

COACHING THE NEXT GENERATION

By Dennis Heath



Before long, baby-boomers now in senior corporate positions will retire. Whether they leave a vacuum starts with coaching a new generation of leaders now.

I have written in the Straits Times before on the subject of coaching, and separately on the issues surrounding the aging workforce, the so-called 'baby-boomer' phenomenon. There is a connection between these two topics. As those of us born between 1946 and 1964 (the baby-boomers) depart from full time employment there is a need to develop high quality, experienced business coaches in Singapore. So where is the link?

The Thomson Corporation recently conducted a survey of 220 human resource professionals in America to gauge the uptake of coaching as an effective means of executive development. Seeing a growing need to prepare and retain future corporate leaders, a large percentage of those polled said they had already implemented executive coaching programs in their organizations.

On further investigation it seems that many of these organizations are employing coaches to minimize the effects of the predicted, mass baby-boomer exodus in the coming years. Projecting their business requirements into the future these organizations saw an urgent need to prepare the next generation of executives to step into vacated senior leadership roles. The survey found that 66 percent of those polled have implemented executive coaching programs in the last two to three years for the purpose of "high potential grooming" and "performance enhancement."

The study also found that the biggest challenge for companies in implementing executive coaching programs is the lack of time to focus on anything but managing current business demands. Some of those

polled cited lack of time and budget as reasons for delaying leadership development strategies in their companies. This shortsightedness will ultimately hit business results as experience, knowledge and maturity gradually drain from an organisation's collective know-how.

Clearly succession planning and development of senior leaders must be priorities for organizations, as large numbers of mature managers exit the workforce. Until recently, it seems companies have lacked the impetus to implement comprehensive executive coaching initiatives. However, the steady improvement of the economy and a demographic shift in the workforce is now compelling corporations to fill leadership gaps with younger workers, who lack the right skills and behaviours necessary to take their companies to the next level. Without support and guidance many of these up and coming young executives will stumble and the effects will be seen in declining corporate results.

Having decided on coaching as a solution, choosing the right coach can be challenging? Here is a checklist of some of the most important attributes to look for:

- **Front line business experience** – For an executive coach to provide the appropriate guidance, he/she should have worked in the corporate world in a senior level capacity.
- **Interpersonal skills** – The coach must be adept at handling many complex interpersonal dynamics, at sizing up a situation quickly and dealing with diverse personalities and cultural backgrounds. A sense of humour can also help to diffuse occasional tense situations when used sensitively.
- **Integrity** – Executive coaching often involves discussing sensitive issues and high-level, strategic, confidential information. Honesty and a commitment not to betray a confidence are essential.

- **Political savvy** – Executives must be able to navigate the political waters of their organization. A competent coach needs to be aware and have the capacity to help him/her in these situations.
- **Flexibility and creativity** – The ability to discard ideas when they seem ineffective and assist the client in coming up with new ones quickly is an important coaching skill. At the same time, the coach should be comfortable with fast change and lots of uncertainty.
- **Organizational insight** – The goal of executive coaching is to strengthen a person's performance as it relates to corporate objectives. That requires an understanding of both the executive and company's needs and how to make them work together to achieve clearly defined goals.
- **Training** – A business coach should possess certification from a recognized coach training organization. Coaching is a profession that calls for a variety of skills that need to be learned and practiced.
- **Personal rapport** – Last but not least, the coach must have good rapport with the coachee. They will spend a lot of time together, probably over a six-month period. They must be at ease with each other and be able to share hopes, fears, goals and aspirations openly and with complete trust.

There's no doubt that the enthusiasm and high aspirations of the next generation of young managers will be an asset to organizations who can attract top talent. However, when baby-boomer mentors leave organizations and take their wisdom and experience with them, many of these youngsters will feel unprepared to take on the full weight of a senior management position. But with guidance from a more mature and experienced mind, they can be transformed into the leaders that Singapore needs in order to stay ahead in a competitive world.