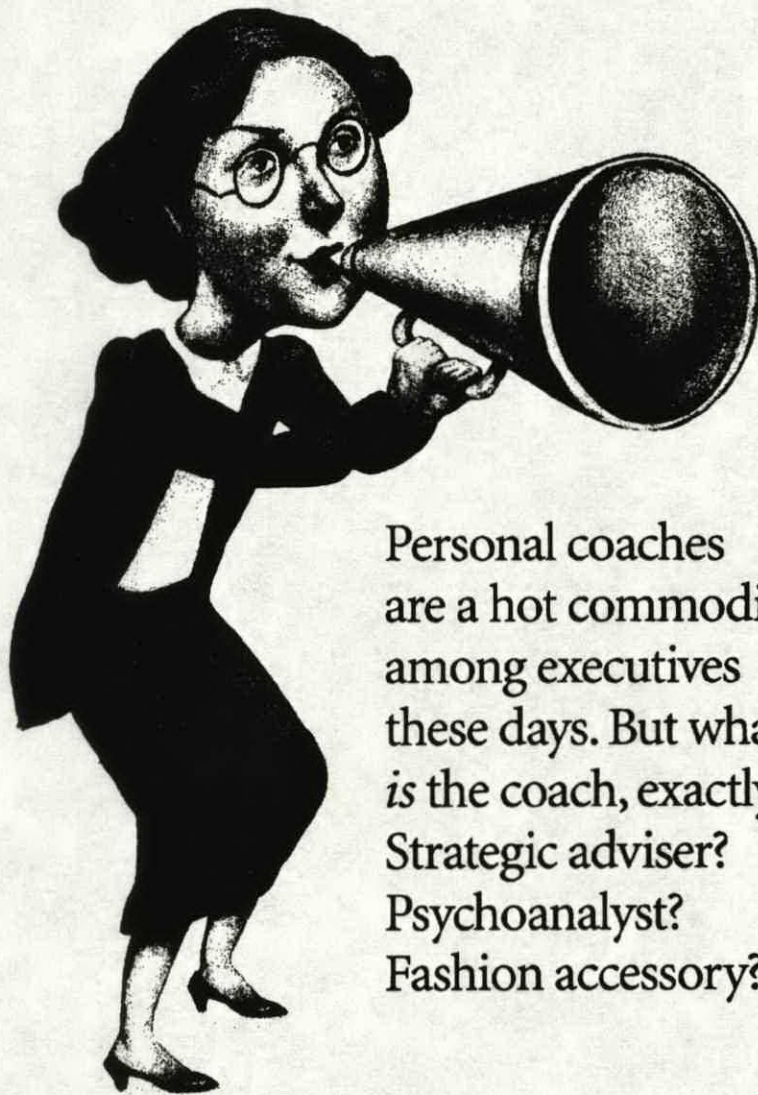


The executive coach: helper or healer?



