

Coached to the Top

Executives and aspiring leaders find that coaching strengthens their skills and helps them home in on personal and professional goals.

BY JAN BEITING

If you have ever spent time listening to youth sports coaches, you have probably noticed that their exhortations to their players from the sidelines are a mixture of tough love, competitiveness, and encouragement. Coaches try to help young athletes play their best, learn the game, and work together as a team. Get rid of the whistle, and the scenario is not so different from the advice an executives' coach might offer to clients who want to perform well in a business setting.

Professional coaching has become a \$2 billion-per-year business, with more than 47,000 people globally who serve as professional coaches, according to the International Coach Federation. Coaching is similar to mentoring in that both are centered on a supportive and confidential relationship, but there are some important differences.

MENTORING VERSUS COACHING

A mentor is traditionally an older or more senior-level expert in the same company or professional discipline. The relationship is often informal, with mentor-mentee pairs meeting for lunch or coffee to discuss challenges and goals. Typically, the mentor offers advice based on personal experience, and he or she may help the junior person network or secure opportunities for exposure within the organization. Coaching, by contrast, tends to be much more structured, and the coach is often someone outside one's own field.

"A coaching relationship usually begins with a formal assessment depending upon the coaching model used," explains Marsha Link, PhD, an executive coach and principal of Link Consulting. The assessment may include interviews with peers, supervisors, and employees as well as one or more standardized instruments for assessing personality traits and leadership style. The results are then used as the basis for self-awareness and intentional goal setting.

"A coaching relationship usually begins with a formal assessment, depending upon the coaching model used."

—Marsha Link, PhD

Seeking a coach, says Dr. Link, is a sign of strength. "It takes courage to look at yourself in the mirror and decide to tackle a challenge rather than avoid it," she says. Ms. Link volunteers with the Ophthalmic Women Leaders (OWL) coaching and mentoring program. The relatively new coaching component of the program was devised as a way for people at different stages in their careers to help one another. "OWL's membership includes junior-level women in industry, clinicians and practice professionals, as well as 'C-suite' executives," she says. "We believe there is real value for people at all these levels to use their professional networks to build on strengths and address areas of opportunity."

SKILL BUILDING AND CONFIDENCE

In large companies, coaching is often paid for by the company to help promising employees accelerate their development. Other times, individuals might seek out a coach on their own to deal with midcareer restlessness, get a fresh perspective on personal challenges, or increase their confidence in their own decision making or managerial skills.

The last is what Audrey Talley Rostov, MD, felt she needed when she agreed to become the managing partner at Northwest Eye Surgeons a few years ago.

"At the time, I was very confident in my surgical skills but not as confident about my skill set as a

(Continued on page 71)

(Continued from page 69)

manager,” says Dr. Talley Rostov. As she was putting in place the administrative team to run the practice’s day-to-day operations, Dr. Talley Rostov realized that major changes would be needed to turn the practice into a cohesive and successfully run business. “I hired an executive coach to help me deal with conflict more effectively,” she says. “My coach really helped me utilize objective data for decision making. The result was better communications and an organizational structure that positioned us for growth.”

Dr. Talley Rostov grew the practice from two to six locations, including four surgery centers. Today, the group has six physician partners and 135 employees. Although she has stepped down as managing partner to take on other challenges, Dr. Talley Rostov credits the coaching, which lasted about 2 years, with improving the practice’s productivity and her own professional satisfaction at the same time.

FINDING YOUR OWN COACH

OWL members who want to tap into the expertise of colleagues for free, short-term coaching can sign up at www.owlsite.org to be matched with a peer coach. Anyone seeking to hire a coach (most work with clients for a year or more) can seek referrals from friends and colleagues or from the International Coach Federation (www.coachfederation.org), which recommends interviewing at least three potential candidates to find the right fit.

“It’s an important relationship, so you want to find someone with whom you can develop mutual trust and comfort,” says Dr. Link. Although excellent listening skills are often cited as an important quality in a coach, she says a good one should do more than provide support and encouragement. “You really want someone who will challenge you to grow, push you outside your comfort zone, and then hold you accountable,” she says.

That sounds like an asset in almost any setting, whether it is the boardroom, the clinic, or the soccer field. ■

For more about OWL’s coaching program, visit www.owlsite.org.

Jan Beiting is the president of OWL and the principal of Wordsmith Consulting, an independent firm providing editorial services and educational content development in ophthalmology and optometry. Ms. Beiting may be reached at (919) 363-3727; jan@wordsmithconsulting.com.