

My big breakthrough

IF TAKE-CHARGE ENTREPRENEURS BRISTLE AT THE THOUGHT OF BEING COACHED, THEY MIGHT SOON LEARN TO LOVE IT



BY JEFF DENNIS

I AM A TRUSTED ADVISOR! Not that you should really care. But for me, the realization was an epiphany that could change the rest of my career. And I can thank my personal coach for leading me to it.

As a serial entrepreneur for the past 17 years, I have performed a range of functions in several successful and not-so-successful businesses. Most decisions in my career have been dictated by the need to put food on the table for a young family, but I'm now at the stage at which I have the luxury of carving out my course on my own terms. If only it were so easy.

On a day-to-day basis, we entrepreneurs are too busy working on our businesses to look at ourselves and our companies from a 30,000-foot view. And because we're used to operating without much of a framework, it's sometimes difficult for us to impose helpful structures on what we do. So, when I recently began thinking about redefining my entrepreneurial life, I knew right away it could be a tricky endeavour.

That's why, last November, I retained a personal coach, Zo Ratansi, to lend some structure to the process. In my last column, I shared how I found and hired the right coach for me. Now that I've worked with Zo for a few months, I can give you a glimpse of the sometimes strange, often difficult and, I've learned, always valuable experience of being coached.

My coaching program can be broken into three phases. The first phase covered "the vision thing." It started even before our first session with a homework assignment: write my biography, breaking my life into decades and identifying the major theme, life events and directional shifts I made in each decade. Then came my first meeting with Zo: a three-hour get-to-know-you session that enabled him to dig deeply into who I am by learning about my past, my ups and my downs. With the help of my bio, he challenged me to find common themes in my life, such as where I was successful and which tactics worked best for me. He also pushed me to be very honest about my strengths and weaknesses. Another intense, three-hour session of goal-setting and dreaming followed. The objective: to identify where I want to be three years from now.

I'm typically a pragmatist rather than a dreamer, so the most difficult part of my coaching experience so far came when Zo asked me to dream out loud about what I wanted my life to look like in three years. What would I be doing? Where would I be working? With whom? But Zo was great and helped me through it. He encouraged me to be unrealistic and push the limits of what was possible, telling me the little voice in my head that said a particular idea was impractical was simply a "gremlin" whose job it was to prevent me from dreaming. He also explained that there would be plenty of time to place limits on my vision; my duty now was simply to dream.

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It wasn't long before I had my epiphany: that being a trusted advisor to entrepreneurs is what I love to do, what I'm very good at and what I do naturally. In fact, I simply can't get enough of helping other business owners resolve their strategic, tactical or financial problems.

The next phase was a little easier for me. It involved developing the first of a series of 90-day plans to implement specific, achievable tasks that would help me move towards my vision. But to formulate the plan, I had to answer two tough questions: 1) what messes do I have to clean up in order to achieve my vision? and 2) what concrete, positive steps must I take to achieve my goals?

Facing the messes was difficult at first because it forced me to take a long look at the current state of my life. Overcoming the inertia of the status quo is one of the most difficult things one can do. But, again, Zo challenged me to make the hard decisions that are prerequisites to significant change.

Since then, we've moved into what I call the "accountability phase." Zo and I now meet weekly for 45 minutes to see how I am progressing against my 90-day plan. We talk about any problems I'm encountering; if I am struggling to meet a goal, we analyze the possible causes. Typically, Zo is quick to provide creative suggestions on how to overcome the problem. For example, Zo helped me develop a dialogue for introducing myself to entrepreneurs as their trusted advisor.

My coach uses some basic forms and exercises as part of the process. For example, I have to send Zo a written progress report by noon the day before our sessions. This document not only reinforces my vision and goals by restating them; it also forces me to review my week. During this exercise, I have to decide whether or not I have been productive since our last meeting, and to be honest with myself concerning the successes and failures of the previous week. This is where the accountability comes in, but, as you can see, I'm not held responsible by my coach; rather, I'm accountable to myself.

When the first 90 days are over, we will put together another 90-day plan, then another plan, and so on. While this could be the reason some entrepreneurs stay with their coaches for years, I think they do it because they continue to see benefits like those I've enjoyed in my short time with Zo.

Hopefully, our relationship won't go the way of the professional sports franchise that hires a new coach who shakes things up but never achieves more than a temporary spike in performance. If Zo and I can maintain our momentum over a long period, I'll know I have a great coach—and I'll be a great "trusted advisor." \$

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