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Getting the Most Out Of A Career Coach

By ERIN CHAMBERS | Special to THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

As a life transition coach, Andrew Susskind specializes in coaching baby boomers through career transitions. "A lot of people are evaluating where they are, where they've been and where they're going," he says, and hiring a private coach can make all the difference. Executive coach Joel Garfinkle built his business around that principle, and has seen a "steady increase" in business over the past 10 years. Whether you're looking to get a promotion, strengthen your presence in the board room or figure out your next career move, calling in a coach may be just the ticket. Six tips to get the relationship right from the start.

Your First 90 Days

Pick the right coach for you. Like most services today, people usually find the right coach via personal recommendations from friends or colleagues or by searching online, says Mr. Susskind. "I often triage a lot of folks who find me," he says. "Just to be sure it's really coaching they're looking for." Do the same to your coach, to make sure that what they're selling is what you need. If it's a promotion, ask if the coach has a history of coaching people to successful promotions? Check to see if a coach has worked with other professionals in your industry? Also consider proximity when choosing a coach; many will work with clients remotely, but some prefer or even require personal meetings. Ask yourself if you need face-to-face interaction to connect with someone's message.

Talk it out. Establish a set mode and frequency of communication even before the first meeting. Mr. Garfinkle mandates three, 40-minute coaching sessions, and then unlimited check-ins via email or phone during business hours, but each coach works differently. Establishing your time commitment and adjusting your schedule from the outset will make the process more manageable. "It's really like a partnership," says Mr. Susskind.

Drink the Kool-Aid. To executives immersed in bottom-line analysis and measurable productivity, talking to a coach about life's lofty ambitions and what's holding you back at work can seem frivolous. "But the ones who get the most out of it engage the most in it," says Mr. Garfinkle. Think of this person as a therapist for your professional life. Even if it feels like a stretch to open up in the beginning, you've committed significant time and money to the process, and hopefully found a coach to match your needs. Get into it.

Manage expectations. While Mr. Garfinkle maintains that you should "have the highest expectations for your coach," it's still important to communicate exactly what you expect from the relationship. Whether you're eyeing a specific promotion at work, looking to strengthen your leadership skills, or building for your next career move, get specific about what you expect from your coach and your career. "More often than not, you know what you want, and you know what your goals are," says Mr. Garfinkle, who admits that while coaching usually isn't going to produce a big promotion in the first six weeks, "you could get on a high profile project within just a few weeks, and then it goes up from there."

Clean out your back pocket... and your closet. Sure, the coach is there to help you reach your next career goals, but you can do a lot to help yourself in the process. "Get ready with your information," says Mr. Garfinkle. Do you have a technical certification that's lurking at the bottom of your resume? A former CEO who's still nagging you about coming back to work for your old company? Bring out all your trump cards for the coach to see. It's part of their job to help you become more aware of your assets, as well as overcoming your flaws. Uncomfortable as it may be, it's also time to drag the skeletons out of your closet, and any flaws or mistakes that are holding you back. "It's about evaluating what issues and challenges get in the way of achieving what we're trying to achieve," says Mr. Garfinkle.

Locate your supporters... carefully. Find the people in your life both personally and professionally who'll champion your cause in this process. And then find those who won't. While both Messrs. Garfinkle and Susskind encourage clients to be open about their participation, they admit it's a personal decision not to be taken lightly. If your boss isn't the type to get on board, tread carefully at work, especially in the beginning. "We take inventory of who is in their life that can really support them in this transition," says Mr. Susskind. Mr. Garfinkle also notes that some companies might be more supportive of your coaching endeavor than you might think, even financially. "(Coaching) is becoming more accepted" as a career advancement tool, he says.

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