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## The Right Way to Get Coached

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Having spent many years working as a headhunter, nowadays I am often retained by companies not to fill jobs, but to provide advice. They hire me to be their coach.

Sometimes a company needs a headhunter's perspective to develop more effective hiring strategies and practices. Other clients want me to train their internal recruiters to work more like headhunters. I also teach managers how to select and interview candidates more effectively. I particularly enjoy coaching employees who are being groomed for better jobs within their own companies.

### **We all coach...**

Because I charge for my advice, I'm a professional coach. But you are a coach, too, whether you get paid to be one or not. When the guy down the hall asks your opinion on a project he's working on, you're coaching him. When a friend calls and asks how she might get a job in your field, you're being a coach when you guide her.

At one time or another, we all act as coaches, and in that capacity we each make a contribution to our professional community. By sharing our experiences and our knowledge, we help others make their own contribution. As coaches, we also change our professional community, because by coaching we propagate our own ideas and agendas through that community.

Whether you are coaching or being coached you are participating in the transfer of "insider knowledge" that makes your profession go 'round.

### **...And we all need coaching**

Much has been written about how to coach (or mentor) other people. What I'd like to focus on in this article is how you can benefit the most from being coached. Obviously, having a good coach is critical. But benefiting from your coach's advice requires that you know how to let yourself be coached.

During many years working as a headhunter, I've learned that most people don't take coaching very readily, even when they come to

you and ask for it. Because I earn my living by coaching others, I've developed a very simple way to get those I coach to listen, pay attention and benefit from what I teach them: I charge them a lot of money. I can tell you with great confidence that, when they're paying me, the people I coach listen intently.

Like you, I also coach people just for the sake of helping them: I don't always charge for my advice. I really believe that "what goes around, comes around," and I devote a certain amount of my time to contributing my help to those in my community.

I'd like to share with you my ideas about how to benefit from being coached. Perhaps my comments will help you get more out of your relationships with your own mentors, or maybe this will make you a more demanding mentor. Either way, I hope these tips help you make "insider knowledge" more useful to all of us.

## **The importance of being coach-able**

In almost every column I write, I somehow slip in the message that good jobs come from a person's contact with other human beings — not from classified ads, job postings, resumes or application forms. All those pieces of paper are easy to acquire, produce and distribute. Good coaches, however, are dear and not so easy to find.

Don't get confused by what I mean when I use the term "coach". A coach can be someone who meets with you regularly and serves as a long-term mentor. But a coach can also be someone you talk to just once who provides good advice or helps you make other contacts that will further your career.

What continues to astound me is that some of the smartest people I've met have no idea how to cultivate useful contacts and relationships with people who can coach them. They just don't know how to be coached.

In particular, most job hunters are so consumed by their goal -- getting a new job -- that they're frantically trying to harvest results while someone who is trying to coach them is carefully trying to plant seeds. A common mistake job hunters make is to call and ask for job leads rather than for advice. It's a very rare conversation where the person you're talking to actually has a job for you. If the person can help you, usually it's because he or she can offer advice or other contacts that might help you on your way. To get this help, you must stop talking and listen, ask the right questions, and indicate that you understand what to do next.

## **Pay your coach with attention**

Too often, a person wastes time trying to impress his coach, but that's not an effective way to stimulate good advice.

- The best way to repay your coach is with *attention*. Learn to listen more and talk less. That's how you harvest beneficial results.
- Don't ask for a solution to your problem. Ask for insight and advice. Your coach is there to *guide* you, not to solve your problem.
- Let your coach see that something is growing out of the seeds he's planting. If you don't give your coach a bit of feedback now and then, he has no idea whether he's being helpful, and he certainly gets no satisfaction for trying.

When your coach isn't charging you a fee, his compensation is the satisfaction of knowing that his advice will be nourished and that something wonderful will grow out of his efforts. When you're able to use what you're given, a satisfied coach is likely to offer you even more help when you need it. An abused coach, however, probably won't talk to you again. He certainly won't refer you to any of his contacts.

## **Don't seeks results; seek direction**

Not long after I completed a project at AT&T to help a group of managers find new jobs after they were downsized, one of those managers asked if I would — as a favor — please talk with an old friend who was left behind and who needed help. "He'll probably get axed soon, and his department will never hire you to help him. They don't have the budget. Pete just needs to be nudged in the right direction, and I know talking with you for a few minutes will help." I agreed to try and help. The next day Pete called me.

