

The coach of your dreams

MORE AND MORE ENTREPRENEURS ARE USING PERSONAL COACHES, AND RAVING OVER THE RESULTS. THEY MUST HAVE SHOPPED AROUND



BY JEFF DENNIS

KILL OR BE KILLED. It's a dog-eat-dog world. Only the strong survive. For years, these clichés were practically mantras for me—as for most entrepreneurs. Until our companies are well established, we get the energy and focus we need from our driven personalities and raw survival instincts. Failure is not an option. Never quit!

Too bad that when you finally get past that stage, you're faced with a pair of tough questions: What's next for me? And how will I get there? Abraham Maslow, a famous American psychologist, theorized that we all live to satisfy a series of needs: first the physiological (e.g., food), then safety, belonging, self-esteem and, finally, self-actualization. I've spent a lot of time lately looking at my life through Maslow's lens, concluding that I have the luxury to focus on self-actualization; in other words, to be all that I can be. But what is that, and how will I achieve it? More and more entrepreneurs are turning to personal coaches to help them find the answers.

I'm one of them. I hooked up with a coach in November, and I'm already enjoying some great benefits. However, finding and working with a coach is not easy. So, in the hope of helping you get all that you can get out of a coach, I'm dedicating a series of columns to detailing my experience of finding and working with a coach.

Let's start with finding the coach of your dreams. In a way, it's easy, because personal coaches are everywhere these days. When I searched the Net for information on coaching, I found countless coaches, websites about coaching and even organizations dedicated to the development of coaches.

But I also discovered an incredible diversity of coaching services and business models. Some coaches are glorified administrative assistants for those entrepreneurs who need help organizing their lives. I talked to a coach who specializes in motivating and managing high-performance salespeople. Other coaches focus on the "vision thing" and the implementation of goals associated with the vision. Some coaches meet with their clients weekly, others monthly. A few even have clients they work with exclusively by phone. (I know one Toronto CEO who's using a coach in Los Angeles he has never laid eyes on.)

I soon felt I needed a coach to help me find a coach! So I turned to the members of my Entrepreneurs' Organization chapter in Toronto. Within an hour of e-mailing a request for referrals, I had a long list of 10. All the entrepreneurs I spoke to raved about their coaches. I heard testimonials such as, "My coach changed my life" and "Thanks to my coach, I now work *on* my business, not *in* my business." I wondered how I could have been as successful as I have been without a coach, and how much further ahead I could have been if I'd had a coach all these years. I was suffering from "coach envy."

Given the number of coaches and coaching styles out there, I thought it was critical to list the qualities of my ideal coach:

- » Experience, preferably as an entrepreneur, and certainly in dealing with entrepreneurs.
- » A strong personality who would challenge me.
- » A clear communicator. I wanted to know exactly what the coach was going to do for me, how the relationship would work, what was involved and, of course, what it would cost.
- » A good listener.
- » A strong recommendation from at least one existing client who I respected.
- » Someone I could trust. In order to be effective, I would have to be candid with my coach about my life and business. What's said in the room must stay in the room.

I then interviewed the coaches suggested by my EO colleagues. After a couple of quick conversations with some out-of-towners and telephone coaches, I decided that I needed a face-to-face relationship. I also eliminated a marketing-oriented coach, although I thought I'd introduce him to one of the investment advisors at my firm.

I narrowed my search to the five coaches who work on big-picture issues—the "vision thing." I met two in person and spoke to the others on the phone a couple of times. Each conversation lasted at least 30 minutes, in which I asked a fixed set of questions about issues as diverse as meeting frequency, cost (prices ranged from \$150 to \$600 an hour), the coaching process and even the "homework" I would be assigned.

Although I conducted the interviews as if I were hiring a key employee, the decision was difficult because most of the coaches had their pitches down pat. In the end, I chose Zo Ratansi. I had a strong sense that he met my criteria, could be trusted to hold our conversation in confidence and could come to understand me, which would allow him to help me set a direction and put a framework in place.

I particularly liked the fact that we would spend six hours over two sessions allowing him to get to know me. I also sensed that his "homework" would be focused, doable and meaningful. He had developed a simple set of forms his clients use to develop a plan and track their progress. And I liked his price. Still, the ultimate choice came down to gut feel and the experiences shared with me by the EOer who uses my coach.

Zo and I have been meeting weekly ever since, and I am extremely pleased with my progress so far. In my next column, I'll let you know why. Meantime, here's my best advice for anyone on the hunt for a coach: you'd better shop around. \$

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