

# A Coach for All Seasons: When to use a coach



Coaching is a process to help people move more easily through the transitions (seasons) in their careers. Any time a person moves to a new company or changes jobs, new skills and new ways of working are required. A coach can help navigate the change while setting mileposts to help chart the journey. Giving yourself the gift of coaching means making **your** goals a priority.

Using the metaphor of the changing seasons, we will show how a coach helped executives in each season.

## Spring: Promotion or a new company

When someone is promoted or changes companies, they sometimes fail to recognize the new expectations or aren't sure how to transition into working effectively in a new culture or new role. They sometimes assume that the new organization works the way the one they came from operated and fail to take into account what they need to do to be successful under different rules.

Scott was a young MBA who had a stellar career in investment banking on Wall Street. He took a new job which added people management to his responsibilities, and lessened his investment responsibilities. Expecting a more relaxed work environment, he was surprised at how much more difficult people management was as compared to managing investments.

The new organization made Scott a vice president and had him managing over 100 people to justify the high salary he demanded. Scott expected authority and autonomy to accompany such a high level job. In addition, he was accustomed to wielding power. On Wall Street if your portfolio is making money (and his was), you can call the shots and make decisions. The new organization was bureaucratic. No matter how much money they earned or how successful they were, everyone had to justify and get approval from superiors for \$100 decisions. Scott was drowning in the bureaucracy, paperwork, and people management and didn't have time to devote to managing the company's portfolio. His job was at risk. Executives were questioning his investment decisions; if Scott couldn't manage people, maybe he couldn't manage investments either.

A key component of coaching is helping people leverage their strengths while recognizing and ameliorating blind spots. With coaching, he came to realize that he didn't have to do all the work himself and that he was neither good at nor enjoyed the paperwork and administration. His strengths were not in people management. He hired a person who excelled at administration and people development, leaving him time to manage the portfolio. His stress went down, job enjoyment up, and the company turned a significant profit because of his management of their portfolio.

**Summer: In the heat of the job – finding balance and clarifying purpose**



As people grow and succeed in their careers, their work may take on a life of its own. I often hear clients say that they are surprised when they recognize that they are in jobs that they don't enjoy and aren't sure how it happened. We sometimes let our careers manage us, instead of the other way around.

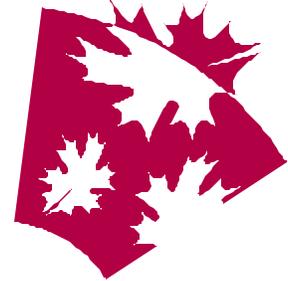
Deborah was 13 years into her career and moving up rapidly. She had held a variety of assignments that had broadened her skills and experience. She was married with two children, a son 9 and a daughter 14. Her career dilemma was whether to take on more responsibility knowing that she would have very little time for her family and herself, or take lateral moves that would be intellectually stimulating but would not require the long hours and travel.

Her coach helped her clarify her values and identify where in her life she got the greatest satisfaction. Using guided imagery, she meditated on the outcome of the two paths and the outcomes she might expect each choice to produce. The work, while interesting, did not give her the joy and satisfaction of her family. If she reflected back in later life, she decided that she would regret more deeply not having spent time with her family than not having made it to the top of the organization.

Another hurdle to overcome was facing the expectations of her parents to excel in the business world, and realizing that meeting others' expectations would not bring her

happiness. By taking time to know herself, she was able to make the choice that would result in greater long-term happiness and satisfaction.

**Fall: Planning for the next job or promotion (reengineering)**



At some point in their career, people may start to see that they don't have the right skills or aren't positioned for the career or job that they really want. In this case, they may need to reengineer their way of working, their skill set, and their perceptions to move to the new job or career they have chosen.

Terry was the Chief Financial Officer of a major corporation who was perceived to be capable of replacing the Chief Operating Officer. He had been with the corporation for a year and one-half, having first worked for a prestigious consulting firm. He had earned a masters in finance and an MBA from a top school and was well recognized for his brilliance and ability to strategize. While the senior officers of the company adored Terry, his peers and subordinates found him intimidating. After receiving strong negative feedback about his interpersonal skills from peers, subordinates, and bosses, he hired a coach to help him see what wasn't working.

