

Postgrad growth area:

Executive coaching



Dr. Benjamin Dattner, an executive coach and business consultant, suggests that psychology students volunteer to provide workshops in MBA programs—giving them experience with and contacts in the business world.

BY SADIE F. DINGFELDER *gradPSYCH* staff

Worldwide, companies spend about \$1 billion each year on executive coaches—people who work one-on-one with managers to help them better perform their jobs. Psychologists with expertise in both behavior change and business culture are uniquely qualified to fill this niche, says University of Minnesota psychology professor Joyce Bono, PhD, who studies the executive coaching industry.

“Coaching...links industrial-organizational skills with counseling skills,” she notes.

Those who can bring these skills together provide a valuable service to organizations, which hire coaches to make good managers even better—by improving their interpersonal skills, for example. Or, more challengingly, companies may ask coaches to pull promising but troubled executives back from the brink of dismissal, she notes.

WHY IT'S HOT:

Coaching is a growing industry: A 2002 survey of human resource professionals by the Hay Group, a human resource consulting firm, found that nearly half had begun using executive coaches in the previous 18 months. The demand may come from the fact that coaches can increase the productivity of entire organizations, says Richard Kilburg, PhD, senior director of the Office of

What are the growth areas in psychology?

gradPSYCH takes a look in this fourth article of an occasional series on areas where opportunities abound.

Human Services at Johns Hopkins University and author of two APA books on executive coaching (see box).

“Because you are working with senior leaders in organizations, the changes an individual is making as a result of their own professional growth and development begin to have a significant impact on an organization that has thousands or even tens of thousands of employees,” he notes.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Executive coaches help their clients become better leaders through a variety of activities. Often, a coaching engagement begins with assessments, says Benjamin Dattner, PhD, an executive coach and organizational psychologist based in New York. A coach, for instance, may seek to find out how other employees view their client’s communication abilities and organizational skills, he notes. Dattner also may ask managers to take personality tests to gain insight into their strengths and weaknesses.

Then, about once a week, coaches will meet with their clients and discuss the challenges they face at work. Most commonly, these fall within the interpersonal realm, according to research by Bono presented at the 2005 Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology Conference. Communication skills top the list of things coaches help managers develop, Bono found. Coaches do this by, for example, role-playing difficult conversations or encouraging clients to challenge negative assumptions about their employees.

Executive coaches can also help managers choose how to make major changes in their organizations or set long-term goals for their own careers, says Kilburg.

“Coaching in general is about helping people look ahead to where they want to be and helping them walk that path,” says Debra Robinson, PhD, past-president of APA Div. 13 (Society of Consulting Psychology) and vice chancellor for student affairs at the University of Missouri–Rolla.

EARNINGS OUTLOOK:

Executive coaches earn \$200 an hour on average, according to a survey of 480 coaches by Bono and her colleagues. However, only 5 percent of psychologists in the survey received all of their income from coaching.

Resources for would-be coaches

Opportunities abound for graduate students interested in learning more about executive coaching. Here are a few resources to get you started:

- **Distance learning.** APA Div. 13 (Society of Consulting Psychology) offers over-the-phone seminars on a variety of topics, including how to get your coaching business started and how to use cognitive-behavioral theory in executive coaching. Visit www.apa.org/divisions/div13/DistanceLearning/CurrentBrochure.pdf for more information.

- **Training guidelines.** Divs. 13 and 14 (Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology) recently developed guidelines for training in their respective disciplines. They can serve as a resource for students who want to know what skills psychologists use when they work as executive coaches, says Div. 13 Past-president Debra Robinson, PhD. Div. 13’s guidelines are at www.apa.org/divisions/div13/InsideIndex.htm and Div. 14’s are at www.siop.org/PhDGuidelines98.html.

- **Coaching federations.** Many coaches come from business, not psychology backgrounds. Organizations such as the International Coaching Federation (www.coachfederation.org) offer training and certification for coaches of all stripes.

- **Further reading.** A new book by Richard Kilburg, PhD, “Executive Wisdom: Coaching and the Emergence of Virtuous Leaders” (APA, 2006), explores how executive coaches can tap into their clients’ different learning styles and help them become wiser leaders. Visit www.apa.org/books/4316075.html for more information. Kilburg also authored “Executive Coaching: Developing Managerial Wisdom in a World of Chaos” (APA, 2000).

—S. DINGFELDER

Psychologists with an industrial and organizational background tend to provide other consulting services to companies, including personnel selection and job performance assessment, and those from a counseling background often have nonbusiness clients as well as business ones, they found.

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HOW TO GET THERE:

Anyone can hang out a shingle and call themselves a coach, but being a competent coach takes specific training and expertise, according to Vicki Vandaveer, PhD, an

executive coach with a consulting practice in Houston and fellow of APA Div. 14 (Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology). Graduate programs in consulting psychology as well as those that provide grounding in such areas as counseling, organizational theory, social psychology and psychometrics are also a good start, she says.

However, "It's probably fair to say that most people having completed their graduate work in psychology need further training—to acquire the knowledge and skills not covered in their graduate program—and significant experience for credibility with senior execs," she says.

Students can begin to gain such experience by heading over to their university's business school and volunteering to help out with workshops for MBA students, says Dattner. Common topics include tests of personal management style and "360-degree assessment," a series

of interviews or questionnaires that allow managers to get an understanding of how they are viewed by those who work above and below them.

"You can make connections with future CEOs while getting training and exposure to business needs," Dattner says.

While required courses often give psychology students grounding in behavior change, students also need exposure to the demands of leadership, says Kilburg. To gain this, he encourages students to run for office in a professional organization or serve on the board of directors of a nonprofit.

"Try to understand what it is like to get a group of human beings to do some productive work together," says Kilburg. "When you begin to understand what your clients are going through you are much better prepared to help them."

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PROS AND CONS:

In addition to helping people advance in their careers, coaches can learn about the inner workings of a variety of industries. Kilburg, for instance, has worked with managers at professional sports franchises, universities and biotech companies, to name a few.

Often, working with these executives is exhilarating and rewarding, he says.

"The majority of people who make it to the top of organizations have a lot on the ball," says Kilburg. "They are bright, able, savvy, have good senses of humor and are motivated to change."

But this isn't always the case. Some organizations bring in coaches as a disciplinary measure—a wrist-slap for managers who aren't being nice enough to their employees, says Dattner. Those assignments can be frustrating because the client may not be willing to change, he notes. Even among motivated clients the stakes are high, notes Kilburg.

"These are high-visibility assignments—if you fail out, if the person you are coaching gets fired, it can be very public and anxiety-arousing."

But, these assignments can also be the most satisfying, Kilburg notes.

"It ain't easy," he says, "But it can be a great time to help a person turn it around." 🐦