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Finding Gold

Beware of the Amateur Coach! or, how to spot a faux in the house

By Michael Lovas

January 1, 2007

The financial industry is made up of more than 600,000 privately-owned businesses. As with any business in any industry, the owners and decision makers want to increase their success. Thus, it's logical to see coaches working with advisors. Indeed, the financial industry is full of coaches.

Question — how do you know which ones are any good? How can you tell which ones have any training or experience in what they're preaching? "Heck, Mike, they all look alike and sound alike. How can you tell the real deal from the faux? The answer is, mostly, it's impossible to tell just from looking. You have to learn how to dig deep and look with salt in your eye. You have to learn to be discerning when it comes to hiring a coach. And that's what this article is all about.

Wait for me! I've watched a strange phenomenon repeat itself over the years. Every time someone comes up with a great idea, it is immediately followed by a wave or "me too" coaches.

Remember when the *Emotional Intelligence* book was published? Didn't you see a wave of speakers and coaches come in its wake, espousing expertise in Emotional Intelligence? Same with the storytelling, consultative selling and psychological marketing.

Shortly following the release of Jerry Richardson's book *The Magic of Rapport*, it seemed that every magazine and conference had a "rapport expert" listed. These people still give me a good laugh. I'm not sure I've ever heard a single one of them explain what rapport is or how to get into it without playing "money see/monkey do," which of course is a recipe for disaster.

For several years, we worked with our friend Bruce Wright to deliver his seminars on Macro Strategic Planning. It never failed; following the seminars, there was always someone who took Bruce's ideas and began coaching, based on them. They had shallow knowledge, little or no coaching skills or experience, yet they actually thought they could do as good a job as the guy who created the program.

In the mid-90s, I worked with a very serious self-develop program called Choices in Dallas, Texas. It was a superb program that changed thousands of lives from scattered to focused, and did it in five days. Guess what. Following every class, there were recent grads hanging out their shingles as coaches. Like all other faux coaches, they knew enough to be dangerous.

Perhaps the body of knowledge that is perpetually embezzled the most is the area of psychology that we specialize in — Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP). Because we publish so many articles on applications of effective psychology, we also read many articles in the same category. There are some really good and clear ones out there. However, most of them cause us to roll our eyes and shudder. So much of the psychological advice delivered in articles and seminars in the financial industry is misunderstood and misapplied.

Here's an example that hit us close to home. Several years ago, one of our own clients sent us his PowerPoint slides for a sales training class he delivered several times each year. In the slides was a lesson on how to read a prospect and learn if the person were visual, auditory or kinesthetic by watching where his eyes went. Because this was a client and friend, I sent him a note and explained that he was teaching faux skills. He completely misunderstood the information. That body of knowledge is called "eye-accessing cues." It's usually taught in the Practitioner-level Training in Neuro-linguistic Programming. And, I've met NLP Practitioners who misunderstand it. So, our friend wasn't alone. And, that's the point isn't it? Beware of the faux coach.

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The point — it is easy to think that you know a body of material or a collection of processes after seeing demonstrations. "Oh. Is that all it is? Heck fire, I can do that." We've seen it happen with our own clients. The process seems so natural and makes so much sense that they think they can do it, too. "Mike, I could have said that." Pity the poor people who hire them. They discover that what looks like gold is really just Faux gold. When the client presents a problem that isn't addressed in the basic book, CD set, intro seminar or keynote, the faux coach is lost and has no idea how to solve that person's dilemma. Again, beware of the faux coach.

Now that I've ridden this horse into the ground, let's look at some questions you might ask a coach to determine if he or she is the real thing or something else. The biggest mistake made by coaches is to fail to address the immediate need and move onto something they know more about. Every amateur coach makes that mistake. What to do when you see that? Fire him! The biggest mistake made by advisors looking to hire a coach is to be subjective, rather than objective. Of course, in order to be objective, you need to have a system or procedure that allows for objectivity. Here it is.

Interview the Potential Coach:

1. **Expectations.** Tell the candidate what you expect to get from him. Then, listen closely to the response. Do you get the sense that the candidate heard you? Or did he launch into a sales pitch? Is he familiar with your business and active in your industry?
2. **Education.** Ask about the candidate's education, training and licenses in his coaching area. You might check with the appropriate licensing board to see if the person is actually certified.
3. **Experience.** Is the coach experienced? How long has she been working as a coach? Amazing how new coaches have tons of experience. Of course, you will need to talk with a few of her previous clients. And, do not hire a coach who will not give you references you can talk to in person.
4. **Relevance.** Does this coach have experience working with issues similar to yours? While it is certainly not necessary for a coach to have personally experienced whatever you are going through, you need some reassurance that what you are bringing to the table is not beyond the scope of her competence. A real coach is flexible and can provide solutions to problems he or she has never even heard of before.
5. **Bad marks.** Ask if there have been any disciplinary action taken. Has this coach had a license revoked? Has he been sued? Has he been to prison?
6. **How does it work?** Ask the candidate to describe what processes will take place to help you achieve your goals. In other words, ask what is the therapist's theoretical orientation. Does the therapist focus on helping to change how you think (cognitive therapy)? Does she/he focus on working with the subconscious (psychodynamic therapy)? Many people claiming to be coaches are not qualified to do either one. Beware of them.
7. **Professional or Personal?** If the coach claims to be a life coach or a personal-development coach, ask him about his training in psychology. Other than coaching in specific business processes (such as time management or technology systems) coaching is an application of psychology. It requires extensive training in the disciplines necessary to enter and affect your subconscious mind. While your coach doesn't need to be a psychiatrist, beware of people who do not possess credentials in psychology, such as: psychotherapy, hypnotherapy, Neuro-linguistic Programming, social work, or family counseling.
8. **Structure or Flexible?** Determine if the person is highly structured or flexible. In our practice, Pam conducts very structured sessions. Mine are much more flexible. Which one is right for you? Even a highly structured coach needs to be able to adapt and flex to address issues as they arise. I believe that a coach is only as good as the options and flexibility he or she can access for you. If you sense that the coach is running a program that is a rigid procedure based on a checklist, think twice. One size does not fit all! In fact, an unhappy top advisor told me that his coach was little more than a baby sitter with a checklist.
9. **We grow from mistakes.** Ask the candidate to tell you about a client he could not help. And, ask him to tell you about someone he helped successfully. Listen for passion and confidence. Listen for words and statements that you relate to and connect with.
10. **Expert or "hang around."** Find out if the candidate is an expert. Look for articles or books that he has written. Look for published interviews or quotes from him in the media.

Parting shots. Always interview more than one possible coach, and be wary of anyone who discourages you from talking with other coaches. No one coach is ideal for everyone, and too many are ideal for no one. For example, a good personality might be attractive, and you might like the person, but you're not hiring a friend. A kind heart might fail to hold you accountable for your own development. You want someone who is focused on your getting the best outcomes, not just making you feel good.

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Michael Lovas

MICHAEL LOVAS is the "Father of Credibility Marketing." He's also the author of eight books, three columns, and a thousand articles on Professional Credibility and Psychological Connection in the financial industry.

Michael is an inspiring trainer and coach who helps advisors improve their businesses and personal lives. He holds three prestigious certifications: Licensed Master Practitioner of Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP), Licensed Trainer of NLP; and Clinical Hypnotherapist. They make Michael an expert at reading people and inspiring groups.

In his spare time, Michael serves as the District Captain for the Patriot Guard Riders (www.patriotguard.org).

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