

SEEKING *your* ROAD *to* Success?

Consider a coach as guide.

By Ginny Marcin

IS there a speed bump on your career highway? Maybe you're happy in the kitchen but can't find the stairs to better pay or more respect. Maybe you'd like to trade your sauté pan for a byline as a food writer or photographer. Or maybe you've moved up to management, and wish your people skills were as strong as your pastry know-how.

In kitchens, food markets, multiunit restaurants and more, some food professionals say they've eased over

career speed bumps with the help of a paid career coach. Why pay a coach instead of relying on friends, family and co-workers for advice? Coaches and the people who've used them point to objectivity, for one thing.

"A coach is your objective collaborative partner, who helps you achieve whatever your goals are," says Kay Cannon, a master-certified coach and past president of the Lexington, Ky.-based International Coach Federation (ICF). In addition,

Cannon says, professional coaches are trained to help you see opportunities, alternatives and options—things you might not have envisioned. And when it comes to goals, she says, a coach is an expert in helping a client get from point A to point B.

LEARNING TO LEAD

In Columbus, Ohio, Brian Hinshaw signed on with a coach about three years ago to help him grow into a challenging new role. He was at the top of his kitchen game as executive chef of a single-unit restaurant for Cameron Mitchell Restaurants, a \$70 million multiunit restaurant group in Columbus, when the company spotted his ability with people and promoted him to regional chef. About a year into the role, and in charge of six restaurants, Hinshaw's confidence deflated like a hot soufflé exposed to a draft.

"Coming into this role, I was a chef—I had a knife in my hand," says Hinshaw. Instead

Those who work with career coaches experience a positive impact on their self-esteem/self-confidence, relationships, communication skills, work performance and life balance, according to a 2009 study.





of boning fish and creating specials, his new job was to oversee everything that goes into the success of restaurants, from the chefs and the general managers to the culture, the food quality, marketing and financial results.

"I didn't even have a cell phone until I was promoted to regional," says Hinshaw. He could see he was going to need some new skills.

When his company offered the services of a professional coach, Hinshaw jumped at the chance. The coach was an expert in people and management—different skills from those of his culinary mentors. He met with her, usually at a coffee shop, once a month for about a year and a quarter. "You could talk about anything—an hourly associate, how to deal with the executive team, how to use all the capabilities of the organization," he says.

Outside meeting times, his coach e-mailed informative articles and suggested books he should read. Among other things, she encouraged new ways of thinking and dealing with people. For example, Hinshaw says, if restaurant cleanliness was the problem, he might first be inclined to just say, "Pick up a broom, and clean this up." His coach showed him ways to get his people involved in solving their problems. She might say, "Why not ask the chef/GM, 'Why is this kitchen always dirty?'" He worked on listening, and helping people to buy into what was expected.

Today, as a vice president, operating partner and executive corporate chef in his organization, Hinshaw is in charge of some 1,900 associates (employees) at 29 locations. Feedback tells him he's become a better listener. And employee opinion surveys rate him high, as approachable, professional and knowledgeable in his area.

Individualized guidance isn't just for people with extensive culinary knowledge. Career coaches say they've worked with culinary clients of many different ages and career stages.

According to a 2009 ICF Global Coaching Client Study conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers and Association Resource Centre Inc., more than 80% of coach clients who responded experienced a positive impact in their goals, including self-esteem/self-confidence, relationships, communication skills, work performance and life balance. The study says that clients who achieved a financial benefit from coaching saw an average return on investment of 3.44 times what they spent.

CLIMBING THE LADDER

Cathy Cochran-Lewis recently became a partner at Crave Communications, a boutique culinary PR firm in Austin, Texas. Before that, she'd been handling Whole Foods Market's interaction with the media worldwide, as a global public relations coordinator.

Coaches work to help clients achieve their goals. That might entail helping a client to consider alternatives and options, as well as encouraging new ways of thinking about an issue.

