

COACHING

What Can Coaches Do for You?

by Diane Coutu and Carol Kauffman

FROM THE JANUARY 2009 ISSUE

Listen to an interview with Diane Coutu.

07:34

In the seventeenth century, the French statesman Cardinal Richelieu relied heavily on the advice of Father François Leclerc du Tremblay, known as France's *éminence grise* for his gray monk's habit. Like the famous cardinal, today's business leaders have their gray eminences. But these advisers aren't monks bound by a vow of poverty. They're usually called executive coaches, and they can earn up to \$3,500 an hour.

To understand what they do to merit that money, HBR conducted a survey of 140 leading coaches and invited five experts to comment on the findings. As you'll see, the commentators have conflicting views about where the field is going—and ought to go—reflecting the contradictions that surfaced among the respondents. Commentators and coaches alike felt that the bar needs to be raised in various areas for the industry to mature, but there was no consensus on how that could be done. They did generally agree, however, that the reasons companies engage coaches have changed. Ten years ago, most companies engaged a coach to help fix toxic behavior at the top. Today, most coaching is about developing the capabilities of high-potential performers. As a result of this broader mission,

there's a lot more fuzziness around such issues as how coaches define the scope of engagements, how they measure and report on progress, and the credentials a company should use to select a coach.

The Survey Methodology and Respondents

The analysis presented here is drawn from an online survey developed by senior editors at *Harvard Business Review* and Carol Kauffman of Harvard Medical School. They compiled a list of potential participants through their direct contacts, referrals from senior executives and HBR authors, and executive-coaching training organizations. Nearly 200 survey invitations were distributed by e-mail, and data were compiled from 140 respondents.

- Respondents were divided equally into men and women.
- The coaches are primarily from the United States (71%) and the United Kingdom (18%).
- 66% of respondents disclosed that coaching is their primary source of income.
- The group is highly experienced: 61% have been in the business more than 10 years.

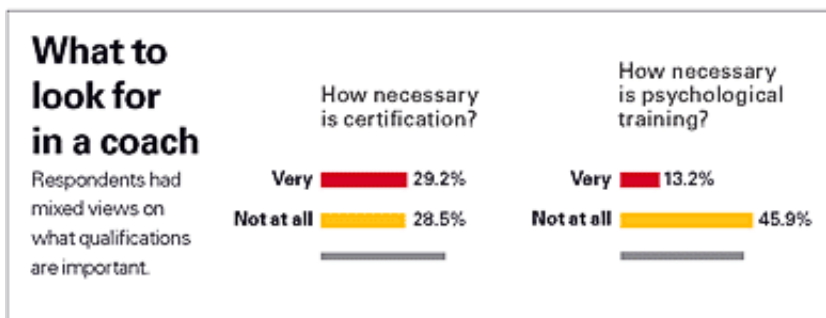
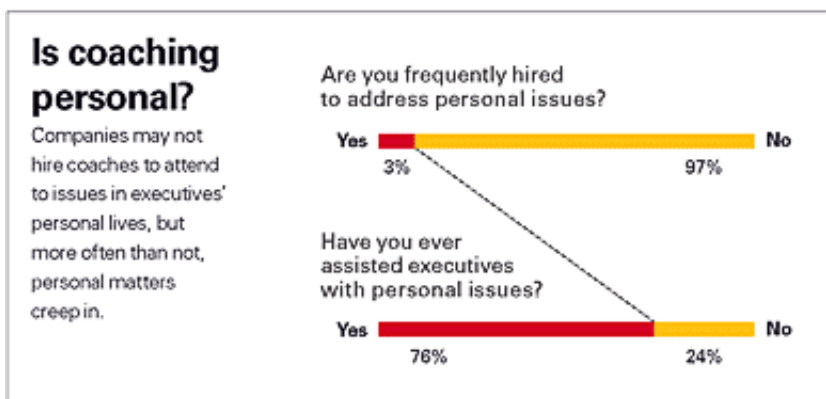
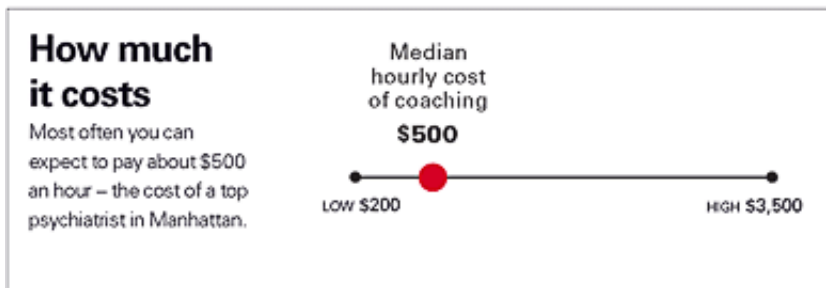
Do companies and executives get value from their coaches? When we asked coaches to explain the healthy growth of their industry, they said that clients keep coming back because “coaching works.” Yet the survey results also suggest that the industry is fraught with conflicts of interest, blurry lines between what is the province of coaches and what should be left to mental health professionals, and sketchy mechanisms for monitoring the effectiveness of a coaching engagement.

