

Going Solo? Choose a coach who won't kill your career

By Cathy Goodwin

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Entrepreneurs tend to be strong, independent people with little experience in getting help. Therefore, they often end up with the coach from hell. They grab the first resource that comes along and follow instructions brilliantly. Too late, they realize they're following a lost leader.

Cathy, who has hired the coach from hell (more than once), gives you some irreverent advice to find a guide when you feel you're lost in the jungle.

Q. Entrepreneurs pride themselves on their independence. So why do they seek help?

A. It's lonely out there! Entrepreneurs want a shoulder to lean on, a virtual hug on bad days, a person to hold them accountable, a jump-start when motivation flags and an awareness that, "Someone believes in me!"

On the other hand, some self-starting entrepreneurs say, "Forget the cheerleader -- bring on the expert!" They want solid guidance from someone who's been there -- a mentor more than a coach.

Q. You say you've hired the coach from hell -- more than once. What have you learned and what would you do differently?

A. If you're hiring a marketing coach, get references from two or three businesses like yours. Ask these clients, "Did this coach help you make money?" If the answer is, "No, but I learned a lot," keep going.

On the other hand, if you need help with motivation or decision-making, references and testimonials will give you clues -- but the ultimate test is your own intuition. When outcomes are subjective, it's chemistry between coach and client that creates success.

Most of all, be very clear on what you want. Say, "I do not want a cheerleader -- I want solid guidance," or, "I want a sounding board."

Q. You say sometimes we should disregard an MBA or certification. Why?

A. If you're hiring a marketing expert, forget formal qualifications: find out who they've helped before. Has she turned a business around? Attracted new clients?

If you're hiring for motivation and support, evaluate the whole person. Look for degrees and

certifications from nationally accredited universities, if that's important to you. Many training programs and colleges accept everyone and flunk no one. Knowing someone graduated from that program tells you nothing.

Q. A website or brochure promises to double your sales in three months or "take you to the next level." How do we read between the lines?

A. Well, if your sales are zero, and you make one sale, the consultant kept his promise! Ask how, not what. Sometimes success depends on factors beyond your control or desire -- or applies to a different business altogether. "Take you to the next level" can mean anything from advising you to clear clutter to offering solid financial and marketing guidance.

Stay away from canned programs. Look what the consultant has written or created.

Q. New entrepreneurs sometimes ask counselors, "Do I have the personality to be an entrepreneur?" Can tests help?

A. Most personality tests were never designed to predict career success. They're not scientific. The results are ambiguous and anyone will see himself reflected in any profile. "Self-validation" is meaningless.

Anyway, personality contributes little to success: grit, determination, experience and network will be better predictors.

Remember: assessments bring in money to the assessor. An astrological forecast may be just as useful and just as scientific.

Q. Let's say you talk to two or three consultants or coaches. One is cheery, upbeat and optimistic and one is a little cool and skeptical. How do you decide?

A. Present a very small sample question and see how the consultant responds. Keep it small: you won't make much headway on big questions, like, "Should I sell the business?"

Often the best consultants, coaches and counselors are not the cheeriest or most optimistic. They're honest. They warm up as you get to know them.

Q. You say we can learn from Dr. Ruth, the famous sex therapist. What message did you want to pass along?

A. Dr. Ruth insisted that her status as an independent advisor, rather than a licensed therapist, was useful because people didn't see her as a godlike figure dispensing omniscient advice.

Anyone can be wrong -- and you have to live with the consequences. Use your intuition. If someone urges you to spend money or take big risks, run as fast as you can in the opposite direction.

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