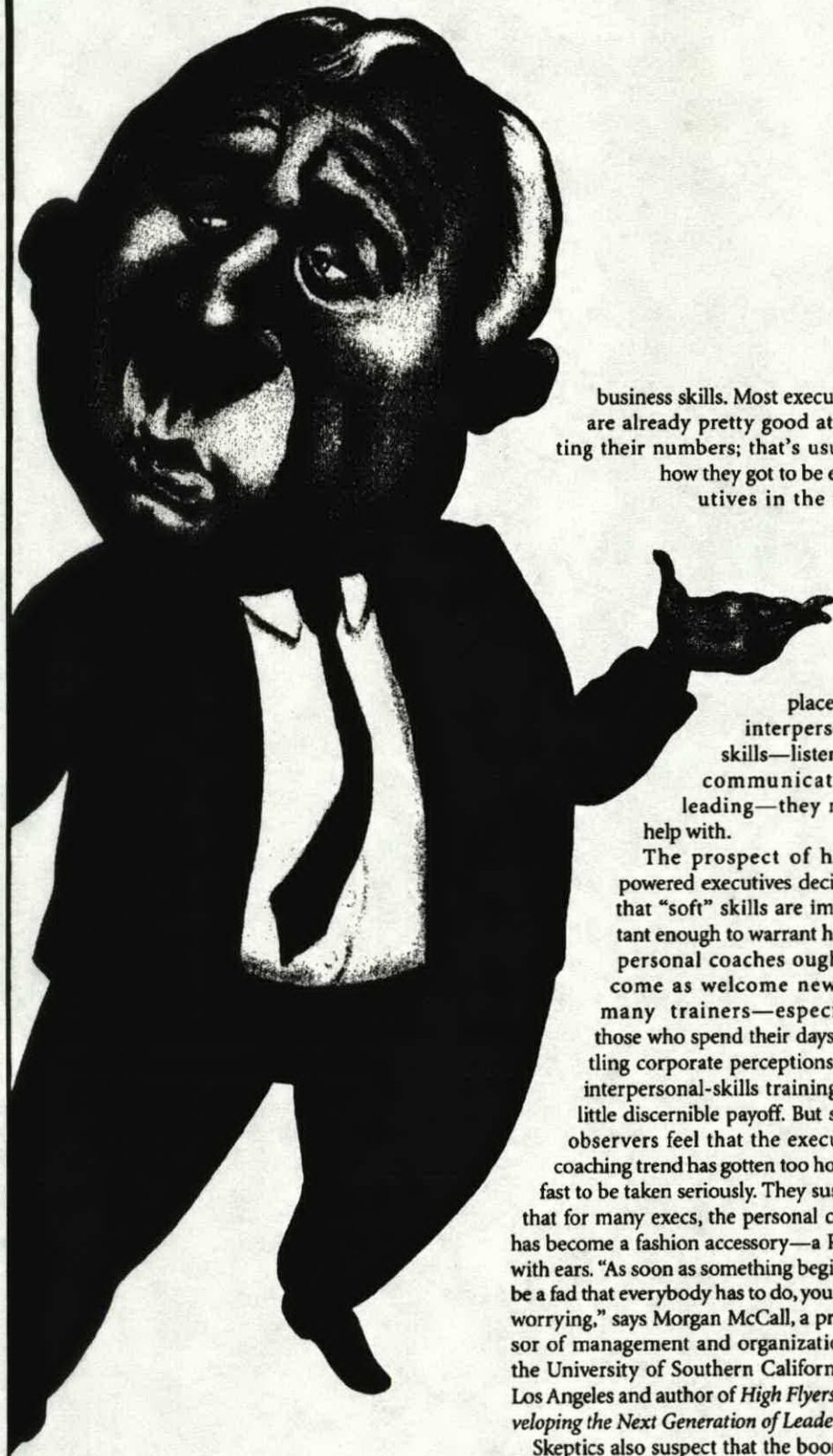
Personal coaches
are a hot commodity
among executives
these days. But what
is the coach, exactly?
Strategic adviser?
Psychoanalyst?
Fashion accessory?

Never mind the mansion, the Mercedes, the membership at the exclusive country club. In corporate America today, the sign that you have truly arrived—or at least that you are being groomed for arrival—is an executive coach. Your own personal coach, that is. Even if the coach's assignment is to render you less obnoxious, his or her presence at your elbow signals that you are regarded by the company as entirely too valuable to fire or shoot.

Almost overnight, it seems, executive coaching has turned into an industry. And business is booming. Rich Fettke, president of the Professional and Personal Coaches Association, a Walnut Creek, CA, organization with about 500 members, estimates that the demand for executive coaches has increased by about 1,000 percent in the past year.

What does a personal coach do? All act in some capacity as advisers, counselors and sounding boards. But advisers about what? That depends on the species, of which there are several. Some specialize in helping CEOs think through their companies' strategic direction. Some function almost like sports agents, helping execs wring the most out of their earning potential. Many are licensed psychologists, and some approach coaching as something akin to therapy, although this last role is controversial within the coaching ranks, as we'll see.

