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FOR WOMEN AND MEN

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Your profits are down, your home life sucks, no-one's returning your calls ... You need a life coach: someone to make your fortune, pick your partner and check that you're making your bed

Kick my butt

“When I started with Laura I didn't tell a soul!” Mary Jane Range, a partner at a New York-based executive search firm, is talking about the latest phenomenon in personal growth — employing a life coach to help you realise your personal and professional goals. “I didn't want people thinking I was off with some guru up a mountain,” she says. After a year as a junior partner, not increasing her business at all, Range was suffering. “I was literally starving on \$65,000 a year,” she says. “It was very, very hard and it was having a terrible effect on me personally, on my relationships, on all parts of my life. I was struggling and I didn't know how to make it any different.”

Then she came across New Jersey-based business coach Laura Berman Fortgang, who was giving a talk at a conference. Berman Fortgang has been coaching for four years; she charges \$400 a month and asks for an initial 90-day commitment — the

estimated length of time it takes to see dramatic results. Says Range, “I thought, ‘OK, that's a vacation. If it doesn't work, it doesn't work. I've got to do something.’” It worked. “In my first year with her I made \$300,000 on commissions,” she says. “And this year I will make \$500,000.”

As far as Range is concerned, she couldn't have done it on her own.

“First of all we did a long-term business plan, then we did short-term plans towards realising it. And Laura would say, ‘What are you going to do this week? You are going to make three business development calls!’ And the next week we'd talk about what happened with them, what didn't happen, and why people didn't call back. I even had to give her the script of the messages I'd left, so she could see how they sounded,” says Range. “She said *she* wouldn't have called me back either!”

Couldn't she have got that feedback from a friend? “Friends don't tell you the tough stuff. They're afraid of losing the friendship or they don't want to hurt your feelings,” says Range. “I pay Laura to tell me the tough stuff.”

Goal-setting every week, unending support, regular wrist-slapping, and constant reminders of where you want to be would also be an awful lot to ask of a friend. It's the role that used to be performed by the “wife” back in the 1950s — except that wives

didn't get paid for it. “Behind every great man is a great woman” the saying went, before women joined the workforce too.

Now, no-one is providing that support for anyone any more — at least not free — creating a niche that was just aching to be filled.

“I think people are tired of figuring things out for themselves, when for a paltry \$300 or so a month they can get the support in their lives that they deserve,” says Sandy Vilas, the owner of the on-line Coach University, which trains upwards of 500 new life coaches a year in listening, hand-holding and focusing skills, as well as a little bit of New Age theory, such as “the technology of attraction” — ie, developing the client so that she or he is able to attract what is needed or wanted as opposed to having to chase it or try too hard for it.

But the effectiveness of life coaching has a more down-to-earth explanation. Says Thomas Leonard, a former accountant and financial planner, and one of the founders of coaching and Coach University, ►

"It's a small voice saying, 'Are you really doing what you want to do? What have you done this week to accomplish your goal?' It keeps you on track." It's also far more inclusive — some might say intrusive — than most professional relationships. "A client has to be willing to bring an outsider into their life," says Leonard. Their whole life, that is.

Part mentor, therapist, business consultant, best friend and nagging mum, a life coach advises on strategies for dealing with not only your boss, but your parents, your siblings, your spouse. They want to know how well you're eating. If you're exercising. Whether you're flossing every day. If you're up-to-date with bills. If your bed is comfortable — even if your bed is made. It's not for everyone.

"If I wanted someone to quiz me about making my bed I'd go back and live with my mum," is a common objection. But the number of life coaches is doubling each year — there are currently around 1900 practising in the US and the idea is catching on in Australia. "By the year 2000," predicts Thomas Leonard, boldly, "it will be as common to have a coach as it now is to have a personal fitness trainer or therapist."

It costs around the same as therapy — between \$100 and \$200 an hour for weekly half-hour telephone consultations, unlimited e-mail access, brief calls and faxes. And, like therapy, it is one-to-one. However, the similarity ends there. "Coaches develop a personal partnership with their clients which is very different from the relationship they have with a therapist," says Leonard.

"I totally love her!" says screenwriter Phoebe Michaels of her coach, Madeleine Homan, who specialises in creative clients, and charges \$300 a month. "I look at Maddy as a wife, a partner, an unconditionally supportive spouse." Some coaches and clients even end up as friends.

