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MIND AT WORK

Coaching Asks the Powerful Questions: Collaborative partnership expands vision, enhances performance

by Judith Humble

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A middle-aged senior vice president, managing billions of dollars in a top government position, found two precious commodities eroding under the strains of her job: her health and her marriage. Coaching was suggested by a concerned colleague as a way to address these costly problems of work-life imbalance. Initially skeptical (“What good will that do?”), this high performer agreed to begin sessions with Kay Cannon, Master Certified Coach and recent president of the International Coach Federation (ICF).

Gains were immediate during their early collaboration; she was able to begin taking better care of both health and marriage while maintaining standards in her position. Then Cannon asked the powerful question: “What do you really want?” The answer, “meaningful work with more time for family,” led to a happy ending far surpassing the parameters of her original vision. The solution included resignation from the stressful job, a motorcycle tour of Europe, and the start-up of her own consulting enterprise. Cannon’s summation of this win-win outcome explains why coaching is rapidly becoming an integral part of the global business community. “This client is still at the top of her professional game, cherry-picking her clients and making more money than ever before. In addition, she has plenty of time to enjoy the companionship of her husband and her grandchildren!”

Cannon’s journey into the realm of executive coaching began with striking parallels: career success in a vice-presidential position with the accompanying perks, and an underlying sense that something was missing in her life. Her own willingness to question led to a dynamic, full-time coaching career as the Leadership Whisperer, with private and corporate clients around the globe. She reports that 90 percent of her current practice involves top-level executives who welcome the privacy and efficiency of the coaching process. “These company leaders are often so eaten up with stress that they have come to normalize it – like the frog who adjusts to the rising temperatures in a slowly heated pan of water. They don’t see the problem until they have a heart attack.” Cannon describes the advantages of master’s level coaching for this top-level echelon: “A skilled coach can cover ground quickly and customize solutions in a private, non-judgmental setting. In one session, they can learn how to manage a board meeting more effectively and also address the problems of getting home in time to eat dinner with the family.”

Identifying factors integral to the effectiveness of coaching, Cannon emphasizes the process of partnership. “In counseling and consulting, the therapist and the consultant are ‘subject’ experts who advise the client. Coaches serve instead as ‘process’ experts. The experience creates a collaborative journey of exploration, with the destination being a solution developed by the client out of their own personal strengths and values. Coaches supply energy to the process with powerful questions, designed to increase awareness and propel clients forward towards their desired outcomes.”

Cannon further notes the indispensable element of emotional safety: “The coaching space gives people the freedom to explore issues that they might be afraid to address in another venue. Unlike colleagues and family members, coaches don’t have any agenda other than the satisfaction of the client.”

Addressing the exponential growth of coaching since its inception, Cannon explains the benefits to companies willing to invest. “Any time a company wants to maximize the value of its human capital, coaches can play a vital role. Performance and work-life balance are both important to business success. One thing that unites these two issues is helping individuals increase productivity while also decreasing stress. When this succeeds, the

company will have a more creative employee with greater work energy and a stronger commitment to the organization!"

She further describes the layers of coaching service that have evolved in response to research demonstrating ROI. "At one time, coaching was a remedial intervention: 'Someone needs to be fixed.' Now it is recognized around the world as a powerful development tool for top performers and is becoming a standard perk in the benefit package for companies intent on recruiting the best.

Cannon believes that high-level leaders benefit most from working with a Master Certified Coach (MCC) who has experience with the context of the presenting problems. She describes the rigorous criteria for acquiring an MCC designation: 200 classroom hours of coach-specific training, 2,500 client coaching hours under the supervision of a certified coach, and successful completion of a rigorous written and oral examination. While the coaching industry remains unregulated, the ICF has worked diligently to establish credentialing standards and a code of ethics that Cannon hopes will one day be universally accepted. It is her recommendation that those in search of a quality coaching experience choose someone who is credentialed by the ICF.

In regard to the future, Cannon reports that coaching is emerging worldwide as a powerful force. She describes her hopes for Lexington: "With the coming of the World Equestrian Games, our city could be poised on the edge of a major transformation. Now that ICF headquarters is located here, I would like to see Lexington join the rest of the world in embracing the coaching vision."

Kay Cannon can be reached at www.leadershipwhisperer.com. A list of certified coaches is available at www.coachfederation.org.

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