The majority of personal coaches are hired primarily to help executives hone their "people skills," as opposed to their



business skills. Most executives are already pretty good at hitting their numbers; that's usually how they got to be executives in the first

place. It's interpersonal skills—listening, communicating, leading—they need help with.

The prospect of high-powered executives deciding that "soft" skills are important enough to warrant hiring personal coaches ought to come as welcome news to many trainers—especially those who spend their days battling corporate perceptions that interpersonal-skills training has little discernible payoff. But some observers feel that the executive coaching trend has gotten too hot too fast to be taken seriously. They suspect that for many execs, the personal coach has become a fashion accessory—a Rolex with ears. "As soon as something begins to be a fad that everybody has to do, you start worrying," says Morgan McCall, a professor of management and organization at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and author of *High Flyers: Developing the Next Generation of Leaders*.

Skeptics also suspect that the booming

trade in personal coaches is driven at least in part by a glut on the supply side. Cost-cutting by HMOs and other managed-care outfits is transforming the entire health care industry, but the mental-health field has been particularly hard hit. "I think a lot of the [coaching] market is being fueled by psychologists looking for work," says Steven Berglas, a psychologist on the faculty of the Harvard Medical School, author of *The Success Syndrome* and *Your Own Worst Enemy*, and himself an executive coach.

It's lonely at the top

But executive coaching didn't just appear out of nowhere, says consultant Chip Bell, a Dallas-based partner with Performance Research Associates who serves as a personal coach to several executives. For many years, high-level managers who were abrasive or lacked social polish were assigned to courses or individuals—often industrial psychologists—charged with sanding off the rough edges. The reluctant managers referred to this as being packed off to "charm school." After all, they grumbled, their job was to make sure the work got done, not that everybody loved them.

Today, says Bell, being a corporate leader is a much more complicated, human-centered chore. And, he says, "most executives are looking for all the help and assistance they can get."

Another reason executive coaches are coming out of the woodwork, says McCall, is because today's managers are subject to more and better assessments of their interpersonal skills than were their

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predecessors of years past. They get lengthy reports on the findings of 360-degree feedback instruments. Their attitudes, traits and behaviors are probed and analyzed by organizations like Personnel Decisions Inc. of Minneapolis and the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, NC (the latter is McCall's former employer). But while movers and shakers get a lot of formal, instrumented feedback about their management styles these days, behavioral habits are notoriously hard to change. Who helps the executive act on the assessment information? Enter the personal coach.

Often, however, a dearth of *informal* feedback convinces top managers to look for a coach. A CEO might have a confidant or two in the organization from whom he can get blunt information and opinions—if he's lucky or has taken pains to cultivate such relationships. But many simply don't hear unpleasant truths from their own people.

Jane Kleinberger, CEO of Paciolan Systems Inc., a computer software company in Long Beach, CA, originally hired consultant Ken Masco to do some organization development work. She retained him as a personal coach after finding that he gave her the kind of honest feedback she felt she needed. Kleinberger says that Masco, who heads a San Clemente, CA, firm called Business Systems Management, sometimes is deliberately "tough" on her in front of others in her company; she hopes her management team will take the cue.

For a coach, the task of providing frank feedback to powerful leaders is itself a challenge. The role requires a strong ego, and "you've got to be very, very comfortable with the possibility of getting fired at any moment," says Sherry Lowry, CEO of NexusPoint, a Houston company that trains executive coaches.

Some of these corporate titans are potentially explosive characters. Harvard's Berglas says he has been called in to help some seriously dysfunctional top managers. "I often treat self-destructive individuals, many of whom seem to be begging for relief from the pressures of living up to their own press clippings," Berglas says.

He is quick to add that there's a big difference between "treating" an executive and coaching him. In the former case, a



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serious personality disorder is at issue; Berglas takes the individual out of the workplace and treats him clinically, as a psychologist. If only coaching is required, Berglas does that at the work site and restricts it to purely work-related behavioral problems.

