

Professional Coaching

By John P. Carnesecchi, LCSW, CEAP

Sue was not in her element. She had been working as an accountant for InVestCo since graduating college. She had always worked hard, completed projects on-time without mistakes, and was liked by almost everyone in the company. The promotion to Vice President of Accounting was another step in her climb up the ladder of pay and responsibility. It was a major honor: she's the first and only woman to sit on InVestCo's board. It was the big league, and she could finally make the big decisions.

Each day reinforced how misplaced and exposed she felt as VP. Sue was puzzled by the officer's meetings and the men that strutted through them. The meetings were nonchalant proceedings officiated by men in stuffy suits, book-ended by rambunctious sports chatter. They had the veneer of an official meeting, but the attitude of a middle school locker room – or she thought. Somehow, insults would score points with everyone, even the boss. Maybe it was insulting him about the right thing? Or in the right way? It was a surreal way to make decisions. Meetings marched on, propelled by brags and banter; then the gears shifted and tens of thousands of dollars were spent or 2% of the workforce was cut. Then insults and banter would start up again.

Sue knew that she was expected to participate in some way, but she didn't know how. The junior executives got away with jokes about the CEO's bald spot, but could a woman? They bragged about their accomplishments, but could she? Did they resent her for changing their locker-room dynamic? It wasn't like she could ask; that would be seen

as weakness and they expected strength. They also expected her to lay-off nearly half of her division.

And how was she going to go back to her friends and co-workers and decide which ones should go and who could stay? How would she lead the ones that were left? Nothing she had learned about accounting over the years could really help her with these decisions – most of the people in her division were good workers that deserved their jobs. These cuts were going to be painful.

She knew what she wanted to do: to prove herself up to the task, and deserve her seat the boardroom. She just needed to find out how to do this.

Hitting the wall

Most good workers reach a point where their career development stops. If you are a competent worker, you tend to be promoted into greater responsibility. In time, you will be promoted beyond your skill set. This is the Peter Principle that “every employee tends to rise to their own level of incompetence.” Good workers are leaned upon for more and more, until they are saturated with work they cannot complete.

While you can find yourself thrust into new tasks by simply being a good worker, there are a number of times when this especially likely. Companies that are quickly changing size, whether cutting back or growing uncontrollably, often propel the last person standing up the management ladder.

Surviving a merger means that you will be facing a new corporate culture. You might come from a traditional, straight-laced corporation and find yourself managing a stable of college grads and their start-up. How will you integrate them appropriately? Or, you may find yourself merged into a much larger company whose Byzantine politics are critical but difficult to grasp.

Breaking through the wall

When you are given authority over a task and the people that do it, you've become management. Management requires skills that are often totally separate from the task that you need to complete, and they don't teach these skills in college. You can learn them on the job, from a mentor, or through executive coaching. Learning on the job could mean dangerous mistakes at work time. Mentors are scarce and often have their own interests. An executive coach may be what you need.

Executive coaches work for you and no one else. Even when hired by a corporation, executive coaches typically work for the employee, developing their skills for the good of all. According to the Harvard Business Review, IBM retains 60 executive coaches to train junior management and lateral hires. And it isn't just the Blue Chips; small businesses hire executive coaches as well.

Sometimes you see the need for skill development and reach out to a coach on their own. In this case, you will meet with the coach on a regular basis, as with a therapist, to

discuss your work situation and plans. Unlike a therapist, a coach will direct you towards goals and hold you to plans of action.

A coach is uniquely situated to give good advice. Unlike a mentor, or even family and friends, they are completely disinterested. A coach can dispassionately assess what skills you lack, and how you might go about learning them. They can give advice and direction for difficult situations, such as executing lay-offs or how to speak truth to power. But most importantly, they help you develop and execute your career plan.

Personal Coaches

The foundation of personal coaching is no different from executive coaching – the client typically faces an obstacle that they do not know how to tackle, or are burned out and need fresh ideas.

The aim of a personal coach is different, however. While the executive coach plans career development and boardroom moves, the personal coach works with their clients to develop lifetime skills and plans of action that aid them in their personal life. The plan can be anything: learning to date more comfortably, setting and keeping healthy habits, making a difficult career change, developing your strength, or meeting a series of milestones that have eluded you.

Again, the personal coach gives unbiased opinions about your behavior and how it affects your goals. Your personal coach is more likely than a therapist to set goals and to hold you to them.

To get the most benefit from your coaching, you should have a goal in mind. Most importantly, you should accept that you may hear advice that makes you uncomfortable, and be willing to make the necessary changes.