

## **The Effectiveness of Coaching in Work Life Balance**

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### **Abstract:**

*Work-life balance: why such a hot topic?*

*How coaching can help*

*Some guidelines in the coaching relationship*

*How to select a coach*

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## **The Effectiveness of Coaching in Work Life Balance**

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A recent survey by the CIPD claims that professionals in the UK would sacrifice up to 40% of their annual salary – an average £13,253 a year - if it meant achieving better work-life balance.

Why has work-life balance become such a hot topic in recent years?

The sheer number of choices available today can leave the average professional sinking under a mountain of obligations, leisure activities and family commitments. Entertainment for our grandparents was limited to a sing-song round the piano and, for their children, a game of hop scotch in the car-free street outside. They didn't have to spend weekends searching for the elusive best deal on new cars, fridges or the bewildering array of media technology; and two weeks in Yarmouth provided an annual treat, without hours of net-surfing for that last-minute, dream holiday. For today's reasonably affluent family there are CDs to listen to, DVDs to watch and computer games to play, not to mention weekends away, holidays on the other side of the world and SO MUCH shopping to do. And somehow, work has to fit into all this to pay for it all.

Coaching can do much to combat the tyranny of choice: the coach provides a metaphorical mirror in which the client might see themselves and their surroundings in perspective for the first time. Through this process the client can identify their true values and priorities, then work out how to build the life style that suits them.

Practical help may be offered in working out a timetable with the client and supporting them in sticking to it. The coaching session may be the only time in the client's busy life when they are really listened to and can give voice to their dreams and anxieties. Unlike other responsibilities in the client's life, the actions set between sessions do not seem like a chore: coaching provides the motivation for the client to take risks and make whatever changes the client feels they need to. Coaching sometimes delivers financial benefits to the client so that work life balance can be addressed in its most obvious equation: making more money while working less hours.

I often hear clients talk about individual areas of their lives where they would like to see change. As they explore these, they often realise that a common link is lack of balance – a need for "me-time" is frequently expressed. Sometimes work life balance itself is set as a main goal. I always ask a client to set 3 goals in completely different areas of their lives, because if one area is stuck, it will hold back the others. Working on three goals is usually sufficient for them to clear the decks and move forward, and work life balance is almost always improved.

Lack of work life balance is one of the most common problems across all walks of life today, from CEOs to workers on the factory floor, from parents to their student offspring. A coach can be equally effective in any of these cases. Coaching is a process like accountancy: it doesn't matter what stage the business is at, or what type of business it is – a good accountant will get results without knowing how to manufacture the widgets.

For coaching to be effective, the coach and client have to set clear guidelines on how the relationship will work. For instance, the client has to be realistic about how frequently the sessions can run, and then stick to the timetable. The coach must hold the client accountable for what the client says they will do. It is essential that the client stays in charge of the content (deciding the nature of the goals and steps taken to achieve them) while the coach must take firm control of the process (clarifying, challenging, motivating and holding the client accountable). A good coach will effect this by asking powerful questions that give the client deep insights, and will not shy away from challenging the client about their values, commitment or performance of their actions. If the coach allows him or herself to be drawn into content – listening to the client's stories for interest's sake or getting involved emotionally – they are no use at all to the client. A good coach is Teflon coated: empathetic, gentle but focussing firmly on the client's agenda, never crossing the boundary from process into content.

Confidentiality must be assured. It is not unknown for the same coach to work with the executives in a company and with their boss. All parties have to be absolutely confident that the coach will not share information, or they will not open up and the coaching will be wasted.

The coach must never lead the client, either with advice or biased questions. There are inevitably times when a client's experience reflects our own and we feel a judgment coming on – we think we understand where the client is and that we know the answer. Of course, we don't – everyone's experience is unique to themselves, and even more so the solution. In a coaching relationship the client is paying us to enable them to find their own answers, not to provide them with ours or to influence their thinking.

Coaching is growing in popularity because it brings results that are rapid but long lasting. It is not unusual for major change to occur during the first session. This is because people often see things about themselves and their lives they have never understood before and these insights provide the motivation to change. It is then essential to continue the coaching relationship for at least 3 months – it takes 6 weeks to break an old habit and 6 to ingrain a new one. If the coaching is not continued over a period, the motivation may be lost and the client will slip back into the original rut.

Selecting the right coach is an essential part of the process. I believe that a successful coach is 80% the person and 20% their training or methodology. Choose someone you think you can trust completely, someone you respect and feel is at your own level in terms of intellect and wit, someone you have strong rapport with. That is not to belittle coach training, which is essential: the coach will preferably have trained or re-trained within the last 5 years. Techniques in coaching have grown considerably more sophisticated in recent years, and new techniques have been perfected. A claim to have been coaching for 10 or 20 years is not always the best recommendation - coaching was originally more directive than it is now. Check that the coach has kept up their professional development and is up to date with modern methods.

It is advisable to choose a coach who has some kind of accreditation. The nearest thing the industry has to an accrediting body is the International Coaching Federation. Started by a group of American coaches to uphold standards within the industry, the ICF now has branches all over the world and its accreditation process is stiff. The UK organisation Association For Coaching will be accrediting coaches soon as well. Because there is no government regulatory requirement for coaches to become accredited, many of the best coaches do not bother, so not having a coaching body accreditation is not necessarily an indication of anything amiss. However, a good training school will provide internal accreditation and it is sensible to check that the coach has a worthwhile certificate of some kind.

Achieving work life balance can be as simple as sorting out the wood from the trees: once values and priorities are clearly identified, it is amazing how the rest can fall into place, or at least become achievable through attention and effort.

In this world of so many choices, the hard part is identifying which path to follow. Coaching enables people to identify what it is they really want, out of the myriad choices available to the modern professional. That is the real pot of gold: once people find it, the rest is easy.

### **Biography:**

**Carol Wilson** is MD of Results Coaching Systems Europe and a certified coach, trainer, mentor and assessor. She is a keynote speaker, has appeared on television and radio and writes articles about coaching. After setting up Virgin's music publishing company, Carol was the first woman to run her own record company and went on to hold Board and MD level positions in the corporate music industry. She now coaches and trains individuals, executives and teams, and specialises in 'hot seat coaching' live in front of an audience. Carol is an Honorary Vice President of the Association For Coaching.

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