"I need to get some interviews scheduled immediately. Let me tell you about myself," Pete started. *Launched* was more like it. I couldn't get a word in edgewise. I don't think he ever paused between sentences. Ordinarily I cut people right off when they begin to recite their employment history. But Pete was amazing; there were no pauses at all. I clocked him. He went on for thirteen minutes, never stopping to confirm that I was even still there.

Pete was clearly one very talented, experienced guy. But Pete was also a dunderhead. He was suffering from what I refer to in my book as *interview-itis*. Instead of trying to get advice and to make new contacts, he treated the phone call as a one-sided and totally inappropriate pitch to get his next job interview. He wanted results now.

Like most job hunters, he was operating at a feverish pitch, trying to impress me with his credentials. Pete had no idea what I needed to know to help him, and he didn't bother to ask. Rather than probe to see where I might lead him, he was busy telling me where he wanted to go. In our half-hour long conversation (if you could call it that) it never dawned on him that he should shut up and listen.

When you seek help, make an extra effort to respect your coach's time and to let him guide the discussion. It's unlikely your coach will be able to solve your problem. More likely, he will be able to lead you closer to the solution you need. So, give him a bit of information about your situation, and let him point you in the best direction he can.

## **Help your coach help you**

If you're going to seek help, there are a few simple rules you should follow that may enable your coach to do wonderful things for you.

### **Follow instructions.**

Most people have one or more relationships with people of authority. We can use these relationships judiciously to help others. I don't share such contacts easily, because the people who call my contacts reflect back on me. I only refer people who will make me look good, otherwise I lose credibility with my contacts. I think most people operate this way. That's what makes good contacts so valuable: they're not easy to come by.

However, the value of good contacts is lost on many people. They figure, "You've given me a name, maybe I'll call that person, maybe I won't." What they should be doing is picking up the phone *now*. This shows respect for the person who made the introduction and it shows you recognize that the information you've been given is valuable. When I refer someone to one of my contacts, I let the contact know the call is coming. When the call isn't made, I've used up a favor that no one benefited from. Think I'll do that again for the same person?

Don't go to a coach just to flap your lips. Go to a coach to learn what you should do next, how you should do it, and who else might help you. Seek instructions, then follow them. Or, don't expect that coach to ever help you again.

### **Stop talking, stop selling.**

There's nothing difficult about cultivating and using good contacts wisely. The most important rule to follow is this: most of the contacts you make are not in a position to hire you, so don't launch into a job interview when you get their attention. Don't try to "sell them". You'll turn them right off.

While Pete was busy talking about himself, he was preventing me from telling him about all the people I know who might be able to help him. When he got me on the phone, the best thing Pete could have done was give me his name and the name of the person who referred him. Then he should have briefly explained why that intermediary thought the two of us should talk. That in itself would have told me most of what I needed to know. Finally, he should have said, "I'd appreciate any advice you can give me." Then he should have shut up and listened.

If Pete was learning something from our conversation, he could have learned as much by talking into a tin can, because all he was listening to was his own echo.

When a coach is new to you, it's important to quickly establish that you're there to listen, not to hold forth. If you're making a sales pitch, you will quickly lose the coach. He'll figure you need a soapbox more than you need advice.

### **Let your coach lead.**

Pete's call to me was not a request for help; it was a challenge. All he wanted to know was whether I could impress him with names and phone numbers of people who would interview him. Since I didn't know Pete, I wasn't about to mindlessly follow his lead.

This is why so-called "networking" usually doesn't pay off. Most networking meetings and business card exchanges are nothing more than information gang-bangs. Participants act selfishly and anonymously. Pete's call was along the same lines. Well-connected people share information and contacts only with others they know and trust. Entering that circle is a privilege. You get in by letting your coach lead you.

Pete knew what he wanted to hear, but he wasn't listening for any new information I might provide. In an effort to help him relax and to gauge his character before I divulged the names and phone numbers he needed, I tried to share some success stories about people I'd worked with. I was curious to see whether he would express an interest in the people I was interested in. He missed the point entirely. Instead, he tried to convince me to review his resume, which I wouldn't do. I was ready to help him without a resume, but he was so busy talking that he never realized I could save him an entire step. I couldn't take him where he needed to go because he was

too busy marching in place.

**Avoid jargon.**

Earlier I referred to coaching downsized employees of AT&T. During our first coaching meeting, I asked each of the participants to stand and tell me about the work they did. Down to a person, their jargon was so thick that I finally exclaimed I had no idea what the heck any of them were talking about. They looked at each other nervously. "How can I coach you if I don't understand you?" I asked. I then had each of them again tell me about their work — but to pretend I was 12 years old and completely ignorant about AT&T's business. Suddenly, they were speaking in English.

