

**LEADERSHIP LESSONS**

How executive coaching became an industry

Group therapy for CEOs? Stranger things have happened.

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Published: 28 Jun 2018

Last Updated: 0 minutes ago

At a discreet hotel, overlooking the lapping waters of the mist-strewn North Sea, 14 CEOs sit in a circle, warm coffee and biscuits in hand. Their respective businesses vary in sector and size, from logistics to law, from seven figure turnover to nine.

It's clear from the offset that this is no smiles-and-small-talk networking event. They already know and trust each other, which is just as well really, because the purpose of this meeting is to share their secrets.

One by one, they reveal them. It could be cash flow or recruitment troubles, plans for an ambitious takeover or international expansion, even insomnia or worries about the kids. Good news, bad news, fears, hopes, confidential, prosaic - nothing is off limits. It's a kind of group therapy for CEOs.

The meeting is run by a US organisation called Vistage, which comprises hundreds of groups just like this, plus many more at more junior levels. It creates a safe, structured space for peer mentoring, led by an experienced chair who individually recruits the members for monthly, day-long meetings as well as one-on-one coaching sessions. In the UK there are now approaching 2,000 members and growing, out of a global total of over 22,000.

With its £10,000 annual fee and commitment of a whole working day a month, Vistage's senior membership programme is just one example of the UK's thriving coaching and mentoring industry.

In its broadest sense, this includes other networks (from the Supper Club, with 450 members, to the IOD with over 30,000), a bewildering range of leadership and development programmes, and of course the executive coach and mentor.

It's not exactly clear how many executive coaches there are in Britain. A quick perusal of LinkedIn shows 2,636 people who *call* themselves executive coaches and 23,868 who call themselves a mentor, but it can be quite hard to know how legitimate they are.

'It is a problem that anyone can market themselves as a coach with no formal qualification,' says Naysan Firoozmand, interim head of global executive coaching at Ashridge Executive Education, one of several bodies – including the International Coaching Federation and the European Coaching and Mentoring Council – that help to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Legitimate or not, most coaches and professional mentors understandably focus on junior people, offering advice and helping their professional development. At a senior level though, the support needs to be different.

‘What they’re looking for is an external point of view,’ says Jennifer Broadley, an executive coach who specialises in entrepreneurs and business owners. ‘Coaches are not consultants, they’re not there to give an answer, their job is to ask really good questions and have a high performing business person figure it out for themselves.’

At the top level, this is not really about personal development as such. It’s about unlocking (a word much beloved of coaches, along with ‘unleashing’) your potential to work on business problems.

‘It’s the opportunity to check and validate your thinking with others, receive support and encouragement or indeed be challenged, in a safe way,’ as an experienced Vistage chair, David Sheepshanks, puts it.

‘I certainly know I would have fallen into fewer Heffalump traps in my younger days had I been smart enough at the time to choose [a coach],’ says Sheepshanks, who founded a successful business in the food industry with his brother Rick, before becoming chairman of Ipswich Town FC and most recently St George’s Park National Football Centre. ‘Many of us are very good at running our businesses technically, but we’re not always so hot at running ourselves.’

SHARON BAKER – WHY I HAVE A COACH

Sharon Baker is the chief operating officer of Mighty Social, an ad-tech (advertising technology) company she co-founded four years ago with her business partner Joel Davis. Having had experience with a mentor in a previous role, she recently hired Stephanie Rosilio, an executive coach she found through her network.

‘The way coaching works is that it’s all within you. Coaches don’t have the answers – at this point no one has the answers; we just have to do what we think is right for the business.

We’ve gone from four to 25 people, and that’s been a shift change in terms of culture. We’d reached a plateau, and as a business owner you can only be a specialist in a certain number of things. I felt at that point that I needed to speak to someone, because you don’t get any support at the top really.

The people I manage come to me and say Sharon, which way should I go, and I can help them make the decision. At our level of management, it's all up to you. I'm lucky that I have a co-founder to bounce ideas off, but we were aware we needed support from somewhere else.'

But surely leaders have always needed such support. So why is formal coaching becoming more popular now? After all, when Management Today was founded over fifty years ago, an 'executive coach' was a far-out Californian novelty, much like 'wellness guru' or 'spiritual advisor' are today; now it's mainstream.

One explanation is that 21st century leaders have less and less time to run themselves, or to think *slowly* about their businesses, in the Daniel Kahneman way. We can blame the email and the smart phone for that.

But it might also be that we're simply more willing to ask for help than our predecessors were. Stiff upper lips are becoming distinctly old hat, while the idea of the hero leader who does it all themselves is plain out-of-date.

This help needn't be entirely practical or business-focused either. While coaches and coached alike would balk at the idea of high level coaching purely for emotional support, arguably the relationship is so valuable because it provides an antidote to the perennial loneliness of leadership.

'There's a real threat [as we become senior] that we begin to experience what has been termed as "executive isolation", which is characterised by the erosion of our most trusted networks,' says Ulster University senior lecturer Martin McCracken, who recently spoke about executive isolation at Advance HE's Leadership Summit in London.

'Meanwhile, as our workload and responsibilities increase, we may find ourselves continually surrounded by people, as we get caught up in an endless round of meetings and events. The end result is a feeling of frustration where increasing demands on a leader's time leave little space to reflect, recharge or plan for the future.'

Tim Johns, former Unilever VP, put it a different way when he wrote for MT a few years back. 'They can tell when they walk into a room that their very presence affects the atmosphere. Sotto voce discussions, of which no doubt they have been subject, quickly stop. Embarrassed eyes look elsewhere, others are fixed on their leader looking for signs of what mood they're in, perhaps assessing how to frame some difficult news. People are everywhere, but friends are in short supply.'

What a coach provides is, quite simply, someone to speak to, someone impartial in whom to confide.

It's easy of course to ask why a leader should feel the need to *pay* for a coach or professional mentor, or membership of a peer-mentoring group, instead of turning to more traditional sources of support. Why not just ask your friends and family, or search the fringes of your network for an informal mentor, perhaps a former CEO?

Some people do that. TechUK president Jacqueline de Rojas, for example, is a former country leader for CA Technologies and the MD of Informix at the time of its \$1bn sale to IBM, but recently told Management Today that she still has a mentor of this type, Margaret Heffernan.

'I wish I had reached out for help and guidance earlier in my career, so I am holding on to all the help I can get. It simply makes us better leaders to keep learning and to keep searching,' says de Rojas. 'For me, mentors and coaches create the space to "think out loud", for someone to hold up that mirror and give me the perspective when I get too close and too wrapped up in the decision versus the outcome.'

In an ideal world, maybe everyone would rely on informal mentoring and great, scrupulously impartial friends. But of course we don't live in an ideal world. Not everyone knows someone with the understanding of the issues, the interest in listening ('if I were to speak with my family about these things, quite frankly they'd be bored,' says Mighty Social's Baker) and the ability to bite their tongue and offer support rather than advice.

Ultimately, it can't be a bad thing to ask for help, whoever delivers it, so long as it brings a genuine benefit – and it certainly shouldn't be seen as a sign of weakness. If British business is to thrive in the post-Brexit world that's being fashioned – albeit slowly and opaquely – around us, it will need its leaders to perform at an absolutely world-class level. It would seem unwise, even unfair, to expect them to do that alone.

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