



Wanna Be a Player? Get a Coach!

Fast Company Issue 5, p.145

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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 Resources, which markets nine Dallas-based medical organizations.

The Coach: Herman Gyr, Ph.D., (pronounced "gear"), co-founder of the **Enterprise Development Group, based in Palo Alto, 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 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."

