

A Coach In Your Corner

This Profession Has Got More Than A Sporting Chance

December 17, 2000 | By Abigail Pickus. Special to the Tribune.

Call it a product of today's increasingly specialized job market. Or view it as a post-modern twist on the age-old search for meaning. But the fact is, you can hire someone who isn't your therapist, or your spouse, or even your mother, to make sure you are getting the most out of life.

The concept may sound a little much, but it's also one of today's fastest-growing professions. Over the past two decades, professional coaching has gone from obscurity to high-profile recognition, thanks in a large part to coach-celebs like Cheryl Richardson--the "life makeover" enthusiast--who is a regular on Oprah and a best-selling author.

"It's exploding. There's a coach on every block," said Nellie Moore, a certified personal coach in Hoffman Estates. "There is a whole new model of coaching out there that is propelling people to go forward."

There are an estimated 10,000 coaches around the world, the majority of them in the United States, according to International Coach Federation, a membership organization that is establishing accrediting standards. So far, 600 coaches have received certification, 144 of them based in Illinois.

"Just like an athletic coach, a professional coach will help individuals articulate their personal goals and objectives, and then help them focus and perform in reaching those goals," said Tom Phillips, the communications counsel for the federation.

Most often called "life coaches" or "career coaches," today's breed of one-on-one coaches are veritable personal cheerleaders, acting as an objective "sounding board" for all the hassles life may throw your way. To put it in coach-speak, you've got to find your "inner-coach" so you can go from 'where you are to where you want to be.'

Different coaches have different specialties. Some concentrate on career and business, while others cater to the more creative crowd. There are parenting coaches and relationship coaches, and above all, "spiritual and life-fulfillment" coaches. And then there are the really specialized ones, like the coaches for women only and the coaches for women with Attention Deficit Disorder.

"Many people have incorporated their last profession into coaching," said Moore, whose "coaching with spirit" business is the outgrowth of her 20 years of experience in the holistic health-care profession.

Ann Van Eron, a professional coach in Chicago, has combined her PhD in organizational psychology with coaching mostly international corporate and non-profit clients such as the United Nations.

"I help with leadership development and organizational development, which means helping teams to work better together and to communicate more effectively," she said.

Be warned, though, coaches are not therapists. Nor are they consultants.

"My expertise is bringing out the best insights and action plans in each of my clients. It's not about hiring an expert to tell you what to do. You hire a coach to help you discover how to make effective choices," said Marian Baker, a professional coach in Chicago.

According to Tony Brown, another professional coach in Chicago, what separates coaches from consultants is that "coaching is more about asking questions, and consulting is about giving answers" while "therapy is what's in the well, and coaching is about where you are right now and where you want to go."

As it turns out, you don't have to go anywhere in particular for a coaching session since practically everything is done over the phone. Brown, for example, has on average 28 clients a week. While he meets with each of them face-to-face every few months, he typically conducts his half-hour sessions over the phone. Coaching fees average \$150-\$200 an hour for individuals, and more for corporations, according to the International Coach Federation..

Who, exactly, seeks out a coach? If you ask a coach the answer is usually the same: Winners who want even more out of life.

"My clients are business owners who are already highly satisfied with life and their career path and are just using coaching to help make more effective choices . Coaching is for winners--not for the broken and wounded," said Baker.

Brown points to Elizabeth Lewis as a perfect example. A financial adviser in Chicago, who works hard and plays little, she says she has been checking in with him once a week for the past three years.

"I have found it to be very helpful," she said. "Sometimes you're so much in the middle of your own situation and you wonder, `Why I am not at the next step?' A coach can help you get the outside perspective you need to move forward."

Lewis has found that her coach has helped her set goals and stick with them, manage her time better and even learn how to make more time for herself--all issues she wouldn't feel comfortable unloading on her friends or family. "It's helpful to have someone to talk to, an objective person who doesn't have preconceived notions about who you are," she said.

And besides, coaches, unlike the people who love us the most, don't come with their own agenda.

"You don't have to worry about a coach saying, `Why would you want to do that?' They just help you do it. It never hurts to have someone who wants you to succeed just as much as you do," Lewis said.

Companies are also turning to coaches to help top people be even more effective. Allstate Insurance Co., headquartered in Northbrook, has internal coaches on staff and brings in over ten external ones

to give support to those heading all the new initiatives underway, such as the recent addition of new distribution channels and products.