And, unlike therapists, coaches aren't looking for the roots of certain behaviours. "A lot of people are trying to get from therapy what they can get from a coach and cannot get from therapy," says Homan. "I don't deal with psychological problems, I deal with blocks. I deal with attitudes and assumptions."

"A coach does for your professional future what a shrink does for your emotional past," says Michaels. "But it spills

over from your profession to your heart, your soul and your emotional life." In fact, its practitioners hold, it is the all-encompassing nature of coaching that makes it so effective.

Says Laura Berman Fortgang, "Some people have asked me, 'What does some of this stuff have to do with my business life?' I say, 'Everything.' If you're distracted by a personal item you haven't taken care of, it is somewhere affecting how you do business."

But it's in the area of earnings and career that people first look to make changes. When Phoebe Michaels went to Homan 18 months ago, what she initially wanted was encouragement for her screenwriting. "When I realised I wasn't going to get that kind of support from my partner, I thought, 'OK, I'll buy it!'" she says. "I thought once I was successful he'd rally round, but until then I needed some help."

In the event, she kept her coach and dumped the boyfriend. "It changed my life completely," she says. "I'd been living in New York, I was in a bad relationship, I was a sugar addict, I was a carnivore and I wasn't exercising. Now I'm practically macrobiotic, I live in California, I exercise like crazy and I'm off sugar and dairy completely." She also got her screenplay optioned by a Hollywood production company, doubled her income as a product namer (to \$75,000 a year), is now working on her second screenplay, and is launching another business, devising titles for scripts.

As Berman Fortgang puts it, life coaches "kick butt". At one point, Homan restricted Michaels to just two social engagements a week. "Other than that, I had to be working," she says.

When asked to, Homan will dish out advice on everything from "whether I should join this club for my professional life" to "whether I should dump this guy or keep him," says Michaels.

"It's what I'm brilliant at," says Homan who, as well as being a coach, runs a business that refers people to other coaches in her "practice". "I have just the right combination of the romantic and the realistic to pull overly gifted, highly creative people together and get them focused."

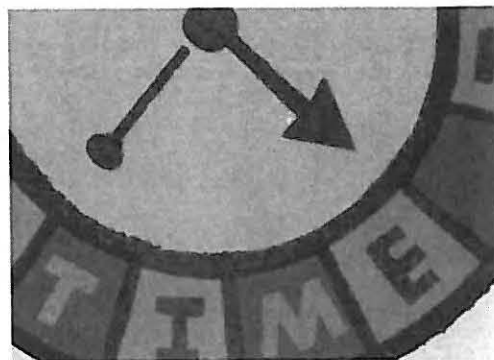
Another of her clients, Ralph Mitchell, an Australian producer-director

living in New York, puts it more succinctly: "Madeleine helped me to focus my energy from being a torchlight to being more like a laser beam." He adds: "Someone once asked me why I needed a coach, and I said, 'Can you imagine the New York Knicks playing without a coach? You need someone to be an outsider, like a director in a play. The actors can't do that.'"

However, given the importance of the decisions they help you make, finding the right life coach is probably even more important than having one at all.

Make sure they have a coach of their own, advises Berman Fortgang. "Any coach who doesn't is not worth their salt. You're asking a lot of your clients. But who is watching that *you* are doing your best?"

Sydney-based Toney Fitzgerald, with whom I communicated by e-mail, doesn't yet have a life coach of his own, although he plans to do so. He got the



idea for coaching from a news program he saw about Coach U. "I've been coaching for about four years, but only really using the identity of life coach in the past 10 months," says the fan of Anthony Robbins, Deepak Chopra and Les Brown. His EST-like positivity is a little over-the-top for my taste ("Now, about coaching, where do we start?" he writes. "OK. Let's goooooooooooooo!"). However, he coaches several clients in Australia and insists that he doesn't have any failure stories. "I once read, and I quote, 'When I pick up the newspaper I always go to the back pages to read about man's achievements, not the front pages of man's failure,'" he says.

Finding a good match for your personality is imperative. "You can usually tell right off the bat if you're going to get along with someone," says Berman Fortgang. If a coach who has been through the training thinks a potential

client is not compatible, he or she will recommend another. "Anything you put up with in life weakens your ability to achieve," she says. "Even if it's a leaky tap. If, every time you notice it, you say, 'That thing is driving me crazy,' you've just exerted energy on something that could have gone to something more positive."

