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Coaching employees to be their best

Employers seek coaches to motivate workers

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The scenario is familiar to employee coach Theresa Heeg: A company realizes many of its key leaders will retire in just a few years, yet its future managers still have to acquire necessary leadership skills before they can fill those positions.

So the company calls in a professional coach. That coach works one-on-one with the targeted employee to identify general strengths, weaknesses and goals.

Over the past few years, Heeg and others say, executive coaching has become much more widespread. Businesses decide they need to outsource for leadership development, and consultants rush to find their own niche in the market.

Those consultants have data to back up their claims that coaching is the way to go.

External executive coaching delivers a return on investment of nearly six times the initial cost of coaching, according to a survey of 100 senior executives who participated in coaching programs. The survey was conducted by Jacksonville, Fla.-based Manchester Consulting, which Philadelphia-based Right Management Consultants acquired in 2004. Seventy percent of the executives who participated in the survey valued the return on their investment in coaching at \$100,000 or more. Nearly 30 percent put the return on investment between \$500,000 and \$1 million.

'Coach approach'

Heeg started her own coaching business in 1999 because at the time, she said, no companies were looking for organizational development staff members with a background in coaching. In 2003, she abandoned her own company and began working for Wheaton Franciscan Services of Wheaton, Ill., as an organization development specialist and internal coach in its Glendale office.

When Heeg was a coaching consultant, she focused much of her time on training groups of managers to use the "coach approach" in their businesses.

Under the coach approach, managers help their employees develop skills by asking leading questions. Here's an example:

An employee says he is unable to solve a problem. The manager asks him to list the potential solutions he has tried already. After he has done so, the manager then asks how he has solved similar problems, and how he can use those strategies in his current situation.

The idea, Heeg said, is for the manager to help the employee help himself.

"In the old days, they called it empowerment," she said.

Many businesses want to learn how to use this approach so they can groom future leaders, Heeg said. Sometimes, it's enough to hire a consultant to lead training sessions. Other times, however, companies want the consultant to work one-on-one with an up-and-coming employee.

"It's viewed as a real perk for an employee to have a coach," said Randy Rakow, director of strategic human resource services for Pewaukee-based MRA-The Management Association Inc., which employs more than 130 people and has an annual revenue of nearly \$10 million. Rakow works as an external coach with MRA's member organizations.

Usually, the "coachee" is a high-level manager or executive. The employee, the coach and the person responsible for bringing the coach in -- often the employee's immediate manager -- sit down and identify goals.

"You have to make sure that all three people are in agreement," Rakow said.

Then, the coach meets privately with the employee for a few hours, twice a month, for three to six months. The two have a particularly tight trust relationship, Rakow said, because the coach doesn't have any internal aspirations within the organization.

While some consultants say coaching is most effective when it comes from an outside source, they do sometimes certify internal coaches for companies. In those cases, said Mary Hunter, a senior manager in employee relations services at MRA, the consultant takes responsibility for keeping the internal coach up to date with his or her certification.

Representatives from General Electric Co. say they incorporate coaching into their leadership training programs.

GE occasionally brings in a consultant to help prepare an employee for a specific event, such as a speaking engagement, said Bob Cancalosi, GE's chief learning officer, who works at Waukesha-based GE Healthcare Technologies. But usually, employees receive their coaching through him, other top-level executives and each other during leadership classes, such as GE Healthcare Management Development.

Among other tasks at these training sessions, executives go through a two-day business simulation in which their trainers observe how they handle stress and how they work with a group. They then share those observations with the executives.

"It is a huge wake-up call for people," Cancalosi said. "They are given very honest feedback in front of their peers."

GE incorporates coaching, mentoring and training into all-in-one leadership programs, Cancalosi said. Therefore, the company's top trainers don't often feel they need to hire outside consultants.

"There is no set industry definition of what (coaching) means," Cancalosi said.

He does, however, feel that coaching -- whether internal or through professional coaches -- is becoming more prevalent in large and small businesses.

"There's been more of an emphasis on emotional intelligence, as well as IQ," he said. "The best leaders have a good balance of both. You can go out and lead a team and

get great results, but if no one wants to be with you a second time, you're hitting a wall."

Troubleshooting

Though more companies are using coaches proactively rather than to respond to a problem, there still is plenty of troubleshooting in the coaching world.

In these instances, Rakow said, the employee still is a valued member of the company; he just is having trouble with one particular issue, such as sexual harassment, and human resources or the employee's manager want to address that issue before it becomes an even bigger problem.

Patricia Clason, owner and director of the Milwaukee-based Center for Creative Learning, remembers a case in which an employee was having trouble relating to his manager and to the employees who worked under him. She spent nine months helping the employee work through his difficulties and finding out what he perceived to be his assets.

"In the course of nine months, we took him from being demoralized to having strong self-confidence and rebuilding a strong team," she said. "He actually determined he didn't want to be a manager at all, and he changed his focus."

However, Clason is careful to point out that a coach is not a mentor or a therapist. She does not train the employee in how to do his job, nor does she provide emotional support.

Clason said she occasionally has recommended to human resources that an employee seek a therapist's help.

"What's frustrating for me is working with people who need to be in therapy, because they're so stuck," she said.

Beth Earnest

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