Most "difficult" execs are merely temperamental, not deranged, and some coaches thrive on the tension of working with them. Says personal coach J. Renae Norton, president of the Meridian Group in Cincinnati and co-author of *The Change Equation*: "I personally love to deal with angry, high-powered, intelligent people who are very demanding. A lot of people would be very uncomfortable with that."

As for those demanding executives, many find that having a sounding board for their concerns is the most valuable part of the relationship. "We all want to be strong in front of our peers," says CEO

Kleinberger. And that isn't easy. As a CEO, she says, "you've got to be on, you've got to be a motivator, you've got to feel that you've got control.

When all hell is breaking loose in the organization, you've got to be cool as a cucumber. Well, we all have days when we also want to scream."

The trouble is, executives don't want to appear less than confident in front of anyone, says consultant Bell. The coach is someone with whom they can let their hair down. "It doesn't matter how big a fool you make of yourself in front of me, because I'm your executive coach, and I'm not here to judge you," Bell tells them.

Masco elaborates: "[Executives need] somebody they can talk to with their game face off. They don't have to be right anymore. They can say to their coach, 'I don't know what's going on around here,' and it's OK."

Listen up

But executive coaches aren't just sounding boards for hire. In most cases, they also are charged with helping senior managers develop the people skills they may have missed in their climb to the top. The interpersonal skill most often listed in the executives' debit column is that of simple listening.

Despite decades of talk about participative management, there are still a lot of command-and-control types out there, says executive coach Ronald Fox, director of Human Resource Consultants in Chapel Hill, NC, and former president of the American Psychological Association. These bosses have grown accustomed to telling people what to do, not listening to what they think. Fox, who co-authored *The Change Equation* with Meridian's Norton, characterizes these managers as people who haven't figured out "that you don't get much loyalty by criticizing and putting people down and telling them what fools they are."

But it would be a mistake to conclude that executives don't listen well simply because they're obtuse control freaks. Tom Leonard, founder of Coach U, a Steamboat Springs, CO, company that trains people to be personal coaches, says many head honchos are poor listeners largely because they don't feel that people are listening to *them*. That sounds coun-

terintuitive, since employees so often seem to hang on an executive's every word, but Leonard insists that "most executives have never really been properly heard." There's too much at stake between the subordinate and the boss to allow the subordinate to listen objectively, he says. Rather, employees listen to the boss through filters finely tuned to detect how anything being said might affect their jobs, their paychecks, or their chances for promotion.

The CEO of a small software firm in the Midwest who employs a personal coach confirms Leonard's assertion that executives sometimes feel nobody is listening. He thinks the sensation is due largely to the fact that everyone in the company is so busy with the piles of work on their own plates that they only half hear him.

That time crunch cuts both ways: Executives are also too busy to listen, says Lowry. To manage their time, leaders have learned to absorb sound bites and executive summaries instead of listening to things in context. "They have no time for process, and listening is a process," Lowry says. "I think one of the problems is that they've been rewarded for hearing the highlights only while missing the nuances and the significance of what's not being said." As a coach, Lowry has assigned executives to spend a whole week just listening for the underlying values of people with whom they communicate.

Eileen R. Hannegan, president of Hannegan Consulting Circle in Coronado, CA, has gone to considerable lengths to coach executives in the art of making time to listen. One client was the CEO of a small high-tech company who wanted to merge his firm with another. Trouble arose when a rift developed between the executives and the techies—the critical people who did the research and development work for the company's products. The culture clash threatened to sabotage the deal.

The CEO was uncomfortable around the techies, Hannegan explains, and didn't much cotton to the idea of soliciting their "input." He felt his job was to issue directives, and theirs was to follow same. If he had to listen to their views, his inclination was to hold one big meeting and get it over with. Hannegan persuaded him instead to sit in the lunchroom for an hour each week and talk to anybody who want-

ed to pull up a chair. For the first few weeks, most of the techies either ignored him or sat down to pick fights. Hannegan urged him to stick it out.

