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Hiring a Leadership Coach

Written by Nancy Larson

When advertising sales manager Patty Dean cut her professional teeth in the competitive New York City TV market 24 years ago, verbal abuse was an accepted, even encouraged, management style.

“There was a lot of yelling; people were not in control of their emotions,” remembers Dean, 47.

Even in this environment, Dean rose to the position of local sales manager and eventually moved to Seattle after a promotion to general sales manager. When her boss there suggested working with a leadership coach – sort of a trained, paid mentor – Dean jumped at the chance.

“I thought it was a great opportunity,” she says.



Learning to Ask the Magic Question

During 10 one-hour phone sessions with a leadership coach, Dean learned how to be proactive instead of reactive. Now, when a salesperson comes to her with a problem, she asks herself: Can this hurt me? When the answer is “no,” as it usually is, Dean understands she doesn’t have to respond out of fear.

“You can say to yourself, ‘OK, let me take a deep breath. Let me take this information in and not jump into their emotional state,’” Dean says. “It keeps me from exploding, and I can diffuse the negative and cut through the clutter.”

Dean says the 15 people she supervises have noticed a big difference in her behavior. After she learned to relax and listen, Dean also saw changes in interactions with her husband and two small children.

“It works when they’re 4 years old, and it works when they’re 40 years old,” she says

Finding a Good Coach-Client Fit

Leadership coaching is not a regulated industry; anyone can call themselves a coach. Dean’s coach, Kay Cannon, based in Lexington, Ky., is certified by the [International Coach Federation \(ICF\)](#). Her 25-year professional background also includes working as a corporate executive and a dog trainer – a job that prepared her well for her current clients.

“With dogs, you have to really use a positive reinforcement approach, and it’s the exact same thing in coaching,” Cannon says.

According to Cannon and other experts, coaches should meet several key criteria:

- Certification by an organization like the [\(ICF\)](#) or membership in the [Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology \(SIOP\)](#).
- Specific coach training.
- Chemistry between the coach and the client.
- Ability to describe their method of gaining trust and the coaching process.

While coaching shares some similarities with psychotherapy, coaching is an action plan while therapy is an exploratory process, according to the ICF website. But Dean sees few differences.

“Coaching is therapy. It’s saying, ‘I’m going to allow myself to be vulnerable in order to be better,’” she says.

Her “soul connection” with Cannon makes this possible, Dean says. But Cannon warns that clients should not choose a coach based solely on whether they like that person. Later, if incompatibility becomes an issue, many coaches will let clients out of a contract.

As the coaching process ensues, clients should look out for red flags:

- A coach who always agrees with the client instead of challenging her.
- Someone who is more concerned with diagnosing problems – more the job of a consultant, not a coach – than with encouraging the client to think on her own.

Leadership Coaching Goals

Leadership coaching, which began in the mid-1990s, now boasts tens of thousands of coaches helping clients around the world. An ICF survey shows up to 65 percent of clients are women.

Getting the support they need to complete challenging assignments, as well as balancing home and work life are common issues for female clients, according to coach Anna Marie Valerio of the New York City area. She has a background in business management and consulting, membership in SIOP, and a doctorate in psychology. Another area in which women need help is in requesting constructive criticism.

“Often they don’t get enough feedback from men or women managers,” Valerio says.

Leadership coaching can take place on the phone or in person. Very often, corporations hire coaches to work with their managers, but some executives initiate coaching on their own. Three to six months is the typical duration of the coaching process.

Prices vary but an average one-hour session costs \$236, according to IFC. Though Dean’s employer paid for her coaching, she’d fork out her own money for the service if she had to: “It’s given me tremendous insight.”



Nancy Larson is a freelance journalist whose work has appeared in national print and online publications including *Health Magazine*, *The Advocate*, About.com, Livestrong.com, and Climate.Weather.com (The Weather Channel online). For nearly 20 years, she has written about the lives, careers, families, and health of women in all stages of life. Now based in St. Louis, Nancy also has lived and worked in Birmingham, Detroit, Buffalo, and Cincinnati.

Useful Links:

International Coach Federation <http://www.coachfederation.org>

Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology <http://www.siop.org>

Kay Cannon <http://www.kaycannon.com>

Anna Marie Valerio <http://www.executiveleadershipstrategies.com/>