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Special Report: Coaches can make you a real superhero

More bosses are calling in old hands to improve the way they handle their staff. By Louise Armitstead

SO you think you are a good boss? You make tough decisions and stick to them. Staff look to you and wait for you. Your nod — like a flick on the first domino — activates another of your finely crafted master plans. You like ideas (if they are yours) and team-playing (if you are the captain). When you walk in, staff sit up and the office steps up a gear.

You are sharp, strong, always understood, never undermined. Clear? Crystal.

So why isn't your business working as you want it to? Why do you still have the feeling that staff aren't as efficient as they could be? And, if you are being really honest, why are neither you — nor your spouse — particularly happy with it all? You are not alone. Top British executives are increasingly niggled by this conundrum — and are going to new sources in search of the answer. Instead of the usual battery of lawyers, accountants and consultants, the position of right-hand man is being usurped by business coaches.

Senior executives say that spending a few sessions with a coach has a real impact. Barbara Cassani, former chief executive of the Go budget airline, said her coach was her "secret weapon". Stephen Routledge, former managing director of HSBC investment bank, said his "role as leader has forever changed for the better".

Jeremy Lang, former chief executive of Chilprufe, the underwear manufacturer, said: "I am working 50% more on my business and 50% less in my business. Our profits are 50% ahead of last year. I seem to have 50% more time for me and my family. I am 100% happier."

You may scoff, but in the past few years business coaching has ballooned: the International Coach Federation, the industry's trade body, now has 7,500 members in 35 countries, including 650 in the UK. Their services are not cheap — coaching may cost £20,000 for a downpayment, £10,000 per quarter and as much as £3,000 a day for individual attention. But the results are impressing British boards so much that they are not just paying the bills but increasingly insisting that all executives enrol. Companies that have embraced the coaching culture include Unilever, BP, National Grid, Northern Foods, Reuters and KPMG.

The coaches are usually former high-level executives. They don't actually make decisions for those they are coaching but use their position as external and impartial third parties, as well as their own experience, to give advice.

And more and more business decisions are being made with the help of a silent coach in the background.

Cassani, for example, is frank about the role the executive business coach firm Merryck & Co played in her success. "Running a business is a solitary role," she said. "Of course, you talk to your team, but you can't share everything with them, nor would you share your innermost concerns. Having a coach is sometimes seen as a sign of weakness. I think if you are confident enough to recognise when you need to talk, it makes you a good leader. When I started at Go we were going through a tough time, losing money and being intensely scrutinised. It was great to have an experienced and wise sounding-board."

The coach also had a stunning impact on the eventual sale of Go to 3i, the venture-capital group, in 1999. Cassani said: "When BA decided to sell Go, I didn't have a clue. I hadn't done it before. I figured that if we (the Go staff) retained 15% of the company, it would be great. I was in Merryck's offices in Berkeley Square negotiating with 3i over the phone. Merryck's David Carter suggested asking for 25%. I thought this was impossible but did it and came away with 22.5%. This had a huge impact on Go staff, particularly when it was sold again a year later."



While many executives embrace business coaching, others are becoming alarmed at the strong but invisible — and unaccountable — influence coaches might have. Most now have to sign strict confidentiality agreements to protect company data. But much of the practical work, usually shrouded in secrecy, is still misunderstood.

When John Dunsmore took over as chief executive of Scottish Courage, the British arm of Scottish & Newcastle, in 2002, he considered himself an easy-going chap. He knew he had a difficult task ahead — it was his first top position at a FTSE 100 company and the shares were plunging ever deeper in the bear market.

So when human resources suggested he have a natter with a business mentor, he agreed. “I’ve always welcomed straightforward feedback on my management style,” he said. “I didn’t know what to expect, but I was interested.”

After meeting several coaches, Dunsmore chose Carter. Then Carter arrived at Scottish Courage’s Edinburgh headquarters and invited staff to do an assessment of Dunsmore. Hardly the scented candles and hand-holding most of us associate with business coaching — but that was just the start. Within weeks Carter had introduced himself to the other directors, sat in on board meetings, chipped in at strategy summits and even met Dunsmore’s wife.

But the first thing was a weekend retreat: two days of talking solidly about Dunsmore, his work and style. He was identified as an INTJ — introverted intensive thinking judgment.

“It was daunting to start with,” said Dunsmore. “The higher you get in corporate life, the less you are questioned, particularly on a personal scale. It’s not easy to just start talking openly about your work and life. Trust has to be earned and developed.”

Although Carter spent most of the time listening, he also presented Dunsmore with some arresting home truths.

“A big surprise was Carter telling me I worked too hard,” said Dunsmore. “He told me I could work 24 hours a day and the business wouldn’t improve. He got me to realise I wasn’t great at delegating — and to improve this I had to appoint a team that was effective and one I trusted fully. For example, he said executives had a weakness for hiring people like them who they got on with, rather than those who were needed because they had different skills.”

For Dunsmore, Carter’s involvement came at a crucial time. He said: “Our profit collapse in my first year was the main reason our stock was the worst FTSE 100 performer in 2003. I had to make tough decisions. David was invaluable as a third-party impartial sounding-board. Without his counsel, I wouldn’t have survived.”

Central to the mentoring is understanding your own character and how it differs from those of others. In so doing, not only will you improve your own style but understand how to get the most out of your staff.

The system Merryck used for Dunsmore is a grid with 16 characteristics to help you.