

Roots of Executive Coaching

By Dan Kennedy, PCC

Although executive coaching has been going on for over 30 years, coaching only began to crystallize as a real and unique approach in the late 1970s. A key player in the creation of non-sports coaching as a discipline, ironically, was a tennis coach.

In 1975, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, written by a former tennis champion and coach named Timothy Gallwey, showed the world a radical approach to helping people learn. Instead of barking orders or even making suggestions, like most coaches of his day, Gallwey based his method on the belief in the innate ability of people's bodies to learn and to perform. He allowed his students to learn through their own experiences on the court.

He saw the coach's role as one of asking powerful questions that would help players to increase their awareness of how they played, and to adjust accordingly. Gallwey believed that the game of tennis, like the game of life, was one of expressing our potential and being the source of our own answers.

Many of those who came to learn the Inner Game were business people. They soon saw that this new message they were hearing on the court could be applied in their boardrooms, as well. It was obvious that this coaching style could help manager/leaders assist their people to take better control of their jobs and careers, and to get results that were rare in the command-and-control management culture of the day.

In time, Inner Game coaches found themselves literally going to work across America to spread the word. Meanwhile, a student of Gallwey's named John Whitmore was bringing the Inner Game to Europe. At the same time, well known sports coaches were being hired to speak to employees in many American companies, further helping to blend the concepts of coaching, management, and leadership.

By the start of the 1990's other pioneers were taking steps to bring coaching to new levels of acceptance and professionalism. Some of those contributors included Thomas Leonard, a former financial planner who founded the coach training company, Coach U. Around

the same time, a colleague of Leonard's and a former CPA and auditor, Laura Whitworth, along with Henry Kimsey-House, a career development professional, began The Coaches Training Institute. Today, over 30 schools are devoted to training people to become professional coaches, some with an emphasis on executive coaching.

In 1998 the Professional & Personal Coaches Association (PPCA) and The International Coach Federation (ICF) joined together to create the primary body representing and supporting professional coaches today. (The ICF name remains.) Soon thereafter the ICF took the next step in professional development by starting to offer certification to coaches who qualify.

Since then the ICF has created a definition for professional coaching and has begun educating the public about how it compares with other key services like therapy and consulting. Last year a blue ribbon panel of executive coaches, sponsored by the ICF, came together to define executive coaching as a distinct form of coaching. One of the things the group did was emphasize that executive coaching is devoted to serving important contributors who hold powerful positions in their organizations.

Today, companies are beginning to routinely hire executive coaches (or train their own) to assist managers with everything from professional and leadership development to personal growth. Some savvy organizations are even using coaching as a perk to attract and retain key players. And in a time when top people are hopping from job to job, many execs are hiring their own personal coaches to bring along for the ride. If it hasn't been clear for all these years, it certainly is now: Executive coaching is here to stay. 

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