

## **FAST-TRACK COACHING IN A FAST-TRACK SITUATION**

**BY BOB VAVRINA**

At the turn of the last century (the 20<sup>th</sup> century that is, not the 19<sup>th</sup>), I began to do what every youthful, not-ready-to-retire senior executive does – I started planning my next step professionally. The goal: pass on my experience to the next generation of business leaders and spend more time in the woods of Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom.

I’ve still not found myself in Vermont often enough. But I have found professional inspiration – maybe even transformation – in the direction my post-corporate life has taken.

I entered the human resources field in the old days, when men held business meetings over martinis; when HR meant hiring, firing and administering employee benefits. That was the 60s. And in the years since, I’ve been fortunate enough to hold senior executive positions in many of the country’s great companies, from Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina to the Travelers Companies to KFC.

The greatest change I’ve seen along the way has been the insistence on value. In the best companies today, “value” in HR terms means regarding and treating employees and leaders as genuine assets to the corporation. But value cuts both ways.

- Top-performing organizations want to see their employees – especially their management – succeed, and they provide tools to enable that success. Among these are coaching, mentoring, counseling and other professional development processes.
- On the other hand, these organizations expect significant, demonstrable and relatively rapid returns when they invest in people; without those, other, less developmentally oriented processes may come into play.

The HR field – scrambling like Microsoft to release the next, best program – has added undeniable value. However, new programs are always fraught with bugs. This is as true in the coaching/mentoring field as it is in any other. My late-career preparation to become a Certified Master Coach, combined with 40 years as a business leader, has helped me see and better integrate the processes of mentoring, coaching and counseling as effective developmental tools.

## **THE BIGGEST BUG IS ALWAYS TIME**

As I studied to become a Certified Master Coach, I was stuck by the degree to which psychological therapy has served as a paradigm for business coaching. Both have the goal of

helping individuals to grow, but I believe the therapy paradigm has hindered the traditional coach's ability to deliver results quickly enough to support business demands. While therapy enables a client to gather insights according to a personal timetable, business coaching must balance the needs of the individual and the corporation. Invariably, that means keeping a sharp eye on the time-clock.

My approach, which I call Situational Coaching, takes a transformative approach to typical business coaching, counseling and mentoring processes. Here is what I have learned and how my approach departs in some ways from the ordinary:

- the client is both the person I am coaching AND the corporation
- the goals we set blend the individual's aspirations and the corporation's needs
- accountability will be measured in pre-established corporate terms
- the timeline will ultimately be set by the corporation, not the individual
- the individual, aware of the ticking clock, has neither the time nor the interest in waiting for personal insight alone to create progress
- as the coach – and unlike a therapist – I would be failing my clients if I did not provide direct advice, strong guidance and constructive criticism as necessary

Too often, business coaches adhere to the therapeutic model. Or they draw artificial boundaries around what they think they've been hired to do. They can become trapped in professional and academic distinctions among coaching, mentoring and counseling as they relate to the individual client. In these cases, they can lose precious time by failing to move among these processes as the situation demands.

More often than not in my profession, coaching, mentoring and counseling are regarded as distinct processes, with dos and don'ts for the coach, mentor or counselor to follow. Bound by these distinctions, the business coach may forget (or not realize) that the corporation is investing in results, not processes. In a sense, they lose sight of their accountability to the corporate client. As a consequence, they can wind up failing their individual client if his or her development does not move forward quickly enough to meet business demands.

## **SITUATIONAL COACHING SUITS THE BUSINESS SITUATION**

A driving principle in the coaching field is that OPTIMAL learning occurs when the individual client uncovers and resolves a career challenge by him- or herself. I've emphasized OPTIMAL here because, in my business experience, few of us have the luxury of achieving optimal results. That's why technology professionals release beta versions of their products.

The reality of the business situation is that cultural pressures, corporate issues, project schedules, sales cycles, time demands and a host of other factors need to be considered as a coach works

with an individual client. The coach who cannot bridge the expectations of both clients – individual and corporate – will not serve either of them well.

When I pitch camp in the Vermont woods, I remind myself not to let the perfect become the enemy of the good. When I think about my client work these days, I remind myself not to let the OPTIMAL become the enemy of the EXCELLENT.

I will take EXCELLENT any day, especially if I can see excellence develop quickly.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Bob Vavrina is a veteran business executive with 30 years of human resources and operations experience, including senior executive leadership positions. He is also an academically trained master coach, holding a Master of Arts Degree in Executive Coaching, with distinction, from Middlesex University in London.

Combining extensive business-world experience with advanced study, Bob is uniquely positioned to lead managers and executives through a tested and proven coaching process that uses a leader's strengths to significantly enhance personal and organizational performance.

Visit Bob's website at [www.vformationcoaching.net](http://www.vformationcoaching.net) to learn more about how Bob can help you and your company improve bottom-line performance through increased management excellence. Bob is an ELINVAR Alliance Partner.