

Hot Shots



THE POWER OF ideas
THE ECONOMIC TIMES
www.ideas.economicstimes.com



Welcome to the ultimate perk — a personal executive coach hired by the organisation to help you succeed

Dibeyendu Ganguly

TWO YEARS AGO, Reliance Mutual Fund was in a quandary over one of its star managers. The individual in question had had quite a dream run in his eight years with the company, averaging a promotion every eighteen months and rising from relationship manager to zonal head. But now he wasn't quite ready to move into the next level. He was great with his own team, but didn't come across too well in larger gatherings. He didn't communicate well. He lacked grooming. The top management felt he needed to conduct himself better. "High performers often move so fast that they

don't get a chance to absorb the softer behavioural aspects that are crucial at higher levels," says Reliance Mutual's HR head, Rajesh Derhgawen. "They're so caught up with their day to day work that they have no time for introspection. They need someone to hold up a mirror, make them see clearly what their strengths are and where they're lacking."

In what was then an unusual step, Reliance Mutual decided to make a substantial investment on its star performer. It hired an executive coach to help him evolve. The returns on the investment turned out to be high, for the company has since brought in two more coaches to help six other managers in its offices in Mumbai and Delhi. "We're not doing it just for senior managers, which other companies do, but for middle management as well," says Derhgawen.

One of the coaches roped in by Reliance Mutu-

al is Ashu Khanna, a chartered accountant who previously worked with PricewaterhouseCoopers and Kotak Bank. Khanna quit a regular job to become a certified corporate coach because she "enjoys helping people succeed."

"Too many people lose sight of what they want in life. The coaching process is meant to give them clarity of thought and help them make the right choices. I see myself as an unbiased sounding board. My job is to help my clients get ahead," she says.

One of Khanna's assignments was to help a star performer learn to manage his time. The executive lead a large team, but was unwilling to delegate, preferring to be personally involved in everything. This style had served him well in the past, but had now become a problem. "My job is to help people change their perspective," says Khanna. "In this case, the coaching was meant to shift the individual's focus to motivating and developing his subordinates."

Borrowed from the world of sports, the concept of executive coaching is still fairly new the world over. It's a close cousin to mentoring, which has been around longer and is an arrangement internal to the organisation. The biggest problem with an internal mentor, of course, is that he or she may not have enough time to spare, since it's not his or her primary job. An external coach, on the other hand, is fully focused on the process, which typically consists of a two-hour session every week, stretching over 12 weeks. But external coaches don't come cheap.

Nihar Ghosh, HR head at RPG Retail, is a certified executive coach himself, but has never used coaching services in his own organisation. "A good coach would charge around Rs 40,000 for a two hour session and that's expensive. We can't afford it right now," he says.

In India, the biggest users of external coaching services are the multi-national subsidiaries, who have imported it as a global best practice. Not surprisingly, the headquarters of the Indian chapter of the International Coach Federation (ICF) is in Bangalore, which is home to the global IT majors. The ICF currently has 395 members and its president BS Rao says, "Most of our members have an HR background, though there are also some former CEOs who have recently joined."

Among Indian companies, the greatest demand for coaching has so far been from the members of the promoter families. Jagmohan Bhanver, head of the executive coaching arm of PeopleFirst Consulting, has handled over 80 assignments and he says that 70% have come from established Indian business families: "The request usually comes from the company's board. Today's promoters need coaching on how to relate to the professionals they've hired. The second issue I help them with is succession and handling relationships with other family members."

Given that people's personal lives are closely meshed with their professional lives, coaching can be a fairly intense process. Most high performing individuals have problems with their work-life balance and this is invariably the cause of much heartburn. Ameen Merchant, who has spent eight years as a corporate coach, divides these personal issues into six segments — family, health, social, financial, spiritual and mental.

"Along with professional goals, it's important to help people set personal goals," says the former pharma executive. "It could be something really simple but important to the individual. I once coached a top executive, who deeply regretted giving up the reading habit because of lack of time. We set a goal that he should start reading three books a month or 40 books a year. He's stuck to the goal and is a much happier man now."

Another individual who Merchant coached said he had lost all touch with his friends and had no social life because of his work: "At first he said he didn't need a social life, but I could see it bothered him. As we talked it emerged that he was a shy, introverted person who found it hard to socialise. He wanted to change this aspect of his life."

Today, executive coaching in India is growing through a trickle down effect, with CEOs and senior managers who have benefited from the process passing it down.

Meanwhile, the beneficiaries of the coaching are beginning to see it as more than a nice-to-have perk. As the job market tightens and the climb to the top becomes increasingly slippery, good coaching just might make the difference between making it or falling by the wayside.

Trends