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Getting a coach, getting a life

'Personal coaches' train clients for a winning life

Allyce Bess

Wendy Richards is a business owner, a Stanford MBA and former international banking executive. Once named by Fortune magazine and CNN among the 50 most powerful businesswomen in Europe, she seems the last person who would need advice on how to put together her life.

But Richards, now back in the Bay Area running her own company, MarTel Advisors, is among a growing number of people who employ a personal and professional coach.

"My goal in working with a coach is focused on professional objectives for my business, and achieving these with the proper life balance," said Richards.

Executive coaches have been around for years, helping businesspeople sharpen their leadership skills and performance. Now there's an increasing demand for coaches who will focus not just on their clients' business goals, but help them achieve personal ones as well. The supply is growing as well.

"There has been a real coaching explosion in the past several years," said Trudy Kendall, co-executive director of the Coaches Training Institute in San Rafael. "In a world that seems to be moving at lighting speed with choices, choices and more choices, people want results. Given all the possibilities available, people are looking to coaches to help them explore their options to create the lives that they want.

"Here at CTI, of the people we've certified, 40 percent of them completed their program last year," she said

To some coaches, the new role is just an extension of the old one.

"I don't distinguish between personal and executive coaching because we're all people," said Richards' coach, Diana Redmond. "All issues go back to something personal."

'Dramatic shifts'

Since she has been seeing Redmond, Richards' business of helping adolescent startups has taken off. Richards recently raised more than \$60 million for Europe Online. While Richards of course did the work, she thinks the confidence gained working with Redmond contributed to her success.

"Diane is able to ask pertinent and direct questions," said Richmond, "She made the problem-solving process go quicker."

"It's amazing how much we don't acknowledge ourselves or accept ourselves," said Redmond, "Even

after just a few sessions of coaching, people can have dramatic shifts in the way they see themselves."

Those shifts don't come cheap. Coaches charge anywhere from \$75 to \$250 per hour. Anyone can call himself or herself a coach; there's no requirement for formal training. So for that money, why not hire a career counselor, see a therapist -- or save the money and have a chat with a good friend?

A coach will tell you that only they can offer you the kind of undivided attention and objectivity you need to explore who you are.

"Friends may have the intention to listen and support you 100 percent but sometimes, for example, a challenge that you are having at work reminds them of something that happened to them last week and suddenly the focus is on them," said Kendall. "The full focus of a coach's attention is on the client -- their goals, their dreams, and their trouble spots.

"When you coach someone, you spend a good hour or two with them for each session and you're focusing all your energy on them," adds Dr. Maynard Brusman, a licensed therapist as well as a coach. "Nowadays the mantra is 'I'm busy, I'm busy' and very few friends have that kind of time."

If focusing on dreams and trouble spots sounds something like therapy, you're not alone. The more personal trend in coaching has many therapists, like Brusman, branching out into coaching.

"Life coaching helps people find a variety of different goals and larger life goals," said therapist Jay Earley, who is starting a personal coaching practice. "What I do is more specific in that I help people answer the deeper questions about the meaning of their lives, what special gifts they offer, and what activities are really fulfilling for them."

Earley, who charges between \$80 and \$100 per hour, says people often come to him when they are between jobs or even looking for completely different careers.

He has helped a graduate student in biology decide what to do with his degree, and an insurance underwriter organize her time so she could expend more energy doing what she loves -- writing fiction. Earley said his clients tend to make life-changing decisions after just a few sessions.

"A lot of times, people do know what their life purpose is, but they are afraid to try it because it doesn't seem practical or because they don't think they can make enough money doing what they really want to do," said Earley.

Coach vs. therapist

Jennifer Joy Smith, for example, was a business developer for a cruise line. She had an interest in the practice of energy healing, but the hard part was accepting that she could do it.

"After a few sessions, the feeling was so strong," said Smith, "Jay helped me visualize myself as a healer, and it was so wonderful that there was someone I could talk to about it."

Earley said the move into coaching from therapy was a natural one.

"It's not as difficult to think you're a good coach as it is to think you're a good therapist," said Earley, "But having an unqualified therapist is more dangerous because people go to therapists in more vulnerable positions. With a coach the most you could lose is money."

A therapist is also well placed to see when a client needs more than coaching, said Brusman, president of San Francisco-based Working Resources.

"People are people, so even in business coaching people bring up personal things," said Brusman, "But if they start talking about an affair, a substance abuse problem, an eating disorder or other very deep psychological issues, I will refer them to another therapist."

While there is no legal requirement for people to get certified to coach, coaches' training institutes have been sprouting up all over the Bay Area and the rest of the country. Coaching certification is offered through both the International Coach Federation and six ICF-accredited training schools, including the Coaches Training Institute in San Rafael. CTI's entire program, including certification and an exam fee, costs \$5,745.

The whole program takes place over the phone, as does a lot of coaching. Kendall, of the Coaches Training Institute, says that close to 1,000 people in California have taken CTI's advanced courses.

"Coaches generally come from all walks of life," said Kendall, "Some are former therapists and social workers, but just as many are entrepreneurs, CEOs, people in human resources, marketing, sales, nonprofits and the arts."

Redmond got her certificate through CTI three and a half years ago after a friend's suggestion. Elizabeth Carrington, executive director of CTI, says coaching is a calling.

"Coaches are born and not made," said Carrington, also president of the Marin Coaches Alliance, of which Redmond is a member. "I had always wanted to coach but before 1996 I didn't know of any profession called coaching. The closest thing I knew was motivational and forward-thinking therapy. I immediately got training."

Coach University, based in Colorado Springs, Colo., is an online training school which currently enrolls 2,000 people from all over the world. Carrington says so many people are enrolled in training courses because they say being good with people is not all it takes to be a good coach.

"It's a business service that is offered to businesspeople, so just because you love people, it doesn't mean you can call yourself a coach," said Carrington. "I wouldn't want someone who just loves money managing my financial portfolio without any kind of business credentials."

Richards agrees that it's a business service, and to her, a vital one.

"Tiger Woods needs someone there supporting his goals and objectives," said Richmond of the successful golfer. "So do most business people."

Allyce Bess is a contributing writer to the San Francisco Business Times.

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