

**WHEN DOES IT MAKE SENSE TO.....
GET BUSINESS COACHING?
By Margery Miller**

Today's business climate is more competitive, more demanding, more frustrating than ever. The media talk about the economy turning around, but in our day to day business lives, we still seem to have difficulties making ends meet on all fronts. So how can we even consider spending money to pay a business consultant?

That reasoning is why most small companies do not respond to the myriad offers they get from people offering consulting services. It is something they can look into when they are making more money, when things are more stable. So, it is a catch-22 - if they got help, they might be able to turn things around faster, but they don't think they can afford the help. So, they keep doing things the way they've always done them, which gets them what they've already got!

That being said, there is some wisdom in not getting help. I've heard too many stories from angry business owners who hired what they thought were hotshot consultants, paid them lots of money, and got no actual benefit from the service. So what is the answer? Just keep plodding along, or take the risk of getting help that might not even help?

First, it makes sense to look for key indicators that let you know it is time for help. When you know what your problem is, you can be more discerning in seeking a solution - and will be more likely to benefit from the services of whomever you hire.

When assessing the status of your business, here are some questions to ask:

1. What are our long-term goals?
2. What are our short-term goals?
3. Are we meeting financial goals?
4. Do we spend more time putting out fires or creating opportunities for growth?
5. Who are the key people moving us toward our goals?
6. Which people in the company seem to be slowing us down?
7. Which people in the company seem indispensable?
8. How are we positioned within our industry - as leaders or followers?
9. How well do we communicate with each other?
10. Do most of our employees understand and agree with our goals and participate in a productive way?
11. Do people stand up and defend their ideas or give up easily when difficult subjects are on the table?
12. How honest are we toward each other?
13. How much gossiping goes on behind peoples' backs?
14. Do people love to come to work or treat their jobs as necessary evils?
15. Do people contribute new ideas or just maintain the status quo?

16. How much micro managing is going on?
17. How much freedom to be creative is encouraged?
18. How much time is spent re-doing work?
19. How well do our people prioritize tasks?
20. Do our clients or customers understand and appreciate what we do and how well we do it?

These questions need to be answered by not only the business owner, but also by some of the key people in the company. Once you have a clearer picture of what is going on inside your organization, you can pick key areas to focus on. When you interview coaches, you can find out how well suited they are to your particular needs. You might have more financial issues than people issues - which means you need a bottom-line dollars and cents type of service. You would benefit by someone who could help you look at your costs and revenue prospects and get them more in alignment.

If you have more issues about communication, productivity and creative development, you would benefit by being coached by someone with experience getting to the heart of difficult issues and helping you move through them. In my eighteen years of business consulting and coaching, I have found that the biggest issue in most companies is communication. It is so painful for most people to be honest that they tend to avoid conflict at all costs and in doing so, keep their businesses from growing.

Rarely do we see a business destroyed by outside influences. Most failures happen because the infrastructure of the business doesn't engender growth or sustain growth. The foundation of a business depends on how well those twenty questions above can be answered and dealt with. The degree of seriousness of particular issues determines how much coaching is necessary.

Many times, the most important coaching is done with the business owner. It may sound trite, but it all starts at the top. If the leader doesn't have a clear vision, definite priorities and a strategy to achieve goals, the employees tend to flounder. Once the leader is focused and clear, we can determine how much interaction with team members is needed. Working with the team opens up a bigger view of how things are actually working in the company - from whether micro managing is a problem to whether all employees are being productive and accountable in their jobs. This can take a few hours or several sessions, depending on the size of the company and the willingness of all to tackle the issues.

In team building, it works well to have an initial session, determine what is working and not working, set specific goals and accountability for them, then come back in three months to do a review of how things are going. At that time, we can decide which goals were realistic, which ones need to be tweaked, and set new goals and continue working on the steps that are beneficial. This process can take a year of three-month intervals, which allows for benchmarking and clarifying at each meeting.

One of the reasons employees feel negative about team building is that they get excited about making changes, but there is no scheduled follow up, which results in them feeling burned and discounted. For team building to be effective, the new procedures that come out of the meetings need to be systematized and incorporated into the company culture. Then people feel they have actually participated in something meaningful.

For most of us, it is very difficult to break down the communication barriers among our employees to do the team building necessary to build a strong company, just as it is very difficult to have enough of an overview to see the strategic steps necessary to realign our financial situations when we are in trouble. It makes sense to get help - but only if we are clear about just what kind of help we want and are able to gauge whether we are really getting what we are paying for.

Business coaching can be a great strategic move if you go into it with your eyes open, asking for what you want and expecting to get it - and if you're willing to hold the people or individual you hire accountable for the work. Success is then as much your responsibility as the consultant's, which creates a win-win for all.

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