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# VIEWS

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# Ready, Set, Help!

# HOW TO FIND A BUSINESS COACH

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Just as there is no algorithm for selecting a mate, there is no single formula for identifying a coach who is compatible with you.

**“Hey, you! Stop slacking! Drop and give me 50 sit-ups, RIGHT NOW!”** Fortunately, I am well beyond the days when my high school coach would use the threat of extra laps around the track to motivate me. Unfortunately, coaches — like librarians — get a bad reputation with some of us because of encounters we had with them in our formative years.

As far as I know, no one has emerged from the womb with all the skills they need to thrive. We learn through trial and error; we learn from watching others; we learn from the guidance of our parents, teachers, friends and, eventually, bosses and co-workers. And while we would all like to believe that we know what it takes to succeed in the professional world, there are times when we all need an outside perspective.

Early in the life of my business, I latched on to someone who had been running a research company for years, who shared my affinity for the Grateful Dead and who was not afraid to gently tell me the truth. She was instrumental in guiding me as I started and built my business; I wince when I think of the truly clueless questions I earnestly asked and she patiently answered. Over the years, I have had other mentors, coaches and the occasional friend who have had to whack me upside the head. I would not still be in business were it not for the wise advisors I have had, guiding and nudging me in the right direction and helping me discover what it is I want to do with my life.

## What Is a Business Coach?

Call them what you will — business coaches, life consultants, mentors or advisors — they are the people who make *their* living by helping other people make their living. And, full disclosure here, I am one of them, at least as one component of my company's services.

Business coaches have a wide range of characteristics. Like therapists, most coaches expect each coaching relationship to have an end, or at least a point where the client checks in only when a new challenge arises. A coach helps you



recognize your strengths and weaknesses, identify and clarify your goals, and create and pursue a strategy to achieve those goals. A coach can help you figure out if you are self-sabotaging your professional growth and find ways to get past self-limiting beliefs. A coach will hold you accountable after you have committed to a strategy. A coach will challenge your assumptions and help you grow to a new level.

There are some things that a business coach is not. A coach does not give you legal or financial advice. A coach cannot make your business decisions for you. And you cannot expect a coach to market your services or to drive business to you. A good business coach works with you to resolve a problem, identify a goal and create a business plan, but you are the one who must ultimately resolve the problem, identify your goals and create the plan necessary to accomplish those goals.

### Why Hire a Business Coach?

People hire business coaches in a number of situations and settings. Before you bring in a coach, be clear on your

expectations and objectives. The following are some of the reasons people have given for hiring a business coach:

- I want to start my business and do not know what to do first.
- I want to move my career forward but do not know how to do that.
- My career/business has been in the doldrums. I need to jump-start it again.
- I need to develop specific business skills — negotiating with a client or colleague, building my professional brand, managing people, closing a sale and so on.
- I want someone to challenge my assumptions, shake up my mindset and get me thinking differently.
- I want to be seen as a leader in my field. I need guidance in becoming that leader.
- I need support! I'm trying to manage my business and personal life, and nothing's working!
- I have lots of great ideas, but I do not know how to put them into action.

When you realize that your marketing efforts are not yielding the results you expected, when you start wonder-

ing whether you are on the right track, when you feel like you need a fresh perspective to a vexing problem or when you would like to know how to fire a difficult client, you are in the market for a business coach.

### Where Can You Find a Business Coach?

Finding a business coach is similar to identifying a therapist or a financial advisor. Most of their business comes (or should come) from word of mouth rather than advertising or traditional marketing. It can be challenging to find someone with whom you enjoy working and who has the perspective and experience to offer you truly useful guidance.

Ask your colleagues and QRCA chapter members for their recommendations. Ask industry leaders for suggestions. Is there someone within QRCA that you particularly admire? That person may be willing to serve as a mentor as well as recommend a more formal business coach. Ask your accountant, your lawyer and your financial advisor for recommendations.

Your coach must be able to work with you and all your charming quirks and personality traits.

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One challenge to finding a coach you can work with is that anyone can hang out a shingle that says “Business Coaching: Open For Business.” There are associations of business coaches, including:

- International Coach Federation (coachfederation.com)
- International Coaching Council (international-coaching-council.com)
- Worldwide Association of Business Coaches (wabccoaches.com)
- European Mentoring & Coaching Council (emccouncil.org)

You can find coaches with an alphabet soup of certification initials after their name. While I respect the work that goes into these organizations’ certification programs, I am not convinced that belonging to one of these groups is either necessary or sufficient for business coaches. At least as important are the less-tangible qualifications and characteristics of a good business coach.

Identifying the right match for you involves more than throwing “business coach” and the name of your city in a search engine and seeing who shows up. For starters, consider the possibility of working with someone who is not in your local area. With free video calls on Skype, your experience can be reasonably similar to an in-person meeting, but without the annoyance of driving through rush-hour traffic or polishing your shoes.

#### Are You My Coach?

Just as there is no algorithm for selecting a mate, there is no single formula for identifying a coach who is compatible with you, as well as someone whose perspective you will find beneficial.

