

Executive Coaching

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More CEOs, COOs and CFOs are seeking leadership consultants, writes

WALLACE IMMEN

Jim Suttie always thought he was “a pretty connected, aware and effective leader” as chief executive officer of Vancouver-based Selkirk Financial Technologies for more than a decade.

But as the financial software company grew from a handful of employees when he founded it in 1988 to more than 100 by 2002, Mr. Suttie noticed that he was no longer getting the support, feedback and fresh ideas he wanted from his managers. People who reported to him seemed afraid to say what was on their minds, he adds.

Mr. Suttie decided he needed some help to re-establish rapport with his staff. And so he turned for advice to an executive leadership coach.

The counsel he received over several months led him to make changes in his leadership style that brought such improvements, he recommended that all of his managers get their own coaches.

Experiences like Mr. Suttie's have been driving fast growth in coaching “C-suite” executives — those with the titles of CEO, COO and CFO, says Steve Mitten, president of the International Coach Federation, a certification organization that includes 8,000 coaches in 30 countries around the world.

Through his own practice, Principal Evolutions Coaching and Training in Vancouver, Mr. Mitten says he has coached about 200 C-suite executives in Canada and the United States over the past decade; requests for consultations went up by 30 per cent last year alone.

One reason for the rise is a change in the image of executive

coaching, says Jack McPhail, managing director of leadership development for Korri/Ferry International, which two years ago established a separate division to coach CEOs that it recruits for corporations.

“Coaching once had a stigma as remedial education but, in the past five years, has become an acknowledged career development tool” that can make a C-suite executive more effective, Mr. McPhail says.

When it comes to a newly hired CEO, companies generally pick up the tab for the services of an executive coach, which cost \$300 an hour and up, because they are trying to increase the likelihood that he or she “fits the culture of the organization,” and won't founder because of miscues and clashes with other managers or directors, Mr. McPhail says.

And failure to fit in is common. According to a survey by Booz Allen Hamilton Inc., 31 per cent of the CEOs in Canada and the United States who left their jobs in 2003 were asked to resign because they didn't work out as the company had hoped.

Even the most firmly established C-suite executives are also seeking out coaches because it allows them to schedule time for self-improvement in their increasingly busy lives, says Adria Trowhill, president of the Toronto-based coaching company Posittrak Inc.

“Leaders are under such pressure to produce innovation and financial results while at the same time motivating their employees that they don't get the time to pull back and assess how effective they are and review their options,” Ms. Trowhill says.

She says coaches always start by asking executives to define their visions of themselves as leaders. “Are they the kind of leader and person they admire in both their business and personal lives? And if not, what is getting in their way?” Ms. Trowhill asks.

Typically, executives will have weekly, hour-long consultations with a coach over several months. The coach will also sit in on meetings and confer individually with people who report to the executive to get their confidential input.

“It's the kind of feedback you won't get when you are a top executive,” says Mr. McPhail, whose previous job was as a vice-president of Chase Manhattan Bank, where he realized that “the higher you rise in an organization, the more isolated you become from feedback.”

But the more you rise in authority, the more important it is to know how people are responding to your leadership because everything you do becomes amplified. Even the most casual comment can be seen as tomorrow's policy, says Sheila Goldgrab, president of Goldgrab Leadership Coaching Inc. in Toronto.

Communications styles or competitive ways of dealing with associates that worked to get someone up the career ladder may no longer be effective at the top, Ms. Goldgrab says.

Nevertheless, she adds that coaching at the senior executive level is about subtle adjustments to achieve more effectiveness rather than a personality overhaul.

“These people are not broken and, in fact, to get to where they are, they have obviously been doing most things extremely well.” Ms. Goldgrab says.

“Coaching a CEO is not about teaching as much as having them look, maybe for the first time, at other options that may be more effective.”

The coach's job is to help executives determine what perspective they can change or skill they can tweak to get the maximum dividend out of themselves, she adds.

Most often, the insights gained are that the leader lacks patience, is not communicating clearly or is not helping people develop in the organization, she says.

