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## Business News

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CYNDIA ZWAHLEN:  
SMALL BUSINESS REPORT

### A Coach May Improve Your Game

Experts can help entrepreneurs look at the big picture, set goals and create strategies.

October 11 2006

Cindy Schreier visited a playground with her son last year and ran into a coach who convinced the entrepreneur that she could improve her performance.

Coach Michelle Payne wasn't talking about fine-tuning Schreier's backhand. Payne is a business coach, and she meant to help the owner of Prima Environmental, a Sacramento testing lab, win at the high-stakes game of small business.

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It was February 2005 and Schreier's growing company had so much work testing contaminated soils for environmental consultants that she was having trouble keeping track of it all, even with the addition of her first full-time employee, a chemist. Her office overflowed with paper. She was worried about money and unsure how well the company was faring.

"The business was running me; I wasn't running it," Schreier said.

She had never heard of a business coach until she met Payne by chance at the park where their children played. She just knew she needed help.

Schreier was so impressed with Payne's comments during the coach's first visit to the firm that she hired her on the spot. In the following months, Schreier made changes that improved the bottom line at the company she started in 1998 and expanded in 2003.

She created checklists and a log to track important communications with her chemist. She filed paperwork and learned how simple steps, such as keeping a pad near her phone for taking notes during client calls, could be the foundation for an organized workflow. And she hired an administrative assistant.

At the end of the year, the company's annual revenue was up 60% at \$320,000.

"Working with a coach gives you the opportunity to discuss issues and brainstorm, and that can open up new doors," said Payne, executive vice president at Beyond Point B and a board member of the International Coach Federation.

Business coaches have become popular, particularly among small-business owners who

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are often overwhelmed trying to juggle multiple roles. Unlike management consultants, who usually have specific types of business expertise and are trained to offer solutions, business coaches tend to help their clients look at the big picture — a view that often includes their personal and professional lives — and draw conclusions.

"It's not about us giving the answers. It's about us pulling the answers out of the client," said Diane Brennan, a business and life coach in Tucson and president-elect of the coach group.

Coaches help clients set goals and establish the steps they must take to achieve them. They also hold their clients accountable for achieving the results they want, usually through weekly discussions in person or over the phone.

The technique works well for individuals who are motivated to make changes and are willing to do the necessary work.

The demand for coaches has helped more than double membership in the International Coach Federation in the last five years. The Lexington, Ky.-based group ([www.coachfederation.org](http://www.coachfederation.org)), which runs a certification program, said the number of its business and life coach members would hit 10,700 this year, compared with 4,600 in 2001.

Coaching can be an effective way for a busy small-business owner to step back and determine whether the company is being run in line with the owner's values and priorities. It also can help owners rethink those priorities.

Residential interior designer Allison Hanes, principal of Allison Hanes Design in Los Angeles, went to her L.A. coach, Keith Miller, to make changes in her personal life. Typical of most small-business owners, she soon found that her personal issues were entwined with her business challenges.

"There are things I realize that I want to change. I want to get out of the box, to push myself creatively and to make more unexpected choices," said Hanes, who started her business in 1992.

"Keith has been instrumental in helping me focus on my professional goals and create some strategies on how to realize them," she added.

With his encouragement, Hanes is beginning a long-neglected project to create a website for her business and has tried to increase her networking, which she finds difficult. She is considering creating a newsletter for her clients and has committed to getting more of her projects professionally photographed for use on her website and in promotional material.

Coaches come from a variety of professional backgrounds. Some are former psychotherapists, management consultants, teachers or executives. Miller once owned a salon.

There is no industry license program, which is why experts recommend working with a coach that has been certified by the coach federation.

To enhance the credibility of the emerging profession, the group offers three levels of certification to members who follow its professional conduct standards and ethical guidelines and meet its minimum requirements.

The levels are based on the amount of coaching experience and the number of hours of federation-approved training a coach has completed. A master certified coach, the highest rank, has a minimum of 2,500 hours of direct coaching experience and 200 hours of training.

Once you've selected a coach, don't hire the person until you understand the terms of the contract and the refund policy, said Bruce Schneider, a coach and president of IPEC Coaching of Manasquan, N.J., an ICF-accredited coach-training company.

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Coaches often work in weekly sessions, speaking with their clients over the telephone or in person at the client's company. Schreier, though, met with Payne once a month for two hours at a time over a four-month period.

Some coaches charge \$1,500 a month with a three-month commitment required. Others, such as Miller, charge by the hour. His \$150 hourly fee is common, although some coaches charge \$300 or more per hour.

Results of a coaching relationship might be measured in costs saved by an owner who can retain successful employees, bring in new business revenue or better organize processes.

"If you are not getting a return on investment that is six to 10 times what you pay your coach," Schneider said, "then you have the wrong coach."

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