The CEO's perseverance paid off, Hannegan says, when people began to believe he was serious about listening to them. First the table grew crowded, and finally, the lunchroom itself became jammed with techies who wanted to discuss things with the CEO. He discovered that he was getting information about the company and its markets that he'd never had before. He's now encouraging the

other executives to spend an hour a week in the lunchroom. They are, predictably, resisting it.

Psyched out

But what about those genuinely dysfunctional executives who need a lot more than advice about making time to listen? Harvard's Berglas, who specializes in such difficult cases, says imploding executives are typified by the six A's: aloneness, arrogance, anger, adventure-seeking, adultery and addiction. (He's careful about that last one, because addiction it-

Shadow captain

Some personal coaches will tag along with an executive for a few days just to watch her—to see what she does and, more important, how she does it. The technique is called shadowing, and it can be quite revealing, says Ronald Fox, director of Human Resource Consultants in Chapel Hill, NC, and former president of the American Psychological Association.

Shadowing is especially useful, Fox says, when an executive is argumentative about something the coach is trying to discuss. If the coach can't convince a CEO, for example, that she puts her co-workers and employees on the defensive too often, the coach can refer to an incident they both experienced during a shadowing session. Otherwise, says Fox, you end up relying too much on what the executive herself reports, and that information is not coming from an objective source.

But do you really get to see executives, warts and all, when you shadow them? Not necessarily, warns personal coach Eileen R. Hannegan, president of Hannegan Consulting Circle in Coronado, CA. She shadowed one CEO for a while, only to find out by talking to employees that her client was pulling a Jekyll and Hyde. When she was around, the executive was so sweet to everyone that the employees were practically gagging. When she wasn't with him, he reverted to the persona whom people went out of their way to avoid.

Hannegan prefers to watch her clients in meetings, rather than following them around the office, because her presence is easier to forget when a number of people are seated together in a room. In this setting, she can find out how well an executive listens to others, how much control he has over the meeting, and how mature the group is. "They may be on their best behavior, but you can see what the foundation looks like," says Hannegan.

Diane Menendez, an executive coach in Cincinnati, OH, counters that while some of an executive's foibles may be hidden when you shadow him, a lot of telltale evidence still shines through. Since many of an exec's behavioral patterns are long established, they are usually easy to spot if a coach is looking for them.

Even a leader's body language can give him away. Menendez told one client she noticed he was having trouble with another person after watching them both in a meeting. He was surprised she could spot that, since he had no interaction at all with the person during the meeting. She explained that the body language of both participants suggested they weren't getting along.

"The gift to the leader is that he gets to see how transparent he is," Menendez says. That may not be the kind of gift for which a coach gets a lot of thank-you notes, but it could come in handy just the same. —B.F.

self—as opposed to addictive behavior—is a clinical diagnosis that should be handled by a licensed psychologist outside of work.) All of these are what Berglas calls subclinical symptoms, meaning they are “coachable” problems, but only if they aren’t associated with a more serious personality disorder.

Diane Menendez, an executive coach in Cincinnati who has had clients in the railroad industry, says a seriously derailed executive is very much like a derailed locomotive. Both can cost millions of dollars and make a big mess. With a derailed train, Menendez points out, industry experts find that it often makes the most sense just to dig a hole and bury it.

The alternative to burial for an exec whose train has jumped the tracks might well be some kind of therapy. As mentioned earlier, many executive coaches are, in fact, psychologists or experienced counselors. But to what degree should an executive coach take on the role of therapist? And even if it’s proper for a coach to act much like a therapist, does coaching an executive require not just therapeutic experience but also a solid background in business? These are bones of contention in coaching circles.