You will probably need different kinds of coaching in different periods of your business. When you just start out, you may need someone to capture and focus your enthusiasm into the most profitable areas and to give you some structure. Once you have been in business for a few years, a coach is useful to help you

sit back, look at the current environment, re-evaluate your strategic direction and perhaps get you looking in an entirely new area. At some point during your business life, you may find yourself burned out or, perhaps worse, just no longer excited or challenged by your job. A coach who is empathetic and able to inspire you may be helpful.

In addition to finding someone whose experience matches where you are in your business, you must find a coach with a personality that meshes with yours. Some people are more comfortable with a coach who gives them encouragement and suggestions on change. Others prefer a coach who is focused and analytical, and who pulls no punches.

The only way you can tell if you have found a coach you can successfully work with is to have a 10- or 15-minute phone conversation. In order to make the most of this time, have a short description of your business ready (no more than a few sentences) to frame the conversation. Write up a list of questions that will help you learn more about this coach and decide whether you have a good match. Such questions might include:

#### *What is your background?*

Look for a coach who has experience in your line of work or something similar, and who remains active in the profession. You may not find a coach whose career path matches yours, but someone with parallel experience will more quickly understand your business. You want to find someone who can balance deep experience in business with innovative thinking and new approaches.

#### *What are you doing differently than you did five years ago?*

You want to find out what the coach does to keep herself up to date. Is she coasting on her laurels, or is she evolving her own business to reflect changes in the business and professional environment?

#### *How wide a range of clients have you worked with?*

You need a coach who can understand the unique issues and dynamics of your

business. Make sure he has worked with enough clients that he can bring a variety of approaches to your situation.

#### *What do you consider to be your greatest asset in coaching?*

Is it compassion? Straight talk? Encouragement and nurturing? All business or a focus on both business and the rest of life? A good coach has a combination of all of those attributes; you want to learn what this coach's dominant characteristics are.

#### *What is your coaching process?*

Is it a set methodology, based on a principle or expert, or is it entirely what the client wants? How successful has your coaching approach been? How much flexibility is there? How much accountability is built into the process? You may prefer a more structured approach or one that is more self-defined; each is an effective coaching process when it matches the learning style of the client.

#### *Are you available for contact between coaching sessions?*

Most coaches allow, if not encourage, their clients to contact them on an ad hoc basis. Find out if you can email or text a question for a short response. Will your coach take unscheduled calls for an urgent question? If you communicate regularly by email, clarify what your coach's turnaround time is (an hour, same day or next day). If it is critical for you to be able to contact your coach on weekends or holidays, be sure he is available.

#### **Will We Work Well Together?**

After your conversation, sit back and think about the experience. During the conversation, did your coach talk more than listen? Granted, you were asking her questions; but her job is to query you about what you want in a coach, what your expectations and goals are, and so on. How did she react when you challenged something she said? Do you feel confident that she will respect your ethical boundaries, maintain client confidentiality and look after your best interests?

Personal chemistry is a crucial part of any coaching relationship, and your

coach must be able to work with you and all your charming quirks and personality traits. Does he respect you and see you as an individual, or do you feel that you are being pigeonholed as "oh, yes, one of *those*"? And, equally important, is he able to provide support and insight that are unique to your current situation, or does he offer generic advice?

Do you feel comfortable talking with this person? An effective coach has a sense of humor, is self-confident without being arrogant, is entirely trustworthy and truly cares about her clients. She is willing to work with you in whatever medium works best for you, whether that is on the phone or video, in person or in email. She knows that she does not have all the answers, but that the two of you together can come up with a creative approach to whatever is challenging you.

Do you feel that you can talk with your coach about financial issues? Your coach must respect your decisions as to how much of his time you choose to pay for and what your budget is. A small or short-term client should get the same respect and professional treatment as a long-term client. Your coach also has to be someone you are comfortable talking with about your annual salary goals, and who can help you expand your vision of what you can achieve.

A coach should be able to tell you the truth, whether or not you want to hear it. A coach cannot be a bully or try to intimidate you into taking his advice; rather, he must be willing to earn your confidence and trust. From your conversation, did you feel that this coach could tell you a difficult truth in a way that you would be able to take it in?

Coaches should be able to offer both a strategic, long-term perspective and practical ideas on how to implement your business plan. A good coach should help you set long-term goals that are both challenging and achievable, and give you guidance on what path to take to reach your goals. While you probably did not have time to get into much discussion of specifics during this initial meeting, you should have come away from the conversation with a sense that your coach can see the forest for the trees.

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Coaches should be able to offer both a strategic, long-term perspective and practical ideas on how to implement your business plan.

Finally, check out the coach's reputation. Look him up on the web to see what people are saying about him; visit his website, blog and other social-media sites. Does the coach have a good reputation within his field? Do other people refer to him as an expert in the field? While a single critical comment is most likely a fluke, if there is a pattern of uncomplimentary mentions of the coach, think twice about this person. If nothing else, you probably do not want to work with someone who is a magnet for dissatisfied clients.

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### Will You Guarantee I Will Succeed?

Much as coaches would like to think so, the success of your business ultimately rests on your shoulders. A coach can offer you advice that is intended to guide you toward your goals, but you still have to do all the heavy lifting. If you find that you are not seeing any progress or feel that you are not getting the type of advice and help you need, find a different coach. Most coaches are deeply committed to helping their clients succeed, and if the partnership is not working, good coaches are happy to refer you to someone else. When a coach's personality, approach and expertise match the needs of her client, exciting things happen. 📧