



Put Me In, Coach

Professional coaches aren't just for organizations in trouble. They can jumpstart successful boards and executives.

By Oliver Tessier

Elliot Lubar was the last person you'd expect to employ a professional coach. After all, what more was there to teach him? He'd spent 10 years as the executive director of Milwaukee's Jewish Family Services (JFS). His board was certainly happy with his performance. Between family counseling, older adult services, and refugee resettlement programs, JFS had more on its plate than ever before. With JFS operating so smoothly, why would Lubar possibly need a coach?

As a savvy nonprofit leader, Lubar knew that there's more to coaching than bailing out troubled boards. It was precisely because things were going so well that Lubar realized he should update his managerial skills and stay ahead of the business curve. "I'd seen a lot of turnover in the field because people weren't adapting well enough," he says. "I didn't want to become one of those casualties." After employing a coach to help sharpen his entrepreneurial skills, Lubar received an excellent evaluation from his board and completed his first capital campaign. "I connected with my coach right away because she was incredibly perceptive," he says. "I felt like she really understood who I am and she never backed off."

Professional coaching is one of the fastest growing areas of consulting in the

nonprofit sector. As boards face greater challenges finding and retaining chief executives, they are more receptive to the idea that nurturing their leaders provides a good return on investment. Executives are also increasingly receptive to using coaches. "I've never encountered a successful executive who felt threatened by professional coaching. The ones from whom I've heard feel that both they and their organizations gained from the experience," says Alan Wichlei, a nonprofit executive search consultant with Isaacson, Miller.

WHAT IS PROFESSIONAL COACHING?

Coaching is teaching in a highly interactive relationship. Professional coaching is essentially a relationship between a consultant and a client. In the case of Lubar and many other leaders, clients are often executive directors, but they can be either individuals or groups, board members, or whole boards. The consultant brings a broad range of expertise to focus on the client's situation and needs. The topics for coaching are agreed upon between the coach and the client, but coaches are usually expected to perform tasks such as

- ♦ building a dialogue of trust. The coach must hear a clients' statements while reading the other signals they are sending. Reading between the lines will

tell a coach what's really taking place within an organization

- ♦ helping clients understand what is expected of them and what is appropriate for them to expect of others
- ♦ helping clients become sensitive to what motivates them and how they behave in achieving their goals
- ♦ helping clients identify solutions to problems and measure their progress in carrying out those solutions
- ♦ stimulating new ideas while acting as a reality check or a point of reference for clients

THE TIME TO FIND A COACH

Boards or executives often hire coaches because they are in trouble. They avoid turning to a coach until the organization is facing a perilous funding situation or a turnover in leadership threatens stability or there is a serious disagreement between management and the board. While organizations are likely to benefit from professional help in times like these, the most effective use of coaching is in planning for success and ensuring that the key players keep the goals in sight. Good times to look for a coach are when you begin to recognize that people aren't finding enough time to think strategically, when the board appears to be losing

focus, or when board and management are beginning to experience tension about their roles.

The National Dental Association (NDA) initially hired a consultant to help the board understand its governance responsibilities. “That was immediately helpful, but it became clear that we needed someone to work with us over time if we were going to have an active governance committee,” says NDA Executive Director Robert Johns. NDA retained the consultant as a coach to keep them on track with their goals and to maintain a dialogue between the board of trustees, the house of delegates, and management. “Hiring a coach isn’t enough, though,” Johns says. “You have to be prepared to work with the coach to make changes. It takes time and commitment.”

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A COACH

The standard criteria for selecting a consultant apply to selecting a coach. In addition to interviewing multiple candidates, asking details of the coach’s philosophy and methodology, and checking references thoroughly, you will want to consider personal dynamics. You need someone who inspires confidence, someone who can relate to you or the demographics of your board, and someone who does not judge you or your peers.

Coaching is an intensely personal relationship; you must choose someone with whom you initially feel comfortable. “Ultimately, what mattered most was the relationship I had with my coach,” Lubar says. “You’ve got to find someone you can connect with, someone who shows some perception about you and your organization, someone you can trust.”

It’s important to remember, however, that coaching is about change, which frequently makes people uncomfortable. You may not always feel in complete harmony with your coach. Try to remain objective in your judgment of the relationship when you confront issues that may make you anxious.

To find a coach, ask peers whose judgment you respect for referrals. Also, check with the Alliance for Nonprofit Management (www.allianceonline.org) or your statewide association of nonprofits.

WHAT RESULTS CAN YOU EXPECT?

Your results are, of course, determined by your goals. A good coaching relationship — like any good consulting relationship — will respond to the client’s needs. Boards often set annual goals that can be monitored by a coach and analyzed through board self-assessment processes. Some boards use coaches like managers to assist their chairs in ensuring that committees are functioning properly, board talent is being put to best use, and meeting agendas focus on the strategic thinking and evaluation of key indicators.

Christine Hammes, Director of Strategic Development Services for the Management Association for Nonprofits (MAP) in St. Paul, Minn., says that her clients often leave with individual strategic plans. Chief executives frequently develop strategies for time management. Many find ways to continue active learning and to integrate their values into their work.

“Our people are working together better than they ever have,” says JFS’s Lubar. “It would be hard to tell you exactly what to attribute to the coaching, but I know I wouldn’t have achieved these things without it.” ☼

Oliver Tessier is a nonprofit leadership specialist. You can find information about his consulting firm at www.otessier.com.

RESOURCES:

For more information on this topic, see:

***The Mentor’s Guide* by Lois J. Zachary. Jossey-Bass, 2000.**

“Mentoring Measures” by Carole Schwiezer. *Association Management*, August 2001.

Finding the Right Coach

The best coaching/client relationships hinge on finding the right match of styles and needs. There are, however, general guidelines that apply in selecting a coach:

- ♦ Research your options. Get as much information as you can about prospective coaches. Ask about their methods, their working style, their experience, and their training. Think and talk about what is important in building a successful relationship.
- ♦ Always check references. Even if you feel the chemistry is perfect, be sure to talk to other clients with whom the coach has worked. Ask about responsiveness, timeliness, flexibility, expertise — all of the things you would want in a qualified professional.
- ♦ Test the dialogue until you are comfortable. Because successful coaching relies so much on trust and respect, make certain you feel comfortable entering into a relationship with the coach. The future cannot be guaranteed on the basis of interviews, but keep searching until you are reasonably certain you have a good match.
- ♦ Set goals and measure your progress against them. Agreed-upon goals can be hard to determine when you are setting out on a learning exploration, but some markers of progress will help chart whether you’re spending your time wisely. Identify goals you want to accomplish as a result of your coaching, and establish a time frame for achieving them.
- ♦ Make a commitment to success. Once you have entered into a coaching arrangement, make yourself available to the process. Be candid; work hard; recognize resistance for what it is. You can expect some discomfort — confronting our own issues can be challenging — but don’t hesitate to be candid with your coach about your experience with the process.