Berglas, who has been practicing variations of executive coaching for more than 30 years and writes about executive psychology for *Inc.* magazine, voices alarm about what he sees as an onslaught of therapists with no corporate experience who are jumping into the coaching game because of cost-cutting in the mental-health field. “There are a lot of people doing this who really don’t understand what business is about,” he says. “They’re kind of smarmy, and they have a sister-in-law who is head of HR at a corporation, and they worm their way in.”

Laying aside the question of smarminess, others agree that psychologists and counselors with little or no business experience can be ill-suited to the role of executive coach. “The corporate arena has to be respected,” Hannegan says. “My concern is that people from the helping professions—which I can talk about because that’s my roots—often have this attitude like, ‘Corporate America is really sick. It’s another dysfunctional family, and we’ve got to fix it.’ That’s not a respectful way to go in.”

Menendez, who spent years at AT&T, agrees that business experience should be



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a prerequisite for anyone who hangs out a shingle as a coach for high-level managers. Though she trains psychologists to become corporate coaches, she does not encourage them to work with top executives. “There’s too much at stake,” she says. “Anything you do with the leader can affect thousands of people.”

Fettke says the Professional and Personal Coaches Association is working on some standards for executive coaches. “There are therapists and psychologists who are just adding ‘coach’ to their business card, and they really aren’t coaches,” Fettke says. “They don’t have goal-setting tools, they don’t know how to do strategic

planning, and they keep the client in the process of their feelings, whereas coaching is truly about forwarding the action.”

Coach or couch?

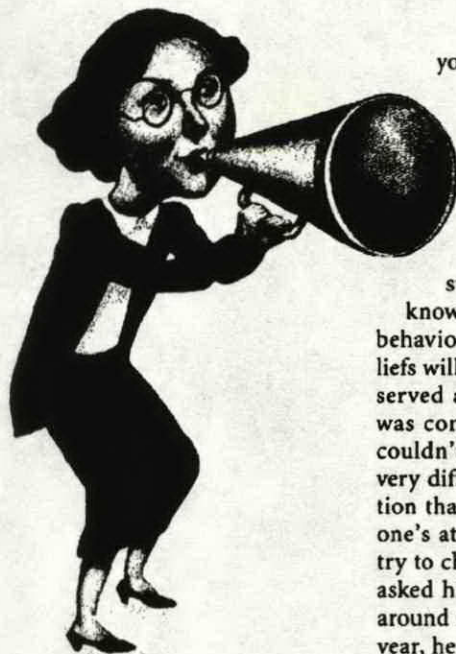
Fettke’s point about “processing” one’s feelings as opposed to getting on with running the business brings us to the heart of the controversy: How far should a “coach” try to dig into a client’s skull?

On this question there is a whole spectrum of opinion. Some say a coach should help executive clients only with business-related issues. Others point to the fact that our business and personal lives intertwine in many complex ways, and insist that the coach’s role is to help clients improve or balance their lives inside and outside the executive suite.

Berglas has no patience with the latter view. “That’s where they are unethically doing psychotherapy outside of an office,” he says. “That’s despicable.” As a coach, he insists, “you’re not there to turn their lives around; you’re there to make them function in a managerial or executive capacity more proficiently....If a person has a character disorder, coaching doesn’t work. The good coach is the one who says, ‘Excuse me, you need a shrink.’”

Others argue, however, that getting a floundering executive back on track is often a matter of dealing with the client’s life, not just the job. Fettke remembers one client who rated his career an eight on a scale of one to 10, but gave his health only a four. A little investigation showed the guy was getting only three hours of sleep a night. He was simply working too hard, and needed some help adjusting his priorities. Is that a “work” problem or a “life” problem? And either way, should we view a straightforward intervention as therapy or simply coaching?

Carol Gegner, president of Executive Coaching and Consulting Systems in Walnut Creek, CA, recently surveyed 48 executives about their experiences with personal coaches as part of her thesis for a master’s degree in organization development. She says there was almost unanimous agreement that having a coach helped in all aspects of life and enhanced both business and personal relationships. “It’s pretty hard to separate your organizational and your personal life” insofar as your characteristic



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behaviors are concerned, Gegner says. "If you're going to go on a tirade at work when something goes wrong, you're probably going to go on a tirade at home, too."

