

○ Wanna Be a Player? Get a Coach!

If you're not getting better, you're falling behind. To elevate your game, find the personal coach with the right strategy and style for you.

BY CLAIRE TRISTRAM

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World-class athletes know it. So do opera divas. Winners in nearly every profession know that without the right coach, they won't perform at their peak. And now a select number of businesspeople know it, too: as organizations flatten, as production cycles hit hyperspeed, as change becomes a constant, coaches can help you become a better, more nimble business leader.

A traditional mentor — a veteran executive whose history in an organization runs deep — is practically an endangered species in the new economy. If your company still has one or two, they're often too overwhelmed with assignments or too stuck in the status quo to be of much help. An executive coach, however, can provide the fresh viewpoint of an experienced outsider.

○ The ranks of executive coaches include human resources specialists and clinical psychologists, mediation lawyers and outplacement consultants. Usually, they are hired by your company and work on-site for \$1,500 to \$15,000 a day. Occasionally, you hire them yourself and work with them off-site, in secret.

Executive coaches are not for the meek. They're for people who value unambiguous feedback. If coaches have one thing in common, it's that they are ruthlessly results-oriented. Executive coaching isn't therapy. It's product development, with you as the product.

Championship Coaches for Peak Performers

The Player : Margaret Jordan, president and CEO of Dallas Medical Resource, which markets nine Dallas-based medical organizations.

The Coach : Herman Gyr (pronounced "gear"), cofounder of Co-Development International, a leadership coaching firm based in Saratoga, California.

○ Coach's MO: Head coach and confidant for people who've already made it to the highest executive levels. Gyr gives managers at the very top something they don't often have: a peer to confide in.

"Don't call it coaching," Margaret Jordan says. "I'm a seasoned leader. I didn't hire him to teach me about leadership."

At 53, Jordan already has 31 years of success in the health-care industry behind her. Like most successful business leaders, she rejects the notion that she needed help getting to the top. But what Gyr did for

Jordan is exactly what a coach does for a world-class athlete: he helped Jordan score a perfect "10" when she needed it most.

The Challenge: In her previous position as VP at Southern California Edison, Jordan was responsible for a 350-member staff that managed all health-care services for the utility's 17,000 employees and 40,000 retirees and dependents. Her department included eight clinics, a complete pharmacy, a lab, employee health services, and numerous other health-related departments. After taking the job, she quickly decided that it all had to go, including her own position. Funding an in-house medical facility no longer made economic sense. Jordan assigned herself the task of managing the downsizing of more than 80% of her staff — as smoothly and as humanely as possible. She brought in Gyr to serve as her coach through the process.

The Game Plan: How did Gyr smooth the way for Jordan to succeed? The Coach gives disarmingly simple examples. When she first met with some 300 employees to discuss the downsizing, Jordan asked for questions and was met with stony silence. She called for a break and huddled with Gyr. He suggested that employees write their questions down anonymously. A small change, but it made a profound difference to employees accustomed to a culture that didn't encourage participation.

Jordan read the questions aloud. Some were clearly hostile. She answered every one of them, no matter how tough.

"She let people know that she understood," says Gyr. "She led

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them through that hostility. My role was simply to work through those moments with her, and to free her up to do what she does best.”

The Postmortem: In his work with Jordan and with other clients, Gyr has learned that a successful coaching relationship is always a partnership. To succeed, that partnership must be based on a solid foundation of trust. The Coach earns trust by giving advice that works. But managers also need to trust coaches enough to take their suggestions and learn from them.

“In business, you always have to be a hero,” says Gyr. “But that heroic notion can get in the way of your partnership with a coach, making you competitive and defensive rather than receptive and open to suggestions. It takes two players for coaching to work.”

Coordinates: Herman Gyr, herman_gyr@codevelop.com

Drill Coaches for Up-and-Comers

The Player: Padmasree Warrior, director of Motorola’s manufacturing technology group in Austin, Texas.

The Coach : Karen Otazo, managing director of Kelso Group International, a coaching firm whose clients include Amgen Inc., Global One, and IBM.

Coach’s MO: A Lone Ranger-style coach who rides in, troubleshoots, and gets out of town fast. Otazo uses tools like 360-degree feedback as well as personal observation of your management style to help you make small changes that get big results.

“It’s not a performance issue,” says Padmasree Warrior. “I know that’s why coaches are often used. I’m already considered to have very high potential. To me, that’s all the more reason to get a coach.”

The Challenge: Warrior needs to sharpen her communication skills. On this particular afternoon, she’s meeting behind closed doors with Karen Otazo. Otazo has brought in Burt Goodman, an acting coach, to help with today’s lesson: how to act like a senior executive. They take turns drilling Warrior.

“Now say it again,” says Goodman, as he patiently directs Warrior on how to bark an order. “Try making it sound angry this time.”

She clears her throat and looks straight ahead:

“Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall ... “

The Game Plan: Otazo often employs 360-degree feedback, where she interviews everyone — boss, subordinates, colleagues, and customers — on your performance. She then paints a complete picture of how you’re perceived in your organization, so that you can decide together on where you need to improve.