Flash back about 12 years. At that point, Cochran-Lewis had just set aside a decade as a journalist and freelance writer, deciding to take the leap toward her food passion. At 36 years old, she started on the bottom rung, handling food demonstrations and working with cooking classes at Central Market in Austin. She flagged a career coach and worked with her three times a month for about six months. The sessions, mostly by phone, lasted a half hour each.

Cochran-Lewis says her coach always reminded her of her long-term goals. "She would work with me on short-term solutions, but she was always keeping an eye on the prize." The target: making a difference for her company, getting increased responsibility and earning a better salary. She says the coach's honest feedback, plus lots of role-playing, helped her learn to express herself in a professional way.

In the short term, Cochran-Lewis moved up in her company. Within a year and a half of the coaching experience, she'd doubled her salary. And by the third year, she says, she was making three times as much as her original salary. She became manager of the company's cooking schools, then moved into PR and marketing.



She says coaching helped her develop confidence and set the stage for future success. She reports that she still consults with a coach from time to time.

AVOIDING CAREER PITFALLS

In Raleigh, N.C., Fred Thompson had about six years of food-styling work under his belt when he felt the pull of food writing. At the time, he was 40 years old, building his food career after 15 years in marketing with corporations. Always someone who loved to cook, he could see the logic of combining all the food activities he's good at. But whatever tack he might take, he needed to make sure it would pay the bills.

When Thompson landed an opportunity to write a biweekly food column, he was enthused but wanted to avoid missteps. "With the freelance market the way it is now, you're only going to get one shot, so you'd better know you can handle the shot," he says. He engaged a coach who's seasoned in culinary knowledge and food writing.

Thompson's monthly coaching arrangement allowed for two one-hour phone calls plus unlimited e-mails. During the coaching sessions, he explored specific editing issues, the writing profession and how to develop a unique "voice." But the seven months of coaching also helped him think about making the food world work for him financially, he says.

Since then, Thompson has become publisher of a regional food magazine and captured several book contracts. Last year, he wrote a major feature, "Star Spangled 4th of July Menu," for *Bon Appétit*. He credits coaching as important to his success.

MAKING PARTNERSHIPS WORK

Before Sondra Bernstein became CEO/proprietor of the girl & the fig in Sonoma, Calif., she had worked as a server and bartender, traveled to help open new restaurants for a multiunit company and studied restaurant management in culinary school. But 13 years ago, when she bought her restaurant and became her own boss, you might say the oil began to spatter.

Bernstein had had lots of bosses and had supervised people before. But this was her first experience as the top person, in charge of the whole business.

"In the restaurant business, you learn how to cook, order, hire staff, run accounting programs," Bernstein says. "There was no class in restaurant school that said how to get along with your co-workers or bring out the best in managers."

Bernstein took on a colleague—someone who had worked for her for several years—as manager/server/cook. John Toulze, today Bernstein's partner, recalls that as the business evolved, friction sometimes emerged over business decisions. It seemed hard for the two to find resolutions for the discussions they were having, he says. Sometimes, conversations got heated and took on a personal tone.

So, about two years ago, the two began a year-and-a-half stretch of meeting with a coach periodically. Each time, the coach

met with Bernstein privately, then with Toulze, then with them both together.

Today, says Bernstein, things are 90% better, and when there are issues, it's easier to work on them.

"I don't think our relationship has ever been better," says Toulze. "The conversations we have now are productive, they make sense and they are enjoyable."

Professional coaches say relationships are often part of the focus with clients.

Pat Botic, a Columbus, Ohio, business consultant who has coached employees within expanding organizations, spells out the difference between coaching and therapy. "Therapy has to do with personal relationships—how the person feels about himself or herself," she explains. "It gets into insecurities and life experiences." Business coaching focuses on being more effective in performing your job. "It has to do with skill sets, connections, how to make contact and make sure someone is listening."

