

THE NEW THERAPY?

By CHRISTOPHER TENNANT



Life coach Tom Rauhen and his students.
- Brigitte Stelzer

October 27, 2002 -- Last month, at a major glossy magazine based in Manhattan, resentment was festering in the art department. It was directed at one employee who many felt was slacking. "He was functioning, but just barely," says a fellow employee (who asked not to be named). "It was the type of situation where normally you would have kicked him the hell out," she says.

Instead, Human Resources devised an alternative: they brought in a corporate coach.

"The coach talked to everyone in the group about our respective roles in the office, trying to figure out how our relationships were affecting the situation," says the magazine staffer.

Tensions dissipated and the employee kept his job.

"Before this, if someone had suggested coaching as a way to solve a problem like that," she says, "I'd have said they were crazy."

Though Manhattan has long been considered the psychiatry capital of the world, many residents are now shunning their shrinks and turning to "life coaches" - a new breed of "personal growth professionals" who buck traditional methods of therapy by favoring short-term treatment over long-term and focusing on a client's future, rather than their past.

"There's much less of a stigma to life coaching than saying that you're going into psychotherapy," says Elaine Resnick, a Manhattan-based clinical social worker. "But it's not a licensed profession, so the public is not protected."

Though coaching has been around since the mid-1980s, it boomed during the early-'90s dot com explosion, when scores of young, inexperienced entrepreneurs were thrust into leadership roles they were unprepared for.

Self-styled executive coaches swooped in. Modeled on such '90s self-help personalities as late-night infomercial star Tony Robbins ("Awaken the Giant Within,") and stern pop-psychology radio host Dr. Laura (who became controversial for passing moral judgements on her callers), these coaches billed themselves as inspirational figures who could help their clients attain any goal quickly.

Then, in 1998, Oprah Winfrey introduced America to her personal "life coach" - Dr. Phil McGraw. The middle-aged Texan (who is licensed as a therapist) became a regular on the show, solving guests' long-standing personal problems in 55 minutes or less. He now hosts his own highly-rated daytime TV talk show.

"Coaching is very present-oriented and geared toward action, not talk," says Bonnie Mincu, a Manhattan-based coach who works with high-level corporate executives.

"We work with them on their behavior," says Mincu of her clients. "If they have a certain pattern of

thinking that's causing them harm, we try to help them figure out how to change it. We're not really trying to go into the deep-seated reasons for why they have that thought pattern. If they just want to talk, they should go see a therapist."

Unlike therapists - who must be licensed by the state to treat people - almost anyone can become a life coach.

Many get their "training" from one of a dozen or so online coaching schools. The International Coaches Federation (ICFNYC.org) is a trade group that accepts all comers, in addition to accrediting schools and certifying coaches (though only 10 percent of U.S. coaches are ICF certified). Coach University (www.coachu.com) charges \$4,295 for a two-year correspondence course and has more than 3,500 students in 36 countries.

"If someone is a life coach, and doesn't have therapeutic credentials, would they know how to recognize clinical depression?" asks social worker Resnick. "You would assume life coaches would respect the same boundaries as therapists. But there's no legal back-up if they don't."

"There are so many different presidents of so many different coaching federations, it's like Don King and boxing," says clinical psychologist Steven Berglas, who also works as an executive coach yet is skeptical of most in the field. "These coaching schools credential people according to their own criteria. Why would you let someone without credentials work on the mind of your chief executive?"

And more and more New York-based corporations are calling coaches for help. "I'd be surprised to hear of a Fortune 500 company today that doesn't use some form of executive coaching," says Ken Kesslin.

A clinically trained psychotherapist with a masters in social work, Kesslin (who is also a hypnotherapist) has coached executives at firms like Citigroup, Merrill Lynch, Pfizer and Solomon Smith Barney. His company's slogan: "Putting the Soul Back in Business."

"Coaching is really just an advance in communication," Kesslin says. "We're living in a much more virtual world, with a lot less people contact. We're busier than we've ever been before, and not necessarily to our benefit. Those two factors alone really leave the door open to an epidemic of poor communication."

Patricia, a 60-year-old Manhattan broker with Insignia Douglas-Elliman, hired a life coach last fall. "I was just starting a new career in real estate and thought it might be a good thing," she says.

Together with her coach, Rose Rubin, she defined three goals for herself: "One was to get a million-dollar real estate buyer," she says. "The other was to meet the man of my life. And third was to take a two-week trip outside the United States."

For the past three years, Rubin has been coaching clients all over the country via telephone from her home in the Catskills. She heard about coaching through a friend at the Australian-based Results Life Coaching. "I thought 'This is great! I can do it from anywhere and get paid for it,'" Rubin says. (When asked for other client testimonials, Rubin directed The Post to Cecilia Bergstein, another life coach at Results Life Coaching whose focus, according to her web link, is "What Is Good About People.") By the end of the three-month session, Patricia still had not met her goals - though she says she made progress.

"I didn't get the million-dollar buyer, but I did become more confident in myself."

Jana Platina-Phipps, 34, has been working with a life coach for the past six months. A home furnishings designer at Gelberg Braid in Manhattan, Phipps says she interviewed several coaches before hiring Robert Bailey, a business coach she met through a class at NYU.

"He's taught me that if you have a strong vision, you will never be overwhelmed," she says. Phipps speaks with Bailey by telephone each week. "Actually verbalizing what you want helps make things real. I'm also paying \$125 an hour, and don't want to waste my money."

For her part, therapist Resnick says she's as astounded by the costs as she is the many loosely-credentialed coaches around: "Life coaches," she says, "charge fees I wouldn't even *dream* of mentioning."

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