR to get results, but will need an understanding of your work environment, training in coaching skills, and, preferably, a certification,” says Miller.

The International Coach Federation in Washington, D.C., is the leading verification authority, according to Bloomfield.

According to Miller, coaches should provide references and no-obligation sample sessions, which will give you the best indication of the coach’s approach and personality. Indeed,

Ashworth advises HR professionals to interview three coaches and go with whoever conducted the session that produced the most concrete goals and action-oriented items.

To narrow your search, contact the International Coach Federation, which offers—online at and through regional chapters—a referral service for searching for a coach by background and niche.

Time and Place

Depending on the location of the coach and the client, coaching can be done in person, via telephone or via e-mail. “I would estimate that 95 percent of coaching is conducted effectively by telephone,” says Miller, who works from California with clients on the East Coast, in Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom.

Because of time constraints, HR professionals, who tend to work long hours, typically find talking by telephone with their coaches easier and more convenient than in-person meetings.

Gatz, for instance, worked with her coach for three months, mostly via telephone, talking for one hour each week. “I am so busy that it just didn’t make sense to take time out of the week to commute to see my coach and then commute back,” she says. “It seemed like a waste of time when we could just as effectively talk on the phone.”

Kaye speaks to her coach for 30 minutes each week; it’s a relationship that has gone on for several years and one she intends to keep. “I see no reason to stop,” she says. “Our sessions ignite my energy.”

Although Kaye’s ongoing relationship with her coach isn’t typical, many coachees do periodically check in with their coaches after the initial goals have been reached. “Clients often come back and check in for tune-ups along the way,” says Sheryl Phillips, an executive coach who was formerly the HR director for the government of Arlington, Va.

At the end of a coaching relationship, Bloomfield recommends developing a transitional plan. “You want to be able to walk away with an unassisted

action plan,” she says. “You can always touch base with your coach, but you want to leave [the relationship] being able to self-advise.”

HR Specific Results

Eight ways HR professionals can benefit from coaching

1. Succession grooming
2. Leadership team development
3. Performance coaching
4. Interpersonal skills development
5. Business etiquette grooming
6. Promotion support
7. Transition management
8. Conflict resolution

Source: *Executive Coaching & Consulting Associates in Washington, D.C.*

Money Matters

Unfortunately, many organizations will hire and pay for coaches for managers of other functions but won't pay for a coach for HR. Fees [can] range from \$10,000 to \$20,000 for a six-month engagement. Many coaches offer retainer fees for clients who want them on call. Retainers [may] run from \$1,200 to \$4,000 per month. [However, most highly educated, experienced and talented coaches charge between \$300-600 per month per person.]

For those making a business case for the company to pay for an HR coach, it may help to note studies that show return on investment. Farmington Hills, Mich.-based Triad Performance Technologies reports a 10:1 return on coaching investment in less than a year. The return comes from creation of a more positive work environment focused on strategic development, reduced turnover/increased retention and improved customer satisfaction, according to the report.

“To get management’s buy-in, I suggest individuals meet with their managers to agree on topics for coaching, discuss desired outcomes and set targets,” recommends Miller.

Of course, you may not want your company to hire

a coach for you, especially if you want to keep the relationship and its outcomes private.

Why does your organization provide coaching?

For leadership development

70%

For skill development or style differences

64%

To retain top talent

40%

As a part of management succession planning

34%

To ensure success after promotion or with a new hire

30%

For pre-termination counseling

18%

Other

3%

“Sometimes individuals pay when they feel their goals are at odds with their company’s, especially if dissatisfaction or career transition are an issue,” says Miller.

HR coaches have proved so valuable to some professionals that they don’t mind paying out of pocket. Gatz’s company is among those that pay for coaches for other managers, but not HR. So she hired her own.

“I felt like it was worth it for me [to pay] to learn new strategies and to get ahold of the resources I needed,” Gatz says.

Andrea C. Poe is a freelance writer based in Easton, Md., who specializes in human resource and management issues.

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