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Page: F1, F2

Career in the doldrums? A little coaching may help

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Shirley Jones was at the kind of career crossroads many people face in their lives.

After the death of her mother, a sense of obligation and the weight of family expectations propelled the Bear resident to go to work as an administrator for her family's janitorial business.

Jones was unfulfilled, but also uncertain of what should come next in her life.

"I was in a transition," she says. "I fell into that role, and I didn't know what I really wanted to do."

Instead of braving the crisis alone, Jones turned to a relatively new kind of professional -- a career coach.

The coach, Wendy Mackowski, a certified life and business coach in Hockessin, helped Jones understand her strengths and passions and hone in on a career that would merge the two.

Jones, 45, a mother of three, learned by working with Mackowski that her experiences as a Sunday School teacher and Girl Scout leader were pointing her toward a career where she could feel the satisfaction of helping people.

Today, she is still working in the family business, but also is pursuing a master's degree in community counseling at Wilmington College.

Jones continues to work with Mackowski, whom she calls "my cheerleader," to talk through life's other challenges.

"It's not really showing you anything new," Jones says of the coaching process. "It's bringing out what's already there. There are a lot of 'aha' moments."

Gaining popularity

The idea of hiring a career coach is becoming increasingly popular in a world where

people demand personal satisfaction as well as a paycheck and are likely to change careers several times in their working lives.

"There's a new paradigm," says Sharon Good, a New York-based coach who teaches a course in coaching at New York University's School of Continuing and Professional Studies. "People want to do work where they feel fulfilled, where they're using their skills and talents."

Coaches aren't therapists; they don't focus on the past or delve into childhood traumas. Nor are they employment counselors, with a thick file of job openings. Instead, they guide clients through a process of self-discovery.

Mary Schaefer, a Pike Creek-based organizational development consultant and coach, who is certified by the International Coach Federation, said she strives to help her clients answer the question, "How do I find the impact I want to have, and find more meaning in my work?"

Coaches don't need any special training or certification before hanging out a shingle.

But several organizations, including the International Coach Federation, offer training and accreditation. The group, which is based in Lexington, Ky., says it operates the only independent credentialing program recognized worldwide. Its certified coaches must complete a minimum of 60 hours of training and 100 hours of coaching experience before they can attain even the first of three certification levels the association offers.

Coaching fees vary

Some coaches charge on a monthly basis; others charge by the session. According to an International Coach Federation survey, about half of those who specialize in career coaching said they charged between \$125 and \$199 an hour.

The idea of hiring a personal coach is a relatively recent phenomenon.

"A few years back, you would say you're a coach and people would ask, 'What sport do you coach,'" says Kay Cannon, president of the International Coach Federation, whose members includes coaches of all types, including career coaches. Membership in the group has grown more than fivefold, from about 2,100 in 1999 to more than 11,000 in 81 countries today.

Career coaching runs the gamut from working with college students unsure of which career to pursue to helping mothers returning to the job market and assisting mid-career workers who want to change fields or find more satisfaction in a job they already have.

The number of people working with coaches has "dramatically increased" in the past

five years, Cannon says, and some major companies, including Verizon and IBM, have even hired in-house coaches.

An objective ear

Coaches provide the kind of unbiased sounding board people can't always find in friends or family.

"The coach is not going to steer you one way or another," Cannon says. Instead, she said, a coach will help you "understand the core DNA of who you really are."

"We don't tell people what they should do," says Al Mercatante, a career and life coach and licensed mental health counselor in Newark. "We empower them to know themselves and make decisions based on what they know."

As Mackowski, the Hockessin coach, puts it, "I work with people on creating a vision for their future."

Karin Harris, of Pike Creek, wanted an "outside source," someone other a relative or a friend, when she was trying to figure out during her senior year at Wilmington College which career path to pursue.

A business management student who has since graduated, Harris worked with Schaefer, the Pike Creek-based coach, to sort out her feelings about possible career moves.

Harris, 22, decided that she eventually wants to go back to school to pursue a degree in organizational development. The process was tough, but rewarding.

"It was hard emotionally," she says. "You have to dig down deep and figure out what you really want."

The coaching process also worked well for Jones, who longed for something more than working in the family business. "All I can say is, it's had a tremendous impact on my life," she says. "It's allowed me to stop and think and feel who I am."

You might want to consider hiring a career coach if:

- You're thinking about changing careers, are new to the work force, trying to select a career, looking for more fulfillment in your current field or retiring and looking for a new career for the next stage of life.
- You know you want to make a change, but you're not sure in which direction to go.
- You're willing to be introspective.

You might not be a good candidate for coaching if:

- You expect the coach to find you a job.
- You're not willing to do the work that a process of self-discovery requires.

- You're not willing to change.
- You don't enjoy working closely with someone.

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