Jargon pushes a coach away rather than draws him near. Engage your coach by speaking clearly and plainly. Skip the jargon. Smooth the way for him to advise you.

Apart from revealing insensitivity and a lack of respect, the use of jargon prevents useful communication. You can speak plainly and still reveal a sophisticated knowledge of the subject matter. Remember that while the specific nature of your work matters, the purpose of your discussion is to get help for your career.

**Ask the right questions.**

The most important question you can ask someone who may be willing to coach you is: *What can I tell you about myself that might help you advise me?*

I don't care if you won your company's top achievement award, that you got promoted nine times, that you invented the cellular phone or that you were on the moon with Neil Armstrong. If you want me to help you, you must let me focus on what I need to know rather than on what you want to tell me.

I don't remember Pete asking me one useful question during the entire time we talked. There were a few he could have asked to make our discussion profitable to him:

- *Who can you recommend that might give me a clear idea of where the communications industry is going?*

The first purpose of this type of question is to get an introduction to an expert who is even better connected than your coach is. The state of the industry is really secondary. Pete was so intent on convincing me he was the expert that he failed to develop some good new contacts.

- *In your opinion, what companies are best positioned to surmount the problems our industry is facing?*

Again, the purpose here is not to identify specific companies. It's to open a discussion that will reveal the names of people who can offer even more help. The secondary purpose is to get the coach to talk. The more he talks, the more you learn.

- *Tell me more about how you fit into this industry of ours, and what you do.*

People love to talk about themselves and their work. This applies to your coach, too. When you reveal interest in the coach, you open the information gates. The only interruption you should make is to ask for amplification about specific companies and people, and for advice.

- *You know a lot of managers in this industry. What kinds of help do they need nowadays?*

If you want to talk about your abilities, and to find out where you might fit among the people and companies your coach knows, give your coach the chance to make the connections for you. But do it by talking about his contacts, not about yourself.

As the discussion gets more specific, ask the magic question:

- *What advice would you give someone with capabilities like mine who really wants to work with [a person already mentioned] at [a company already mentioned]?*

Such questions would have convinced me that Pete could have a fruitful discussion with anyone I referred him to. But rather than impress me with his interest in our industry, Pete demonstrated a disconcerting level of self-interest. He revealed that his only objective was to land a job, not to form the kinds of connections that would enable him to make a contribution to the businesses I could refer him to.

### **Harvest the coach's suggestions.**

When Pete finally calmed down and let me talk, I told him about two specific people at two specific companies who would, at my request, meet with him and help him expand his contacts. I was trying to give Pete some detailed information about these men so that we could together identify something to go on — something that would justify an introduction.

Pete quickly dismissed these companies as "too big" for his taste. In fact, I was not offering job interviews. The people I'd mentioned were both excellent contacts; influential people whose own contacts spanned the industry. They could have helped him get in the door at any of a number of appropriate companies. But Pete's *interview-itis* was distracting him. He was turning down valuable introductions. He failed to water the seeds I was planting. I let it drop, and Pete walked away with nothing.

When your coach makes a suggestion, draw him out about it. Pete could have said, "I'd like to talk with your friends. But tell me, how do you think I might be able to help their companies? What management or technical topics tend to trigger their interest?"

The more you harvest your coach's suggestions, the more help he'll give you.

### **Stay in touch with your coach.**

Whether your newfound coach actually helps you or not, don't let the connection die. Stay in touch. Share any new thoughts you've developed as a result of your conversation. If the coach made introductions on your behalf, let him know the outcome.

Sometimes I fail to really connect with someone I'm trying to help. When that person makes an extra effort to try again, it makes me

redouble my own efforts. His persistence (leavened with sincerity) encourages me to find new ways to help him. I think coaches respond well when they realize they're not the only ones expending energy in the relationship.

**It does indeed go around; help it along.**

One way to show respect for the advice you've been given is to judiciously follow it. Another is to reproduce and amplify it. While you're thanking your coach, suggest that you'd like to repay his efforts by making yourself available to coach anyone he might ever want to refer to you. What goes around comes around, and then it's your turn to make it go around again.

As we said earlier, it can take a lot of steps to reach the person who has a job for you. The most powerful steps are people — the coaches who guide you. Learn to cultivate them. Don't make a coach feel he has to charge you a big fee before you'll listen, pay attention and follow up.

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