Coach U's Leonard agrees that a coach shouldn't cross the line into therapy, but he insists there's more to the role than straight skill-building. "I wouldn't even consider working with an executive unless I had some permission—not to go into his background or personal problems or dilemmas, but to work on something called his personal foundation," he says. That foundation consists of the client's boundaries, standards, integrity and character, Leonard explains. "You can't just push somebody harder to get better results and expect it to last very long. You've got to strengthen that person from the inside. When

you do that, then the person can lift a much heavier weight without you having to be there to push them every moment."

Some coaches prefer to take a sort of behaviorist end run around the whole issue. As many trainers have long known, if you can change a person's behavior, changes in attitudes and beliefs will sometimes follow. Norton once served as a coach to an engineer who was convinced that female engineers couldn't be depended on. "I think it's very difficult to go in with the assumption that you're going to change someone's attitude," she says. So she didn't try to change her client's mind, she just asked him to behave a little differently around his female co-workers. The next year, he and a female engineer won an award for a project they worked on together. "He was a changed man," Norton says. "There's no question his attitude changed. But he in no way intended to change his beliefs when we began."

Norton says she runs into the same thing when she coaches CEOs to adopt a more participative management style: "I've worked with lots of CEOs who've told me: 'I hate this. I hate doing this. It's uncomfortable for me. But you know what? It works.'"

Fixing the top dog

One of the dilemmas coaches run into—according to Norton, it happens about half the time—is when a CEO brings them in to tune up a misfiring executive, and the coach realizes that the CEO himself is either part or all of the problem.

Fox says he is initially dubious when the person he's supposed to coach blames the CEO for the difficulties—a common gambit among troublesome executives. If he suspects there's something to the claim, however, Fox questions other managers to see if they'll confirm it.

If the CEO is the problem, Fox says, the coach has three basic alternatives. Sometimes it's best to confront the CEO, although the CEO may deny it and tell the coach to stick to the original assignment. Sometimes, if the CEO is someone who responds well to data, Fox will suggest an attitudinal survey of the organi-

zation and hope the issues get revealed that way. The last, and most risky, solution is to organize the other executives and stage something like a chemical-dependency intervention. If you try this, Fox warns, you have to coach the group carefully to avoid accusing the CEO outright and to keep the discussion as neutral as possible. No matter how sensitive everyone is, of course, the CEO may just kick you all out of his office. "But if you've got a lot of people that he's dependent on, and everybody is saying that he's having a negative effect on them, then it's hard to fire the whole bunch," Fox says.

In some cases, a CEO brings in a coach to fix other executives only to see the wisdom of getting some coaching himself. One CEO was having trouble with two senior management underlings who were constantly fighting. "I didn't quite understand why," this CEO says, "but I did find that I was spending quite a bit of my own time helping mediate and resolve their arguments." He decided he could either fire both of them or find someone akin to a marriage counselor to get them back on track. Fortunately, he says, he found Norton. The results were so quick and positive—less tension throughout the staff and increased productivity—that he retained her to coach him, too.

Will executive coaching prove to be a passing fad or an established way to fine-tune the skills of an organization's leaders? It's too early in the game to tell. To the degree that personal coaching is a distinct discipline, the field still has some key issues to sort out: Is a coach a therapist or a business adviser or a bit of both? Should a coach seek long-term relationships with executives or organizations, such as Masco has with Kleiberger's company, or should the job be to come in, provide some help, and then back away? Bell favors the latter approach: "A good executive coach is forever working himself out of a job," he says.

At its best, says McCall, "Coaching can be a very powerful tool because it can be timed properly, it can be done over a long period of time, it can be individually tailored, and it can focus on healthy people, if you will, people who are doing well and want to improve their skills." ■