Terry did not feel like he intimidated anyone; he had a quick wit and charming personality. There was another side of Terry that surfaced when people disagreed with him. In this situation, he used his intelligence to show how wrong they were for not seeing his point of view. In previous jobs this kind of behavior was typical. He had been accustomed to working with other bright people who expected

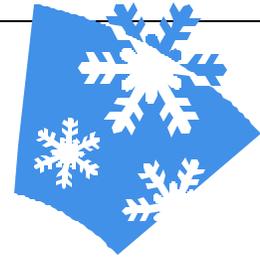
to be challenged. In this new environment, however, people were more used to dialogue than challenge.

Terry disagreed with the data about being intimidating. Recognizing that first hand data is the most believable, the coach asked him if he would be willing to audiotape a few of his meetings with peers and subordinates. He agreed. When he listened to the audiotape at home, he was surprised to hear how confrontational he sounded. His wife walked in while he was listening and was shocked at what she called 'abusive' behavior.

Now Terry was ready to work on the issue. He practiced using facilitative and coaching styles for decision-making. For example, if peers or subordinates came up with a plan that he thought was weak, instead of challenging them, he asked them what they saw as the pros and cons of the plan, how the customers might view it, what the risks were, etc. Usually they began to see what Terry had seen from the beginning, but because they saw it for themselves, they didn't feel intimidated or bashed. If they missed something Terry felt was important, he would suggest they consider his idea. He made it a point to praise them for their ideas to ensure they felt valued. Praising was a new concept to Terry. He assumed that people knew they were doing a good job, and praising was unnecessary.

At the end of the six-month engagement, another round of feedback was solicited and Terry was pleased to see that he was viewed as a leader from peers and subordinates in addition to bosses. He had developed the interpersonal skills to match his business acumen and was ready to become COO.

## **Winter: Planning for retirement or refirement**



Today people are retiring at young ages and are looking for new activities for their energy. Some are looking to be 'fired up' about work, hence the term refirement.

Linda had an extremely successful career in marketing, but had reached a point where she felt bored and unenthusiastic about her work. She was working in an organization that she felt was going in the wrong direction, and the President was unwilling to hear her ideas for change. She asked for coaching to improve the relationship with the President and to have more influence in the organization.

We began working at the tactical level, talking about how to have greater influence and found that because the President had come from marketing, he was threatened by Linda's ideas. She learned to present her ideas less forcefully and began to get greater acceptance. But, she felt like something else was missing. Through many exploration exercises, Linda remembered that she had always wanted to write a novel. She had not given voice to that desire because of all the change it represented, as well as her fears.

Spending time reflecting on that desire increased its power, until she was unable and unwilling to repress it any longer. She set a date for leaving her job, the plan for doing the research for the book, the financial plan to support her during the writing, and the other support needed to accomplish her goal. As the pieces fell into place, her enthusiasm grew. The headaches she had almost every day went

away, and she realized that she was ready for and excited about her new career.

## **What are the benefits of working with a coach? Strategic or tactical, long or short term**

Coaches help clients in the following ways:

- Focus - make the time to analyze, reflect, and decide what matters
- See new options – review behavior and see new possibilities. We all have blinders on in some areas of our lives; a coach can gently open our peripheral vision.
- Reflect on behavior, choices and decisions – with the caring support of a coach, people can look at themselves objectively and make new choices.
- Observe current behavior and assess how well it is working for you or if change is needed. Successful people have a hard time changing what has worked in the past, and even recognizing the need to change. A coach can help in the change process by creating experiments for the client to try out new behaviors.

We employ many different tools to help clients see things differently and to fit their learning styles. For one client, the key to her opening up her deep desire to leave corporate life and write a book, surfaced after she had been meditating consistently for one month. She had been so busy working that she had been unable to think about what she really wanted. The self-observation technique is used to give people the data they need to decide if their

actions are effective or not. And, using experiments to try new behaviors creates safety for change.

Whatever season of your career you are in, a skillful, committed guide can help you transition to what you really want. And, working with someone else can make the journey that much more enjoyable.

### **About the author**

Sandy Mobley is an executive and team coach, organization consultant, and trainer.



Her expertise helps organizations and people lead and enable change. She has worked with senior leaders through transformations to implement their visions and with people who want more success and job fulfillment.

She earned an MBA from Harvard University and bachelor and masters degrees in Math and Computer Science, combining pragmatic and interpersonal skills. She is certified as a master coach by the International Coach Federation.

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