Agreeing to submit to an unvarnished 360-degree review requires a level of humility that’s not always easy to swallow. How many of us relish knowing exactly what everyone else thinks of us? But such a method can bring to light some powerful insights.

One of the surprises for Warrior was the general perception that she lacked the authority to perform in an executive role. Otazo believes that this perception was based on superficial but significant personality traits: Warrior was soft-spoken; she suppressed her natural enthusiasm; she avoided the spotlight.

“Padmasree’s voice had precision, but not power,” says Otazo. “She’s tough, but she didn’t appear tough enough for an executive role.”

The Postmortem: Otazo encouraged Warrior to seek out opportunities to interact with senior executives, and to role play her conversations with them in advance. She drilled Warrior endlessly, coaching her to speak with authority at meetings and articulate her views concisely. “For Padmasree, it was an issue of turning up the energy,” Otazo says. “For many others, it may be turning it down.”

Once you’ve hired a coach, how long does it take before you see real change? Otazo doesn’t fool around: if you hire her, you’ll become a better manager within a couple of days or she’ll say good-bye. She suggests the same rule of thumb for any manager, working with any coach. “There has to be movement,” she says. “Otherwise, we’re both wasting our time.”

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Sidebar: My Enemy, My Coach

A senior manager at a lumber company had an experience last year that’s not uncommon: he walked into his office one morning and found a coach waiting for him — without his knowledge or consent. As soon as The Coach left for the day, the manager called a headhunter and started looking for a new job.

If you show up for work one day and find that a coach has crashed your office, you may have just gotten the not-so-subtle signal that it’s time to start polishing your resume. Here are three ways to protect yourself, direct from coaches we trust:

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Try for complete confidentiality between The Coach and yourself. That means all conversations, all counseling, are private and inviolate. Your boss should be able to evaluate your progress based on external results, not on a report card from your coach.

If you can't get complete confidentiality, ask for permission to review The Coach's reports on your progress. "Written documentation has a great deal of power," warns executive coach Karen Otazo. "Personality profiles are especially dangerous. They're often used to assess a manager's promotability, when really they're just a one-time snapshot." Otazo won't work with a company unless the manager has the right to review and edit, within reason, her written assessments.

Insist on measurable goals. To ensure that your work with a coach doesn't become an exercise in out-coaching, tie everything to a business benefit. By itself, "improve time-management skills" has no measurable benefit. But it's a legitimate way to achieve a critical goal: "meet project deadlines."

Sidebar: How to Get the Most from Your Coach

How do you get the most out of a coach? Karen Otazo, formerly a human resources executive at Arco, warns that you're flirting with disaster if you don't prepare your organization before you bring in a coach. If executive coaching is new to your company, it's quite possible that your peers — and particularly your subordinates — will feel threatened. Sit down with them ahead of time and explain what you're trying to accomplish. Without their cooperation, you risk poor results. Some managers have depoliticized The Coaching process by calling it "training" instead.

For best results, set tangible goals. This isn't the time for stretch goals — aim for improvements that you know you can achieve. "Most people aren't hitting on even half their cylinders," says Marilyn Moats Kennedy, the author of six books on career management and the "Up the Organization" columnist for *Across the Board* magazine. "Don't try for 100% improvement — 15% improvement is the difference between a mediocre player and a star."

When it comes to assessing your performance, ask your coach to be rigorously honest with you. Some are not. Take these sound bites of coaches describing their role: "I just hold the CEO's hand," says one. "I'm like a trusted family friend," says another. Or: "My job is to remind him, 'your greatest strength is that you're you.'" If you get that warm, fuzzy feeling from an executive coach, run! Herman Gyr, who specializes in coaching managers in companies undergoing rapid change, advises that you look for a coach who isn't afraid to criticize. Coaches

are best when they push you out of your comfort zone — and don't let you back in.

Sidebar: My Secret Coach

Some corporate cultures just aren't ready for coaches. Marilyn Moats Kennedy, managing partner of Career Strategies, a Wilmette, Illinois-based consultancy, tells of one manager whose decision to hire a coach turned out to be a professional disaster. His peers were so resentful — and so obsessed by the fact that he had gotten a coach and they hadn't — that he lost his clout within the organization. That kind of political fallout is one reason why well over half of Kennedy's clients hire her themselves instead of through their companies, and work with her in secret instead of on the job.

Kennedy usually coaches clients by phone. It takes about three weeks of periodic conversations to solve a typical problem. "I first figure out whether what they say the problem is, really is the problem — or if they've invented something to wrap around the real problem," she says. "Then we go through alternative scenarios for how they can change."

Off-site coaching makes it clear that you are the client, not your company. It allows you to avoid messy issues like what to do if your goals and the company's goals are in conflict. Hiring your own coach isn't cheap: expect to spend \$150 per hour or more. But it could be that a few hours spent with an objective, business-savvy coach is all you need to perform at a higher level.

Will you lose out on valuable insights when your coach can't consult with your colleagues, relying on your input alone? Kennedy doesn't think so. "Working over the phone, I can identify the problem, suggest what can be done, and try suggesting something else if the first thing doesn't work. If you keep moving forward and trying different things, you'll get it right."

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The Relief Coach for Entry-Level Employees

Coaching Resources

How to Find the Right Coach