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Coaches help execs — and companies — advance

June D. Bell

Cindy Reese's executive coach makes her uncomfortable. Surprisingly, that's a good thing.

Like most people, Reese prefers to avoid conflicts and situations that make her edgy. But her executive coach routinely nudges her into disconcerting scenarios so she can hone her leadership skills in adverse circumstances.

Reese, who oversees about 550 people as senior director of Sun Microsystems' Newark site operations, credits the coaching sessions with boosting her image as "a more strategic, vital, big-picture" leader — exactly the kind of manager who will be first in line for a promotion.

Reese's use of an executive coach is far from unique. Scores of Bay Area business leaders have turned to specialized consultants to sharpen their leadership and persuasive abilities and steer them through the complex processes of change.

The field is booming. About 10,000 people coach business executives today, and that number is expected to grow fivefold in the next five years, said Steven Berglas, a psychologist, executive coach and adjunct instructor at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business.

Some companies hire executive coaches to help their leaders conquer problematic management styles, but most use coaches to help rising stars fine-tune their decision-making skills or improve their relating styles. The best use is with "those people on the ascendant career track and not hampered by personal issues" that would be better addressed in therapy, Berglas said.

Michele Bolton of ExecutivEdge of Silicon Valley, a Los Gatos coaching business that has worked with Reese and about 500 others, said proper coaching can help executives turn weaknesses into strengths.

"There's always people who are lopsided," she said. "They're high in IQ but low in EQ (emotional intelligence). "They can deliver on time and on budget and meet goals, but the project team dislikes their management style."

The intensive help that an executive coach provides requires an investment of finances as well as time. Most charge a set rate that can range from \$2,500 a day to as much as \$25,000 for up to a year's worth of weekly or bi-weekly meetings and evaluations. Companies usually foot the bill when they hire coaches for their top employees, though individuals occasionally seek out their services. These individuals pay an hourly fee starting at about \$175.

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