

# *Do You Need A Performance Coach?*

Squeamish about traditional talk therapy, more men are hiring a new kind of counsellor to get their careers on track

BY RON IRWIN AND  
CHRISTOPHER MCDUGAL

ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
EMIL PAPP





# Idiot Boss Syndrome was decimating Paul's department at work like an alien-generated germ. Three of his fellow managers at the pharmaceutical company were so fed up with their new boss that they all resigned on the same day.

Paul, who asked that his name and employer be kept confidential, didn't want to lose his job. He'd just been promoted to a management position. He had a wife, two kids and his MBA to think about. But his boss was paranoid, vindictive and annoyingly slow when it came to making decisions. It was only a matter of days before Paul stormed out or was escorted out by security.

So he reached for the phone and made a confidential call. By the end of that 50-minute conversation, Paul had found a way to remove the "Take this job and shove it" from his lips and became the new boss's right-hand man. It took a few days to implement a strategy, but within a few weeks, Paul had turned the situation around. His sales team went on to have a record year. He finished his MBA without too much stress. More importantly, his boss began welcoming his input, and Paul began appreciating skills he never realised his boss had. "Now I see other managers banging their heads against the wall, blood gushing, and I'm as cool as a cucumber," says Paul.

What made the difference? "My coach," Paul answers emphatically. "I had my performance coach, and the guys who resigned didn't have his help."

For many men, having a good coach at their side is an indispensable part of the game called "get ahead". Let's face it: life's lonely en route to the top, and once you're up there, you need support. Just as life coaches have made their way onto our personal turf, executive coaches are being called up to the business league. In the US and UK, a performance coach is a "must-have" item in the businessman's arsenal, and it's a growing trend in SA.

## What is a performance coach?

Performance or executive coaching barely existed at the turn of the millennium. Back then, the field began as a tiny offshoot of "life coaching", which is essentially the mental health equivalent of a golf pro. A life coach examines every aspect of an individual's behaviour, looking for ways to unclutter everything from his garage to his mind to his diary.

## 5 THINGS A COACH SHOULD PROVIDE FOR YOU

According to performance coach Si Ekin, these are non-negotiable:

- 1 Clear goals for the duration of the assignment, established during the first two sessions as an absolute minimum.
- 2 A goal for each session.
- 3 Courageous feedback: the coach is there to support the client to achieve his or her goals, not to be their friend. Ineffective coaches worry about losing a client if they "tell the truth!"
- 4 A mid-coaching assessment.
- 5 An end-of-coaching report.

Performance coaching came out of the realisation that most executives didn't need to have their whole game overhauled – maybe just their swing modified. So a number of life coaches began focusing primarily on job-related issues and quickly saw a remarkable surge in business.

Since much of a man's identity (and anxiety) is tied up with his work, it's an area where he may be open to seeking the sort of professional help he would avoid for gooey emotional problems. Throw in a term like "coach", which conjures the comforting sense of locker-room camaraderie, and add a steel-belted-radial modifier like "performance", and you've got a programme a lot of guys feel comfortable with.

But why the need for executive coaches? "Our lives are very isolated," says Dale Williams, head of Coaches and Mentors of South Africa (COMENSA). "The typical executive is faced with huge pressure to perform, yet has very little support. There's nobody to speak to about vulnerable issues like 'My wife is leaving me and I'm not sure I'll make the next quarter's numbers' or 'I'm not sure I'm up to the challenge of turning this business around.' These aren't thoughts the top dog can share with anyone because these fears show weakness. Simple as that."


Into this isolated situation walks the independent, open-minded, creative and self-aware performance coach. Someone who is willing to listen and ask questions that will "help the executive clarify their thinking" in a "confidential environment". Williams says executive coaching offers something that's "very rare in the world today: an opportunity to be really heard while they are completely honest, open and vulnerable".

In 2005, Sanele Nyoka (40) was a divisional manager at Old Mutual and, by his own admission, "quite a serious person", but also "always putting things off", including setting concrete goals to start his own business. He hired Si Ekin, a Cape-based executive coach and co-founder of Ekin Astengo Coaching, for 10 months, and met with him regularly, experiencing what he calls "a process of soul searching that helped me think differently". Before this, he would "glide around issues instead of diving deep down". He learnt that the coach "has to be committed to achieving what you want" and "know exactly the things that need help".

## How does it work?

Different coaches use different methods. Michael Stratford, a performance coach who'd held 54 jobs by the time he was in his late thirties, uses a variation on the Socratic method, asking clients a two-part series of questions to determine, first, what the client hopes to accomplish in his life and, second, what he's doing now that's moving him forward or holding him back. That first question, says Stratford, is often the harder one to answer.

Once Stratford's client is recognising his passions, he looks at behaviour. He may do a little role-playing, but otherwise he eschews preplanned "sharing" or "awareness" drills. Instead, he asks questions until the client's own answers provide a solution. "If the answer doesn't come from within, he won't own it," Stratford explains. "I can't impose behaviours on people... I get them to voice their ideas until they say, 'My God! That's the answer!'"



Performance coaching came out of the realisation that most executives didn't need to have their whole game overhauled – maybe just their swing modified



Two years ago, Andrew Brand (36) was an aggressive director at an ad agency. He had a lot of responsibility, a lot of technical expertise, plenty of energy and a will to succeed – but, despite this, he felt he didn't have the tools to cope with everything his bosses might throw at him. When the company he worked for launched a training programme for directors and management, he met executive coach Dale Williams.

