

[how to choose a] top coach

The emergence of executive and corporate coaching as a mainstream management tool has seen the number of coaches in Australia explode to more than 500. So how does an individual or organisation cut through the clutter and find the right coach? **Kate Kerrison** reports.

To some people, the concept of coaching conjures up images of a control freak coming in and taking control of your life. It's anything but, according to success coach and motivational expert Shelley Taylor-Smith who is the Founder and Director of Champion Mindset™ Consulting.

"Coaching has many titles including life coaching, success coaching, executive coaching, performance coaching, and even mentoring to name just a few. Coaching is not the same as psychotherapy. And they can overlap where coaching works from the present to the future compared to psychotherapy working past to present," says Taylor-Smith.

According to Taylor-Smith, the personal coaching process allows you to create more of what you would like within all areas of your life: business, career development, family, health, finances and relationships.

"A coach will provide you with honest feedback in a respectful, supportive way. Coaching is very results and action based, so employ a coach who believes in their services and provides [a] 100 per cent money-back guarantee policy - that offers confidence too," Taylor-Smith says.

Australia's coaching fraternity consists of psychologists, psychotherapists, ex-executives, and former high-level sports coaches; there is no typical coach.

The Radiant Group's Shirley Smith, a leading executive coach and human behaviour expert, says the name "coach" is just a "tag or

brand".

"You wouldn't say all teachers are the same or all doctors," she says.

"Is it counselling? Is it coaching? Really, I think it is a bit of everything. It is under a name called 'coaching', which is sexy and trendy and has sporting and performance connotations, but if it is helping people and getting results, who cares what it is called."

The International Coach Federation (ICF), coaching's peak professional body, has 500 members in Australasia, including both executive and life coaches, and there are hundreds more non-members operating as coaches.

To support the popularity explosion of coaching, Peter Stephenson of The Stephenson Partnership estimates that more than two-thirds of Australia's top 100 listed companies are offering coaching to their senior and emerging executives.

Many coaches and coaching organisations, such as The Stephenson Partnership, aim to undertake extensive analysis of the participant's needs and requirements before they begin the program. This assists them in picking the right coach for the job.

However, there are occasions when the coaching relationship can go wrong and it is time to move on.

Stephenson says the biggest mistake is hiring one of the many "aspirational" coaches who, through coaching, can suggest clients target goals that are quite unrealistic.

"They can psyche clients up and virtually tell them they can walk on water, which can result in them leaving an organisation or can lead

to dependency. If something goes wrong they are straight back to the coach for reassurance."

Most healthy coaching programs run for between three and 12 months, usually for around an hour every couple of weeks; they are conducted face-to-face or, occasionally, by phone. "You should continue the relationship until you outgrow your coach," says Peter Fuda, Managing Director of PCD, a change management consultancy that also specialises in coaching.

"People do that - look at Ian Thorpe. Tennis players develop as much as they can using one coach and then move on. In a way, a good coach will do himself or herself out of a job.

"People also have to remember that there are alternatives to coaching; the same results can flow from reading books, attending seminars, or general mentoring."

Hiring the "wrong" coach can also lead to manipulation of the client's decision-making process.

Graham Richardson, who runs his own consultancy and coaching business, Horizons Unlimited, says coaching can go wrong when the coach builds a sense of conspiracy with the participant against the organisation. "It's not the coach's program. That's where some coaches go wrong. They transfer what they think or want to the participant," he says.

Fuda says participants tend to discuss very personal issues and this poses an enormous ethical challenge in a consulting relationship.

"People can be open to manipulation under these circumstances and if you become

uncomfortable because you think the coach is manipulating your decision-making process, then you may have cause to run. But if it is at a skills and strategy level, you are always open to discuss this with peers and colleagues for a second opinion."

These ethical issues are dealt with in the ICF's code of professional conduct, which deals with confidentiality, privacy, and conflict of interest.

Conflict of interest can be at the forefront when a coach is being paid by an organisation to work with a group of senior executives. Not only does the coach need to tread the fine line of confidentiality between the client and the organisation, but also between colleagues - all of who are likely to discuss their working relationships with each other.

"In most cases it is a triad relationship," says Karen Tweedie, President of the ICF's Australasian Chapter. "The three parties need to be clear about what they are seeking to achieve."

Tom Applegarth, Regional Financial Controller at Ergon Energy, says he noticed significant benefits from a recent coaching program.

"My supervisor suggested it to me because I transitioned from a role of technical accounting to one where I had 80 employees, and I really didn't have any formal management training." He says he has definitely noticed a change in both business outcomes and professional relationships as a result of coaching.

Graham Clelland, a Business Manager within Queensland Rail's Coal and Freight Services division, has recently finished his coaching program with Executive Coach Gary Cox through AIM Queensland. He says it was a positive experience for all concerned.

"I think it is one of those issues where the organisation will never know what exactly caused the change but there will be a wave of change eventually," says Clelland.

He says the benefit of coaching is that it is personal and specific.

"Instead of concentrating on nebulous issues, coaching is very real. We have been through a succession of training courses but

this has probably been the most relevant because it deals with real life issues," he says.

Like Applegarth, Clelland says the issue of work-life balance was definitely raised during the coaching, but it was in the context of his professional life. "It was about how much balance you wanted, and what you could do with that balance at work; what level of commitment did you want to make."

While executive and corporate coaches tend to work within the boundaries of the workplace, they say that almost every client raises the issue of work-life balance.

Stephenson deals with this in his latest book, *Highwire Executive: Top Coaching Secrets to Transform your Work and Home Life*, which runs through a series of coaching sessions with "John", the time pressured CEO who makes giant steps to achieve better work-life balance.

According to Richardson, executive coaching is very different to life coaching.

"There are boundaries. [It's] all about how that person is performing in the workplace. But the thing I hear all the time is: 'Is this meant to work at home as well, because it is!'"

"Everyone I talk to mentions work/life balance. Unfortunately, in a lot of cases there is no solution. Not everyone can go out on his or her own or reduce their work commitments. It is more about developing the coping mechanisms to allow them to deal with it better."

Smith, who has a background in psychology and relationship counselling, says that over one or two sessions clients generally raise personal issues surrounding relationships with colleagues or their home life.

"It's important for them to have a confidante with whom they can raise personal issues, and not feel embarrassed."

There are times though when a coach runs up against depression or other mental illness. It is a dangerous environment to coach in and generally the coach could recommend another course of

action.

Leaving aside the ethical issues around coaching and the risk of picking the wrong coach, one of the most common reasons for a program failing to meet expectations is the level of commitment from the participant.

Stephenson says coaching is a two-way commitment. "The participant has to know that they have to attend meetings, do homework; the development happens between meetings. It takes effort and hours of commitment.

"The worst formula is when a line-manager says to Mr X, 'You need coaching', and X doesn't want to do it - that is a complete waste of time."

Having completed his program Clelland says he has two pieces of advice for those considering coaching. "Firstly, look into the background of the coach and make sure they have relevant experience; and secondly, you really need to provide the commitment yourself if you want to make it work."

Kate Kerrison is a freelance business writer.

what do coaches do?

Coaches provide an objective sounding board;

They provide support and honest feedback;

They assist in reviewing and challenging your style of dealing with people and your strategies for getting things done;

They assist you to become more effective and maintain good performance so you don't plateau;

They help you focus on what is important and be less distracted by some of the day-to-day problems and challenges; and

They help you gain greater self-awareness and self-management with a view to management of others.

Source: AIM