Kristen Armstrong, a Sonoma, Calif., coach who's trained as a clinical psychologist, says when she has coached chefs, often the focus is helping to build a team. For instance, chefs who have fabulous culinary skills may need to learn how to give performance reviews that help up-and-coming line cooks and sous chefs know what they need to do to move up. And front-of-the-house managers might need to learn how to work smoothly with the back-of-the-house.

Dealing with interpersonal issues, coaches don't just rely on gut feeling and intuition about a client. They can use standardized personality tests and other assessment

A COACH WHO KNOWS CULINARY



It's not required for a professional career coach to work in his or her client's industry, or even to have experience in it. But professional coach Antonia Allegra, St. Helena, Calif., loves having that inside track on her clients' work challenges. With personal experience in both the food world and in writing/publishing, Allegra works mainly with clients interested in culinary careers, including food writing and publishing.

She has guided some 1,500 clients over the past 12 years as they navigated career dreams, confronted dilemmas and pursued greater work satisfaction.

"It's just a normal part of life to want to know what's going on with someone else and to really listen," Allegra says of her coaching perspective.

As a young woman, she always loved cooking, but planned to go into early childhood development and theater. Then her husband's career sparked a move to France. When she entered a culinary

program there, earlier goals evaporated like a cold droplet on a hot griddle. Allegra attended LaVarenne, L'Ecole Lenôtre and Le Cordon Bleu. When she returned to the U.S., she put her enhanced culinary knowledge to work.

In the years that followed, she became food editor of the *The San Diego Tribune*; wrote several wine guides; founded two award-winning publications; directed her own culinary school; was on the launch team for The Culinary Institute of America at Greystone, St. Helena, Calif., and more. She is director of the prestigious Greenbrier symposium for professional food writers.

Maybe just as useful as her background in two industries is her own experience in career happiness. "Everything I do, I love. I will not take on something that is not interesting", she says.

To help clients discover their own routes to happiness, Allegra poses a question early on in the relationship. She asks the client to list the top 10 directions he or she might like to go in, in the next five years.

"It could be dog sledding, tree trimming, anything," Allegra says. She considers

the client's answers an important ingredient in the process. "Oftentimes, that's where people start to see other extensions of what they want to do."

Allegra trained as a professional coach through Coach University, an offshoot of the International Coach Federation, a Lexington, Ky.-based worldwide resource for professional coaches. "It took two and a half years," she says, recalling weekly classes over the phone, plus exams.

She feels the culinary world deserves coaches who understand it. So she joined with colleagues Merrilee Olson and Debi Benedetti in founding the C4 Collaborative, Santa Rosa, Calif., a coaching group dedicated to the culinary and hospitality trade.

Allegra also views coaching as another direction that culinary people might branch out into. "Perhaps there are people out there who understand what the coach spark is," she says, emphasizing the serious effort it involves.

For anyone who's interested in taking on the role, she offers simple encouragement. "Call me," she says.

tools for giving a client a better view of himself or herself. Some coaches even specialize in those assessments.

Armstrong uses such tests to supplement information she gets in interviews with the client, his or her colleagues and supervisors.

Coaches and clients agree that coaching may not be the answer for everyone. But if you do decide to look for a coach, experts say, keep this in mind: Coaching is not a regulated profession—anyone

can call himself or herself a coach. So it's important to ask about credentials, background and experience.

At the International Coach Federation, Cannon advises looking for three things: A coach should be trained specifically for coaching, have an actual credential to prove that and subscribe to a code of ethics. "Be really clear what you'll be paying for, what you can expect from the coach and how often you'll meet," she says. And, she warns, be sure to have

some kind of written contract, even if it's just a simple letter of agreement.

Many coaches offer a free introductory meeting for prospective clients. One way to explore the topic more is through Web referral listings of professional coach organizations such as the ICF and Santa Rosa, Calif.-based C4 Collaborative.

Ginny Marcin has been writing about the food industry and food people for more than 20 years. She lives in Westmont, N.J.