



IN PURSUIT OF POTENTIAL

More and more often, FDs are turning to business coaches to enhance their careers. But what does a coach actually do, and how should a potential client prepare themselves for a coaching course?

Anne Scoular explains

GETTY

Q&A

With Anne Scoular

IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MENTORING AND COACHING? AREN'T THEY BASICALLY THE SAME THING?

AS: I would crudely define mentoring as traditional training, advising and consulting. Mentoring puts in skill and content. Coaching pulls out the capability that people have within. Of course at various times in our career we need different amounts of both.

To illustrate the relationship, I draw a St Andrew cross: at the beginning of your career, the amount of mentoring that you might need starts high in the top left-hand corner and then proceeds to go down to the bottom right. Usually, by the end of your career no one is going to tell you much, and you're not going to listen anyway. Conversely, coaching typically isn't so important at the beginning of your career - it starts bottom left of the graph and goes up top right, giving you a saltire.

WHY IS THAT?

AS: The reason coaching gets more important at that midpoint where the lines cross is that career paths typically follow a pattern: a new accountant or lawyer does well, becomes an associate, becomes a director, and eventually they become a partner. And suddenly the world changes overnight, because it's no longer enough for them to simply dot the Is and cross the Ts: they've got to build teams, to create a whole new business stream. You've got to be innovative, and be at the frontline.

HOW WOULD A TYPICAL COACHING ENGAGEMENT BE STRUCTURED TO ADDRESS THAT TYPE OF NEED?

AS: The person's employer will

usually have an objective: something like 'We want Mary Smith to join this board and here's a six-month contract to achieve that'. Success would be defined in a number of ways, perhaps that Mary is not only seen as an effective member of the board, but that she's also up for the audit committee on the next cycle, for instance.

Different firms have different contexts: some are very structured, and some will dictate how they want it to be. Some are more fluid. But more commonly it would be the coach and the individual client agreeing up front, 'what are we going to try to deliver?'

And then it depends on the person. A lot of accountants prefer to work on their own, and have quite formal meetings to sign off. Others are extroverts and do like to kick things around in discussion. It's really what's best for the particular client.

The individual client will normally outline the overall task. They often have no idea how to achieve that. I have seen it many times where they'll just gaze at you helplessly. And so the coach's job is to say "let's break that down into manageable chunks" and in doing so, you are trying to establish your understanding of the job at hand. That will warm the client up and they often say: "I also need to do this and this and this." Typically, you've got a pretty decent list of goals by the end of the meeting.

ONCE YOU START, IS IT SIMPLY A MATTER OF FOCUSING ON STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES?

AS: As a coach, I focus on getting them to find the answer. And one of the things that you learn on a coaching course is that there are 100 ways to

find the answer, and everyone has to have their own style. But most importantly, it has to be authentic. And so that's why we may offer advice or opinion. I do have some ideas and some tools, but I truly think if we can find an answer from you it's going to work better.

HOW SHOULD SOMEONE THINKING OF GETTING COACHED PREPARE FOR THE COURSE?

AS: They should think as much as they can about what they want from being coached. Don't worry about how it's achieved because that's the coach's job. But ask yourself: "What do I want?" If I was helping them to find a coach, I would ask them what kind of person had brought out the best in them in the past. Not necessarily a coach or teacher or anyone like that. Were they warm and encouraging, or were they pretty straight down the line and neutral? Were they punchy and direct? Do you respond best to a 'knock them down and drag them out' fight where both of you are grinning afterwards? What works for you? What are you looking for?

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MOST COMMON ISSUES YOU WORK WITH CLIENTS ON?

AS: A lot of the time, when the person sitting in front of me describes the difficulty of working for someone, I often wonder why the organisation hasn't just fired that person. My client

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may be running themselves ragged, and is being coached on how can they buffer the impact of clients. They may be struggling to keep a team together, given that they've had people leave because of the bullying by a senior colleague. People will say: "I know we're not allowed to let him go because he's a major rainmaker, but I literally lie awake at night worrying that something is going to blow up." I'm usually thinking: "Just fire them." So it's often not so much my client, but my client being coached on dealing with someone difficult.

That is more common than you might think. Adrian Furnham, a wonderful professor of psychology at UCL, has written lots of very good books on this, and he says that a lot of workplaces are toxic. His theory is that people 'select in'. So they pick four competencies and skills and go for them. At the same time, they forget to 'select out'. So they forget to say: "If this person is very intimidating, then we're not hiring them."

WHAT ABOUT TIMESCALES? DO YOU WORK TO A FIXED CONTRACT OR IS IT OPEN-ENDED?

AS: Again, it depends. You could have just one session with someone on a particular thing. For instance, if I sent someone for presentation skills coaching ahead of making a big presentation at a conference for 2,000 clients, they might just have one or two sessions: the presentation's made,

Clients may struggle to keep a team together, so often its coaching them on dealing with that

it was much more successful than it would have been, job done.

You can achieve a lot in just a short time. I once spent a day with the entire strategy team of a manufacturing company in a sector that was going downhill very, very fast because of technological change, and I had just one session with them off site, really thrashing out the issues. But we had to do it, and form a new plan.

More typically, though, it will take longer. So, in the case of the FD coming onto the board for the first time, employers might typically give that person a coach for the first six months just to get them to settle in more effectively.

And that's where the return on investment becomes a no brainer. Because if it fails and you have to make a new hire then it's going to cost you 10 times whatever the coaching costs, to say nothing of the disruption to everyone else.

ARE YOU ON CALL 24 HOURS A DAY TO DELIVER COACHING?

AS: No. Coaching is for very successful people on the whole, and they tend to be busy. And so, to go

back to the example of the FD appointed to the board, in that case, it is about joining the board successfully, and if the company has had foresight then the coach is hired two months ahead of the role starting. Then you might have two or three sessions close together over three or four weeks up front, just because they've probably got a bit of anxiety and they need to get their thoughts together and get crystal clear on their first 100-days plan.

But then, assuming it's a six-month contract, even if there is some up-front stuff, it very quickly evolves to perhaps maybe one session in person a month, because they're busy. And most coaches will do that for a fixed fee. In many cases, the coach will offer reasonable ongoing telephone and email contact.

That said, I have been in a hotel room at 10 o'clock at night on the phone to a client in Poland. She'd been sprung with the news that she was making a major conference speech the next morning to a whole group of people from Central and Eastern Europe. That had led to some uncomfortable thoughts, so she rang me up and said: "I'm in a bit of a panic on this, I need help. If I talk to you about it, I think we can just go over the key points." She set the alarm for 4 or 5am and wrote the rest in the morning. But I'm telling you that story now eight to 10 years later, and it stands out because it was quite a rare exception - almost no one phones me like this. ■



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