In their focus on raising performance, leaders also often overlook the fact that they may be creating fear in their staff, Ms. Goldgrab says.

They can end up creating an organization whose employees are disengaged and can't achieve at its best.

The coach's challenge is to develop a candid dialogue with the CEO's subordinates, who might fear that the coach is a spy for the boss and that any critique could be taken as a sign of disloyalty, Ms. Goldgrab says.

She says she makes it clear that the process is not an assessment of the management team but an opportunity to make a contribution to taking the team to a higher level of performance. That makes people willing to speak out and not feel they are seen as disloyal, she says.

Beyond increasing their effectiveness, C-suite executives invariably have two other reasons for seeking out a coach, Mr. Mitten says. They want to find more balance between their work and personal lives and rekindle enthusiasm for their job.

"Pretty much everyone wants challenge, success, growth and making a difference, but they also want great relationships with family and important people in their lives and they want peace and health and adventure.

"You can say, 'yes, I want a satisfying career, yes, I want to be a better leader but I've got no time for my family and I haven't been to the gym in six months.' In the end, it doesn't do you any good to become the greatest CEO in the history of the company if you have a heart attack or you lose your family," Mr. Mitten says.

Mr. Suttie says his coach opened his eyes to some things he hadn't realized he had been doing unwittingly for years. Self-taught in his leadership style through positions such as chief information officer for Noranda Inc. and the same job at Gulf Canada Resources Ltd. before founding Selkirk, he found "it's really helpful to have another person's point of view to talk about what you are doing without being judgmental and to bounce your ideas off."

His coach, Susanne Biro, understands that need. "C-levels, especially, are not being challenged on their performance on their impact on people. In the coaching relationship, I can call them on all that. They hire me to speak the truth," says Ms. Biro, a leadership coach with Bluepoint Leadership Development in Vancouver.

She says she has found C-suite executives extremely motivated to follow through once they have set their targets.

"It really comes down to having them determine for themselves what is getting in the way of achieving what they want and taking action on it," Ms. Biro says.

Mr. Suttie met with Ms. Biro for an hour each week over four months. He says the changes he ultimately made were his own idea but "recognizing the effect my reactions were having was a pretty sig-

nificant lesson for me."

One insight he got from his discussions with Ms. Biro, who also observed meetings and conferred with Mr. Suttie's staff, was that he was prone to get openly frustrated or upset in meetings and "it would cause people to shut down and not respond."

So Mr. Suttie worked on not openly showing his temper and refraining from chastising subordinates in front of others.

Another issue he said he hadn't been aware of was how imposing he was. At a height of six feet one and weighing 260 pounds, he was physically intimidating to smaller people. "I could appear to be threatening, even though I think I'm pretty soft and easy," Mr. Suttie says. He made a conscious effort to trim down and become more approachable.

The biggest change he made, he says, was in his speaking style. For that, he sought the help of a second coach, Bluepoint president Gregg Thompson, who asked staff members why they felt they couldn't communicate with Mr. Suttie.

'Leaders are under such pressure to produce innovation and financial results.'

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Mr. Suttie says he learned that, having never studied public speaking, "I was used to giving standard, boring presentations of the facts." His coach taught him to use personal experiences and story-telling techniques to make his presentations more engaging and compelling.

The response to the adjustments he made became quickly apparent, Mr. Suttie says. "I believe it had a lot more impact on the people who were listening to the presentations."

So impressive were they that he made it "optional but strongly encouraged" for the 14 members of his management team to take a page out of his coach book. Ten of them got their own coaches and "we found it changes attitudes," says Mr. Suttie, who sold his business to Thomson Financial, a unit of Toronto-based Thomson Corp., last September, and has become an executive vice-president of Thomson.

And in meetings with staff, "there was more dialogue, and discussion was much more directed and specific than it ever was in the past. It's hard to put a number on the improvement but I saw results."

While he is not seeing a coach at the moment, Mr. Suttie says he envisions a time in the future when he will take one on again. "You don't need to see a physiotherapist or a golf coach all the time but the assistance can be invaluable," he says.

"For executives who want to do a better job, getting coached is good stuff. It works."