

The Case for Certification

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I recently wrote an article on the effectiveness and importance of executive coaching as a tool for business growth. My premise in this article was that just like successful professional athletes I believe that business people can benefit from working with the right coach.

I have had a number of inquiries as a result of my article as to whether or not “certification” of a coach should be a critical criterion in the selection process. That caused me to pose that question to my “network” and I received a number of interesting and illuminating responses. I actually asked the question regarding two professions that are highly interpersonally related and that are seeing a definitive movement towards certification, Human Resources and Coaching.

While you could say simplistically that the answer is “it depends”, I think there is a more definitive thread in what I received.

Although almost everyone agrees that a certification is not a guarantee of effectiveness or relevant experience in a particular setting it does provide a few key indicators:

- The person has committed themselves to a course of study and education to improve or form a “baseline” of skills in their chosen profession.
- They will have at least been exposed to the fundamental competency areas that are part of the profession.
- They will in all likelihood have been required to possess some experience, passed an examination, or received training in their area; potentially all of the above.

It is also true that all “certifying” institutions are not the same. There are organizations which apply the standards and requirements with a great deal of rigor- some examples would be a Certified Public Accountant or Professional Engineer.

I will suggest these guidelines for you if you are seeking out the services of either a “coach” or human resources professional:

- When in doubt check with references and ask for referrals from colleagues who you trust and respect and who has had occasion to utilize similar services.
- Certification may be a good first screen- especially in areas where the person’s qualifications and experience in their field are not immediately obvious to you.
- Check relevance not only to their profession, but to your situation. The person may be highly competent in their chosen field, but may not possess an appropriate understanding of your business or requirements.

At the risk of alienating huge numbers of various professions I have also determined some other helpful experiences.

- Professions like teaching or counseling do not automatically translate into effective coaching and/or human resources professionals. In some cases they may possess the “people” skills, but not the “technical” skills.
- The practice of law, even employment law, is not a direct substitute for human resources experience. The law is primarily about compliance and interpretation. I once had a colleague who was a very successful attorney state, “I can tell you whether or not it is legal, I can’t tell you how to make it work in a practical application.”

- “Liking “people is not a guarantee of effectiveness as a coach or human resources professional. In fact both of these professions are about increasing successful performance; either personally, professionally or both. This means holding people accountable. They don’t always enjoy that process.

In the absence of personal knowledge or a strong referral certification is an excellent tool to narrow the field, just don’t assume it is a guarantee.

Mark F. Herbert is a principal in the consulting firm of New Paradigms LLC. He has over 30 years of experience as a corporate executive and consultant specializing in optimizing organizational performance. He speaks and writes frequently on topics related to human resources management, organizational development, and executive and managerial coaching. He has developed and implemented a management system called Compliance to Commitment™ that has seen significant measurable results in multiple organizational settings. His first book, Managing Whole People will be published in the fall of 2008. He can be reached at mark@newparadigmsllc.com or www.newparadigmsllc.com