

- CUBICLE CULTURE

Some Office Coaches Whitewash Miseries With Sunny Platitudes

By

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Whenever Tate Volino attended a company-mandated meeting with a business coach, he had a hard time getting past personality quirks that drove him nuts.

There was one sales coach who gestured constantly, making her charm bracelet jangle so much her clients thought a dog on a leash was in the room. Then there was the business-etiquette coach who used the word "vignette" so much that Mr. Volino and his colleagues started inserting it into their everyday speech, like saying over lunch, "Please pass the vignette."

Mr. Volino admits he carries a larger suspicion of coaches. "My main issue with many of these people is their level of real-world experience," he says, noting that many have no idea of the industry or position of their clients. "I always wonder how well these people would actually do if they were to do my job, instead of just telling me how to do it better."

You can get a coach for just about anything in the business world -- executive coaches, career coaches, strategic-business coaches, performance coaches, even success coaches -- who can presumably set straight those of us who have inadvertently coached ourselves into failure.

There are as many people calling themselves coaches today as there are actors waiting tables. Their backgrounds vary: former top executives, midlevel managers, M.B.A.s and just good "people persons" looking for a good revenue stream. Some coach-training schools advocate that people start calling themselves coaches right after their first class.

The trouble is, not all coaches are winners, despite their often unshakable winning attitude. Their you-betcha positivism may be a good slap in the face of knee-jerk bellyachers, but often it just boils down to simple slogans and pat answers. The answering machine message of one coach concludes: "Do choose to have a great self-esteem day!"

Earlier this year, a coach visited Ann Garcia's biotech recruitment company to talk about how he recruited contract engineers during the dot-com boom. In eight hours, he coached the obvious ("Make sure you hire qualified people"), dropped names, used bad speaking habits ("Umm"), hitched up his pants for dramatic effect and winked at women who asked questions.

By the end of the day, the attendees were making Bingo cards with all those traits and trying to get him to commit all his offenses. "You started hearing 'Bingo!' from a trainee after every few sentences," says Ms. Garcia.

Work situations can be so serious that the players need psychotherapy -- and all they are getting are pep rallies, says Harry Levinson, a former Harvard professor and the retired founder of the Levinson Institute, which coaches executives based on organizational psychology, or the study of behavior within companies.

It's also wrong to think every problem has a solution, he adds. A very meticulous person and one who manages a subordinate slob aren't likely to ever get along, he says. "Very little by the way of coaching is going to do anything to help them," he says.

But it's easy to see the appeal of coaching over the slog of therapy. Sandy Vilas, chief executive of CoachInc.com, which operates Coach U, one of the largest coach-training organizations, says the demand for coaching has skyrocketed. "People are tired of waiting 10 or 20 years," he says. "We're not interested in why you got to be the way you are."

Peter DiGiammarino, chairman and chief executive of a software company and regular coaching consumer for himself and his employees, says he has been a big beneficiary of coaching. But caveat emptor: "I don't like to hear anybody say that problems are fixed. It's like a marriage -- you're never done making it better."

The coaching industry, sensitive to the claims that qualifications aren't necessary, has implemented standards through the International Coaching Federation, which certifies various levels of coaches based on their training and experience, and sets out ethical standards, such as client privacy. (Curiously, the first tenet requires that coaches refrain from anything "that may negatively impact the public's understanding or acceptance of coaching as a profession.")

Still, some clients swear by them. They say coaches help them sort out their goals, reinforce their focus and clear the clutter, in coaching parlance, that gets in their way. But in some cases, a big part of coaching is providing what an interested spouse or barfly may once have done for burdened employees: listening and caring. It's a valuable sounding board, but their sympathetic ear has the remedial effect of a placebo.

"It took me coaching awhile to fully grasp the power of what I'm about to tell you," says business coach Nancy Dana. "The greatest power in coaching is the person coached being fully heard for the first time in his or her life."

Some just aren't cut out for that kind of intensity. A few years ago after he was laid off from a hospital, Jason Weber threw in the clipboard after taking three years of coaching classes by phone. "There are individuals who believe they're worth every dollar and they have clients who won't tell you differently," says Mr. Weber. But, "I couldn't buy what I was selling."

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