Brand worked with Williams for 18 months. They met weekly, spoke frequently on the phone and stayed in touch via email. The coaching, Brand feels, allowed him to handle the stress that came with being in charge of “a bunch of things that I didn't know how to approach, and felt as though I didn't have the time to deal with”. With Williams' help, he not only found structure in his life, but found that with time to think, anything is possible.

Brand's the first to admit that a coach can give you the “drive and focus to succeed”. The “coachee”, he says (using a word prevalent in the business), has to dig deep and work hard. “Look at Jacques Kallis and Bryan Habana,” he says. “Both men were born with great talent, but they had to have an unrelenting desire and commitment to succeed. Their coaches don't need to teach them the game – they work on their mental approach, tactics and game plans to enable them to perform at their best.”

Brand's coaching isn't over yet; he's just taking a break. “Coaching isn't a quick fix, it's a journey,” he says. He now has a better understanding of his strengths and “not strengths”, and has become more goal-oriented, more focused and better equipped to deal with the challenges he faces. It's also given him the confidence to open up his own business.

## Is professional coaching for you?

There's not one specific character flaw that makes you ripe for coaching. Common situations coaches deal with are the aggressive yet talented person who intimidates colleagues or the top manager who suspects no one is willing to contradict him. Coaches spend a lot of time working with executives who have recently been promoted into leadership roles and aren't sure how to motivate their team. Another common client is the person who feels overwhelmed and needs to set priorities and maximise his time.

American Alyssa Freas, founder and CEO of the Executive Coaching Network, is one of the best-known people in the business worldwide. She says there's a deep irony in coaching: “The person to actively pursue coaching is almost always the one who needs it the least.” She's found that “great leaders are committed to self-improvement”, while the “hard cases” – the executives who need coaching the most – are the most resistant to it.

## Finding the right man for the job

According to Freas, the coaching industry in South Africa is in a maturing state and many of the techniques used locally are imported from overseas. The goal now is to sensitise coaches so they “take into consideration the history of the country, the cultures and the current political framework”.

The most important challenge a South African executive faces is how to choose the proper coach. And the one-size-fits-all answer won't work. Coaches have to be matched to the right clients. Freas' experience has proven, time and again, that the system works best when there is chemistry between the coach and coachee.

Take the unusual example of Phil Towle, coach for heavy metal group Metallica: he got the rockers in a circle, talking about what was preventing them from creating their new album. The result was a sold-out tour, which singer James Hetfield says was partly due to Towle's work: “Phil's been like an angel to me,” he said in a teary interview. “An angel sent to save me.”



Great leaders are committed to self-improvement, while the really “hard cases” – the executives who need coaching the most – are the most resistant to it

## What are the risks and expectations?

Where performance coaches differ from other mental-health professionals is that they steer clear of delving into your past traumas and focus on your future. But because so many men have their entire identities tied up in their professional life, the typical executive coach walks the boundaries between a therapist, mentor and business advisor.

Safeguards to prevent your coach from turning into your shrink should be discussed in the very early stages of any coaching relationship. “Right from the start, the coach and client should determine exactly what the goals are,” says psychologist-turned-performance-coach Thomas Krapu. “After a reasonable period of time – I'm talking months, not years – client and coach should assess whether progress is being made. If the client isn't much closer to the goal than before, it's time to think about terminating the relationship.”

What's most important, Krapu adds, is that the client should be moving toward self-sufficiency. ■



## HOW TO AVOID A COWBOY Con artists abound. Here's how to tell the good from the bad

Jonathan Cook, senior lecturer at the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) and director for academic programmes, tells us: "When it's done well, executive coaching can be really valuable and complements what we teach at business schools most effectively." But the danger is that an unscrupulous coach "may be tempted to pass on his or her favourite theory, based on very limited experience or what the previous clients

said". In Cook's opinion, the best coaches have a strong background "either in managing organisations themselves or in the professional facilitation skills that are required for coaching practice". He warns that the huge growth of coaching in the past decade has led to many people entering the industry simply "on the basis of short courses and a sincere desire to do good". That's not enough: before hiring a coach, ask yourself honestly: what can

this person offer that I don't already know? According to Craig Metrowich (International Coach Federation member, professional speaker, entrepreneur, executive coach, author and extreme sportsman), because executive coaching has become fashionable over the past few years, it's inevitable that a few cowboys (read "con artists") are going to try to make a quick buck from it. Think about the following when choosing a coach:

**Look beyond the coach's accreditations.** There are literally thousands of academic coaching qualifications out there. Search instead for coaches who have relevant experience in your field.

**Ask for client testimonials** and get them in writing.

**Ask if they offer a 100 percent money-back guarantee:** "If they don't have it, you've found yourself a cowboy."

**Ask what basis he or she will measure your performance against** to prove you have had a successful relationship.

**Ask them about their personal purpose:** "How can they guide you to reach the stars when they don't have a clue where the stars are?"

**Ask them what they would do if they were a full-time staff member in your company,** and what value they would deliver to your particular business.

**When in doubt, consult the International Coach Federation,** an excellent resource on all issues related to the industry: [coachfederation.org/ICF](http://coachfederation.org/ICF).