

# A LITTLE USEFUL ADVICE

## Coaches are the hot executive accessory

**BY KATHERINE MACKLEM** After senior executives Gary Bettman and Colin Campbell spoke to National Hockey League officials at their annual September training camp, Mark Bosworth and David Hoy took the stage. Partners in an Edmonton executive coaching firm, the pair were brought in to work with the referees and linesmen for the next two days. "Our group had been off for a year through the lockout—it was fragmented," says NHL VP Stephen Walkom, who'd hired the pair. "Prior to doing anything in regard to the officials' actual jobs, we worked through a whole process of team building. We needed to get a sense of worth again, and a sense of trust."

Huh? The cool cats of the ice, keepers of the NHL's new rules, in need of soft skills like team building? And using executive coaches to get there? Once—and not *that* long ago—exclusive to corner office occupants, executive coaches are now seemingly ubiquitous. On university campuses and in law firms, government, and not-for-profit organizations, they've also infiltrated the middle ranks of business. As a shrink is to the New Yorker, a coach is the new must-have status symbol of mid-level office workers. No longer is the presence of a coach an indication something is wrong; now it's a perk that means you're a rising star. And discretion, once the mainstay of any coach's success, is also gone, at least for clients. Today, from the water cooler to the cocktail party, coaching is prime chatter



**LISTEN HERE** Executive coaches recently helped NHL referees build team spirit. More and more, managers are turning to outsiders for advice and support.

material. Commonly edged into the banter of office tower hoi polloi are these key words: "According to my coach..."

Exactly what a coach does is a little fuzzy, and a lot touchy-feely. The goal is to help clients resolve work-related problems, such as a non-collaborative staffer or a belligerent boss, or to build intangibles like leadership skills. While group coaching is gaining traction, coaches typically work with clients one-on-one. By ask-

## When confiding to colleagues can be career suicide, coaches step in

ing focused questions, the coach helps develop a strategy, and then follows up as the client carries out the action plan. It's not about remediation, nor is it hand-holding, says longtime coach Alison Hendren, who oversees the program at Victoria's Royal Roads University. "Coaching supports people in discovering and maximizing their professional and personal potential."

Isn't that what a boss is supposed to do?

In today's world, the answer is more often no. There isn't time. Overloaded managers are now the norm, especially at mid-levels, and they can't take time for the soft side of running a business, says Lindsay Sukornyk, a Toronto coach. "As corporations have downsized and got their organizations to lean and mean," she notes, "managing, mentoring and relationship building have fallen by the wayside." Like so many other former in-house functions, nurturing is now being outsourced. "Coaching people is extremely important, but it's not always urgent," she says.

There's another factor: the transient workforce. With people moving rapidly between organizations and in and out of jobs, there is little time to develop relationships with co-workers. And in increasingly competitive environments, where everyone is dispensable, there is little trust among colleagues. "It can be political suicide to share certain things with your peers or your boss," observes Sukornyk. "That's a huge piece of why external coaches are extremely important. It's a totally unbiased, objective support system to people."

Among the NHL refs, there's much more cohesion, says Walkom. In the past, refs would often pass the buck when calls were criticized, saying they hadn't made up the rules. Now, they are more likely to stand up for their calls and those of their colleagues, he adds. The cost of providing Bosworth's and Hoy's services per team was "hardly anything," says Walkom. "Let me just say this: any money that's spent on this type of effort, to make your people the best they can be, is paid back in dividends." **M**



### YURII VLASOV TINKERS WITH THE SPEED OF LIGHT

Light is fast—so fast that it's difficult to harness on a computer chip. But Yurii Vlasov, a researcher at IBM Corp., may have found a way. In a study published last week, IBM revealed that Vlasov and his team managed to slow the speed of light by a factor of 300 (to 600 miles per second) as it travels across a microchip. That means the potential to store and send more data, faster and using less power, than ever thought possible. Geek heaven is upon us.