Bottom line: Coaching as a business tool continues to gain legitimacy, but the fundamentals of the industry are still in flux. In this market, as in so many others today, the old saw still applies: Buyer beware!

What the Coaches Say

- 50% of respondents come from the fields of business or consulting.
- 20% of respondents come from the field of psychology.

Did you know...



Did You Know...

What the Survey Says

Ingredients of a successful coaching relationship

Is the executive **highly motivated** to change?

Yes : Executives who get the most out of coaching have a fierce desire to **learn and grow**.

No: Do not engage a coach to fix behavioral problems. Blamers, victims, and individuals with iron-clad belief systems don't change.

Does the executive have **good chemistry** with the coach?

Yes: The **right match** is absolutely key to the success of a coaching experience. Without it, the trust required for optimal executive performance will not develop.

No: Do not engage a coach on the basis of reputation or experience without making sure that the fit is right.

Is there a **strong commitment from top management** to developing the executive?

Yes: The firm must have a true desire to **retain and develop** the coached executive.

No: Do not engage a coach if the real agenda is to push the executive out or to fix a systemic issue beyond the control of the coached individual.

Does the focus of coaching engagements shift?

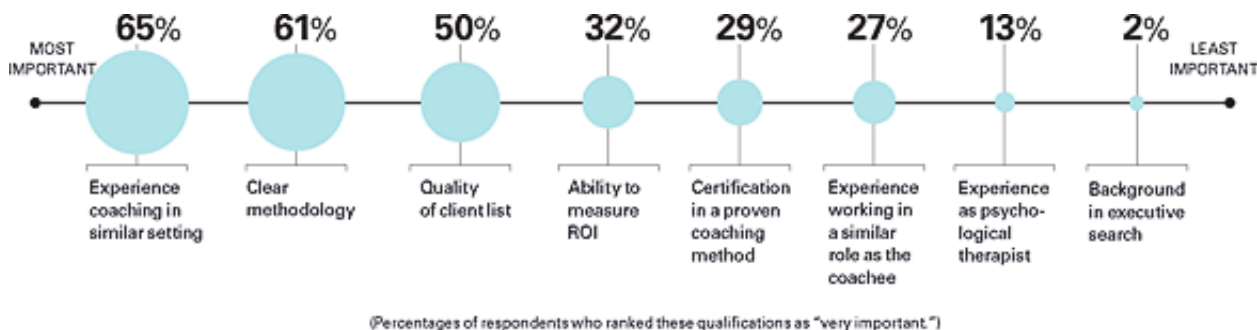
All but eight of the 140 respondents said that over time their focus shifts from what they were originally hired to do.

“Absolutely! It starts out with a business bias and inevitably migrates to ‘bigger issues’ such as life purpose, work/life balance, and becoming a better leader.”

“Generally no. If the assignment is set up properly, the issues are usually very clear before the assignment gets started.”

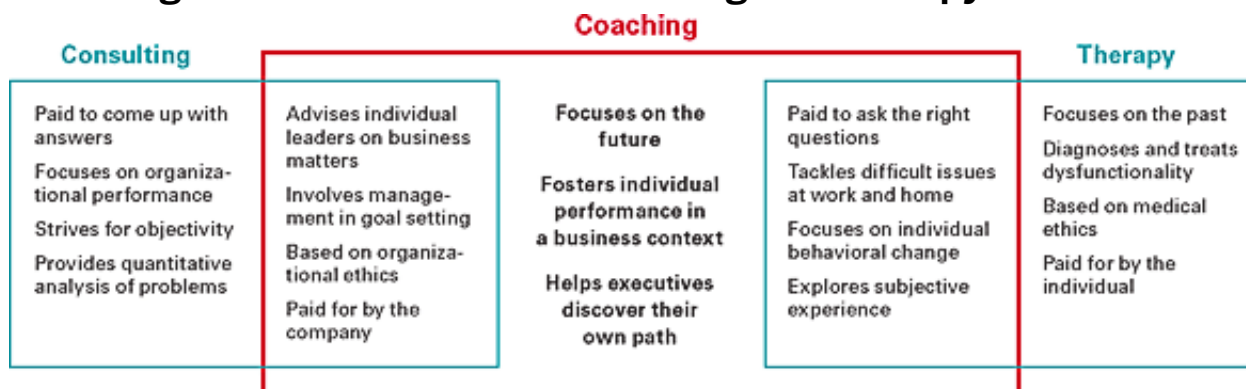
Buyer’s Guide

We asked the coaches what companies should look for when hiring a coach. Here’s how various qualifications stacked up.



Buyer’s Guide

Coaching borrows from both consulting and therapy



Coaching borrows from both consulting and therapy