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Demand increases for coaches to guide executives, small firms

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About four years ago, Krause Funeral Home in Milwaukee underwent a transition in ownership from one generation to the next. President Mark Krause took over the business from his father and two uncles and felt confident he had an experienced management team in place to handle the change and shepherd growth.

Yet, he also believed both he and the business would benefit by having an additional person on the sidelines to coach them in setting goals and staying on task.

So he turned to Patricia Clason, owner of Accountability Coaching Associates in Milwaukee. Clason, a registered corporate coach since 1997, acted as an objective sounding board and support system for the eight-person management team, which is a mix of family and nonfamily members, Krause said.

Clason had previously worked with the Krauses by providing a communication program for the funeral directors through her Center for Creative Learning, a professional training development firm in Glendale.

"As you grow, there are different issues you have to contend with," Krause said. "I don't know if she has the magic answers, but she helps facilitate the thought process in figuring out what you need to do."

More people in the Milwaukee area like Clason are entering the executive coaching field as more company executives and small business owners seek the service.

Demand for executive coaching has been booming, said Joan Lloyd, owner of Joan Lloyd & Associates, a consulting and training firm in Wauwatosa. Within the past year, the number of requests she's received for executive coaching has increased by 80 percent. Coaching accounts for 20 percent of her business.

An executive coach is an outside expert who is hired to help an individual or group to build skills, overcome challenges or reach goals. Clients also look to coaches for help in improving communication skills and integrating leadership training.

"It is becoming more acceptable," Lloyd said. "People are starting to realize it's not meant for someone who's failing."

Some employees have viewed their employer hiring a coach for them as a punishment for unsatisfactory performance. However, with more executives requesting the services for themselves, the negative connotation is disappearing, coaches say.

"Tiger Woods has a coach," said Wendy Fritz, owner of Wendy Fritz Consulting L.L.C., which provides executive coaching and consulting services. "It shouldn't be a signal of weakness."

Skirting 'fix-it' mentality

Coaching is often confused with consulting but there is a distinct difference, executive coaches say. Though consultants can provide coaching, consultants often enter a situation with a "fix-it" mentality whereas coaches provide a helping hand and empower people to take the appropriate steps.

"A coach leads, guides, recommends, supports and encourages," Clason said. "Coaches don't do the fixing like consultants do. Just like in football, the team goes and executes it all."

Coaches are often called in to serve as an objective third party to help executives or managers work through challenges or conflicts.

Coaches often have left corporate executive positions and have received additional training, from organizations such as the International Coaching Federation, a professional organization in Washington, D.C., or Coach University, run by CoachInc.com, a training company in Steamboat Springs, Colo.

"They don't want someone to judge them but they want help to think of different options," said Bob Weiss, a personal and business coach and owner of R.J. Weiss Consulting in Brookfield.

They also might be asked to help a new executive or manager who may possess the technical skills but may have shortcomings in leadership or communication skills.

Coaches also may provide guidance to a leader who is thrust into a new position.

Karen LeSage, now a part-time public relations specialist at Froedtert Hospital, Wauwatosa, found Lloyd's presence helpful when she was asked to take the interim leadership role in a non-clinical department with which she was unfamiliar.

Lloyd helped her assess the needs of the staff and "served as a gentle observer," LeSage said.

Throughout a three-month period, Lloyd helped develop leaders and stayed to assist the new vice president who was hired.

"Coaches are very effective change agents," LeSage said. "They have no hidden agenda."

Small business owners also reap the benefits, namely in confronting unexpected business issues or simply setting goals.

Organizational skills

Krause has worked with Clason for the past three years. He said that, since starting the coaching sessions, Krause Funeral Home has experienced a 25 percent growth in the number of customers and revenue.

"It has helped me with my organization skills as the company has grown," Krause said. "It's helped our employees achieve the goals they're looking for."

Clason specifically helped each member of the management team identify their strengths and weaknesses and set a goal on how to improve upon them.

The coach and client determine how often they will meet, whether it will be over the phone or in person and how the sessions will be structured.

The first meeting is usually free and coaches will often make an initial assessment as to the client's needs, goals and expectations. Subsequent sessions might include data collection or interviews with a client's colleagues, customers and managers. The third phase includes the coaching sessions themselves.

Coaches might meet every couple of weeks or once a month, depending on the client's needs. Coaches charge per hour or offer a package deal, including a certain number of calls, e-mails and in-person sessions, said Rey Carr, president and chief executive officer of Peer Resources, a educational corporation in Victoria, British Columbia, for coaches and mentors, and a member of the Worldwide Association of Business Coaches. Rates average between \$250 to \$500 per hour, he said.

Coaches should have a background in the corporate world, as well as coaching and counseling skills, in order to bring value to the relationship, Lloyd said.

Clients need to be open, willing to be coached and ready to be held accountable.

The challenge for coaches is to stay out of the "fix-it" mode, Clason said.

"As a coach, we try to get clients to think on their own and that's what the challenge is to get them to figure out how to solve problems," said Pam Browne, president of the International Coaching Federation's Milwaukee chapter and a business and life coach with NorthShore Coaching in Mequon.

The Milwaukee-area chapter has 24 members. Nationally, the federation, which includes a variety of coaches, has about 5,500 members.

But the impact on clients is often quickly realized in terms of quicker and better decision-making and greater confidence, which improves not only the individual but also company as well, Carr said.

"The best coach is someone who helps a person coach themselves," Weiss said. "It's a growing and transformative process."