Thomas Leonard agrees. "You'll find that coaches aren't so hungry that they'll take clients who don't fit." It's not altruism so much as "if you have clients that aren't a fit for you, it drags you down with your other clients."

And honesty is vital. "If someone wanted to sing and they sent me a demo which showed they couldn't sing at all, I would tell them it wasn't going to fly," says Homan. Thankfully, she hasn't had to do this so far. "Frankly, most people who have strong dreams aren't that out of whack." Besides, it's not the job of a coach to cap their clients' dreams.

"I used to work from 7am to 10pm, but Laura helped me go home early at least twice a week, and to take days off"

"Our job is to tell the truth," says Berman Fortgang. "But I always believe that if someone wants to do something they can do it. I have a friend who is practically tone deaf but she really wanted to be a singer, so I told her to have lessons. She still has trouble with tone but she can now play guitar and she's written songs and has had meetings with some publishers who love her lyrics and want to match her up with someone to write for. So I don't believe in saying no to people when it's something they feel passionate about, but I will help them get things in perspective."

Ralph Mitchell wasn't a bad actor, but about two months into being coached by Homan, he realised that he didn't want to do it any more. "Madeleine asked a lot of questions like, 'If you could do what you really wanted, what would that be?' and, 'If you had enough money to do what you wanted,

what would you do?' and, 'If you were going to die in two years, what would you do?' Questions that made me think." Once he had decided that what he really wanted to do was produce and direct, Homan helped him come up with a plan to do it. "She asked who I wanted to work for, who I needed to call, what were my options, who did I admire, what was their number and what was I going to do that day to further my goal. She helps you put the doorknob on, so you can open the door and go through," he says. "I'd have probably figured it out in the end, but she just saved me so much time."

Saving time is an important factor for coachees in other ways, too. René Ross, a branch marketing manager, was working 12 hours a day, six days a week when she enlisted Berman Fortgang's help to create more time for personal life. She quickly realised that her job would never allow her the free time she

wanted, so she changed jobs. "Laura helped me do my résumé and cover letter and helped me prepare for the interview with test questions." Now she earns the same money for fewer hours. "I finally have time to do all the things I love — be with my husband and family, exercise, enjoy life."

Roy Assad, already a top insurance agent, also needed to make time for his personal life when he first went to see Berman Fortgang. "It's a strange feeling at first, having someone you're responsible to when you're the CEO," he says. But it worked. Not only did she help him find more room for his home life, he actually increased sales figures.

"She'd give me things to do in between calls and then fax me two pages of stuff asking where I was that day on those issues. She taught me how

to get off the phone without being rude, and I learned a lot about delegating," says Assad. "I used to work from 7am to 10pm, but Laura helped me go home early at least twice a week, and to take days off," he says. "Now that I'm no longer under stress I'm free to pay attention to my relationship, which is very important to me."

However, in spite of the convenience of telephone sessions ("You just close the door, tell your assistant to take messages and after half an hour it's done"), Assad found that he was slightly uncomfortable with being coached over the phone. "So I split my two hours a month into one hour in person and two half-hour sessions on the phone," he says. He prefers his occasional in-person sessions.

However, Laura Berman Fortgang prefers to work on the phone. "I'm a better coach on the phone. Because I am not distracted by any visual cues, I can be focused on the client 100 per cent," she says.

Thomas Leonard agrees. "When I first started consulting on the phone [because a client moved to a different state] I assumed I wouldn't be able to do as good a job." Now, he believes, he actually does a better job that way. "People worry that it won't be intimate if it isn't in person. In fact, people are far more forthcoming on the phone or in e-mail."

"It just gives me a tickle to see people reaching for more than they would on their own," says Laura Berman Fortgang, in answer to the question of what she loves most about her work. "If someone is 100 per cent devoted to your success, how can you not do great?" she asks. It's the kind of constant support one couldn't get from most friends — even if they had the time — as Range attests. "As my business started to grow, some of the people in my life got a little..." she pauses, searching for the right word, "funny."

As Madeleine Homan puts it: "The coach has only your interests at heart, whereas friends' agendas are much more layered and complicated. They sometimes don't want you to be successful." It's a pretty sad indictment of relationships in the so-called "caring" 90s. "Yes, it's awful," she agrees, before adding pragmatically: "But it's life."

Life, that is, without a coach. ■