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Going deep in the business leadership game



Scott Barry, general manager of Long Subaru in Webster, says he became a more effective manager with the help of his coach, Bonni Carson DiMatteo of Wellesley-based Atlantic Consultants.

By Micky Baca

An R & D executive for a large area company can't seem to convey his department's vision to sales and manufacturing staff no matter how passionately he presents it. Partners in an established accounting firm are baffled by the fact that staff members would rather walk on nails than work with them on projects. A manager of an automobile dealership works 12 hours a day but can't seem to accomplish what he needs to get done.

When it comes to calling the shots for a business of any type and size, as the saying goes, it can be lonely at the top. That isolation makes it difficult for executives to troubleshoot their own performance as they oversee that of others.

But more and more business executives are finding help in a one-on-one service once relegated to sports and fitness. The business or executive coach has emerged as an increasingly common leadership tool. In fact, one area coaching firm, Forward Motion Coaching of West Boylston, estimates that major, multi-national companies will spend more than \$1 billion on such services in 2006.

And if the experiences of business leaders like Scott Barry, general manager of Long Subaru in Webster, and Larry Schwartz, partner at Westboro-based Carlin, Charron and

Rosen LLC, are any indication (see sidebar), it is a service that executives shouldn't be shy about using. As Barry points out, "Tiger Woods is the best golfer in the world, and he has a golf coach."

Barry's coach, Bonni Carson DiMatteo of Wellesley-based Atlantic Consultants, who has provided such services for 20 years, says business leaders are more open to being coached since the dot.com bust. "People started to see they weren't infallible, they weren't invincible and they need a sounding board," she says. Since then, DiMatteo and other area coaches say, they've seen an increased demand for coaching services.

What is business coaching?

Business or executive coaches are a varied lot, with seemingly as many different approaches and angles as there are individual executives to coach. And since there are no definitive criteria for business coaches (several national groups do offer certification), they admit that just about anyone can hang out a shingle as a coach.

Area coaches agree generally on a description of their work: one-on-one interactions with individual executives or business owners. Coaches analyze clients' needs, establish their goals, and help them come to workable solutions.

Many coaches begin the process with what is called a "360" survey in which the client's subordinates, superiors and peers are asked to answer questions about them. But key to coaching, DiMatteo and other coaches note, is listening to the client, determining their belief system and how they get things done, and helping them achieve goals through self enlightenment.

A tale of two leaders

Coaches build better managers from the sidelines

You could say that Scott Barry, general manager at Long Subaru in Webster, and Larry Schwartz, a partner at Carlin, Charron and Rosen LLC's Boston office, were at opposite ends of the management-style spectrum when they respectively sought the help of an executive coach.

Barry is the classic nice guy, a factor that, he admits, has somewhat hampered his management work, along with a tendency to have trouble focusing on what he needed to achieve. Schwartz, a 30-year accountant and CCR partner since 1987, says he was abrasive and insensitive with employees without really realizing it, and they, in turn, just didn't like him very much.

Both men now say that working with a business coach has transformed them into better managers and happier people and left them with tools to pursue more fulfilling futures in their companies.

Refocused to succeed

Having earned a MBA, Barry says he knew he had the skills to manage but wasn't always using them effectively before working with coach Bonni Carson DiMatteo. He also had trouble focusing. "You'd run around all day long and put in a 12-hour day. But instead of getting things done, you'd be putting out fires," he says.

After working his way through the ranks at R.H. Long Motor Sales for eight years, Barry, age 40, is in line as the person likely to assume the executive manager role in the company when his boss – 20 years his senior – moves on. When his boss suggested he use the services of an executive coach nearly two years ago, Barry, a general sales manager at the time, says he was open to the idea.

Meeting with him once a month for nearly two years, DiMatteo, he says, really help him break down his shortcomings and bring together the skills he did have to better manage his 35-to-40-person workforce. She helped him hone time-management and organizational skills. And she led him to discover the key reason for his lack of concentration, which turned out to be Attention Deficit Disorder, for which he now takes medication.

DiMatteo also coached Barry in directing employees, measuring their performance and increasing his expectation of them. Barry says he's now able to make the people around him better and, while he's still a nice guy, he has set limits on what he will tolerate.

The coaching process, which concluded recently, cost \$10,000 for the first year, Barry says, but was "absolutely worth it."

Attaining a client's goal might mean getting the client to realize employees can't read their mind, getting that person to delegate more to staff, or even, for one of DiMatteo's client's, having that person "practice smiling."

Coaches may do their work in person, over the phone, via e-mail or a combination of all three. Most suggest a minimum coaching period of six to eight months and meet with clients every two or three weeks for one to two hours a session. Prices vary but can range from \$3,000 to \$6,000 for the initial coaching period or from \$150 to \$300 an hour.

DiMatteo works with a range of clients, from executives from Fortune 500 companies to those running small businesses with a handful of employees. She focuses on many individual goals, with one common denominator: the wish to improve performance. Clients have come to understand that coaching is often the most effective form of management training, she says. Top among the most common areas in which business leaders need coaching help, experts agree, is communication.