Executive turning point

Phillip Cenere FAIM GAICD investigates the value of coaching and mentoring and asks how executives and directors can navigate critical turning points in their careers.

As the associate dean of a business school and as a member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors NSW Council, curriculum portfolio committee and director professional development committee, I am keenly aware of the importance of lifelong learning.

However, prior to a meeting with my soon-to-become executive coach, Phil Crenigan MAICD, I was uneasy about the prospect of a formal coaching relationship. What exactly is an "executive coach"? What does the relationship involve? How much time, money and navel-gazing do I need to commit?

Crenigan is principal of Executive Turning Point and specialises in helping CEOs, managing directors, senior executives and non-executive directors navigate critical phases of their careers. He was previously the executive search director of De Jager and Associates, sales director with Fosters Group and managing director of Guinness Australasia. Crenigan currently sits on the board of the Sydney Philharmonia Choir. He spends his free nights singing with The Sydney Symphony Chorus at the Opera House.

I expected the meeting to run for thirty minutes. It lasted two-and-a-half hours. By the time the meeting was over, many of my own paradigms had been challenged.

THE TREADMILL

Truth be told, I did a little background research before calling Crenigan and it was his LinkedIn article *How to avoid a career train-wreck* that caught my attention and hit home. Below is an excerpt from the article.

"If we are to believe the statistics, many of the people reading this post will be between 'a rock and a hard place'. With one in two executives expressing some disillusionment about their current roles and responsibilities, one has to worry about the impact their mindset will have on the people they lead and the people they value the most outside of work. I have been engaged as a coach by over 40 senior executives to help them transition to a better place. The patterns and symptoms are common and might resonate.

"Executives most at risk are usually in their mid-forties when their personal financial gearing is at its highest with high mortgages and school fees. Typically my clients talked about not being in control of their lives and in all cases they felt that this sense of being a victim was seeping into their lives outside of work. This was confirmed when we included partners and close friends in 360 feedback."

The excerpt continued: "Clients in describing why they felt they needed professional coaching disclosed a diminishing sense of self-worth, doubt, and confidence. This in turn was feeding a drop in performance, a loss of motivation and questioning the sheer 'point' of it all. In some cases clients indicated mood swings, a sense of being trapped because of the need to fund the external trappings of success and interestingly all confirmed that they had not shared or talked through how they were feeling with colleagues for fear of being seen as a victim or through lack of trust in the environment they were in.

"From a health point of view, there appeared to be a consistent pattern of being worn out or on a treadmill, of being constantly on call to the business. Clients talked about running on empty but invested little time in rest or renewal as the treadmill span faster and faster.

"In all cases there had been little investment in personal development as that appeared to be something they did in an earlier career and not one client had a career plan. Networking or external engagement was also a casualty and did not figure in any allocation of time and resources."

THE RELUCTANCE FACTOR

I interviewed several people to obtain background information for this article. The word "reluctance" came up in almost every conversation. Despite the increased awareness about coaching and many organisations offering mentor programs to their employees, the evidence suggests that many executives and directors are still reluctant to engage an executive coach.

Crenigan says that there is a lot of self-induced pressure on executives to portray a certain image and keep up appearances.

"They think they have to be bullet-proof, superman or superwoman and can't show vulnerability," he said. "The reality is that leaders have the same issues as everyone else – marriage breakdowns, problems with their children, pressure to perform."

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The pressure to fit the mould often results in group-think and people needing everything to be vanilla.

"Where do directors get their fresh perspectives from? Or, do they all draw from the same gene pool? How many chairmen or boards have a coach or have invited external advice and 360 degree feedback? A lot of people stop getting coaching when they reach the boardroom but why is that, the world outside hasn't stopped."

MENTORING, COACHING, SPONSORSHIP

Crenigan says there is a flawed belief that coaching is about fixing something that is wrong and this often prevents many people from reaching out. "Coaching isn't just for remedial issues," he said. "It is about helping clients be the best that they can be. [Tennis player] Roger Federer doesn't have a coach because he has a bad back hand. It is about developing the art of building a perspective for what you want to do."

Crenigan says coaching is a very special relationship, often referral based, and based on absolute confidence and trust. "The 'coach and coachee' relationship is probably the most important relationship in your life outside of your partner. If leaders can make positive adjustments to what they're doing, it leads to highly engaged teams that perform better. It is a bit like genetics – intervening early and tinkering with the molecules of life. If we can crack that code, it is an important and powerful intervention."

He says really good coaches can do mentoring, coaching and sponsorship depending on their client's needs and situation.

The following excerpt has been taken from Company Directors' chairman's mentoring brochure. It outlines the difference between mentoring, coaching and sponsorship and quotes an article by Sarah Dinolfo and Julie S. Nugent entitled *Making Mentoring Work* (Catalyst, 19 January 2010). What is the difference?

"**Mentoring:** Mentoring is a relationship between two people for the purposes of developing themselves or their careers in navigating the workplace or a particular field. More often than not, the relationships are mutually beneficial, with both partners learning and benefiting from the relationship."

"**Coaching:** Coaching is instructional, often with a particular goal or focus, such as developing technical or soft skills or related learning and growth, and can be used as a way to train someone on a discrete task or series of tasks."

"**Sponsorship:** Sponsorship is when one partner, usually someone at a more senior level and/or an individual with strong influence within an organisation, assists a protégée in gaining visibility for particular assignments, promotions, or positions. The role is often recognised as having a career, job, or opportunity-related purpose with some inherent degree of accountability on the sponsor's part."

MAKING THE TRANSITION

During one of our sessions, Crenigan asked me a simple question which, to my embarrassment, I struggled to answer: "Why a board position?" It is such a basic question, yet we often fail to stop and ask ourselves: 'Why am I doing this?' He suggested that I spend some time reflecting on what it is that I really want by beginning to examine my skill set and getting some insight into "what I am and what I am not."

He says people should not be drawn to their weaknesses: be aware of them, but focus on your strengths. For example, during our chats we discussed one of my points of difference with the majority of other non-executive directors. I am part of a new generation of directors, younger in age, in tune with the needs and characteristics of the Generation X and Y (and now also M) workforce, a native user of social media and new technology, and one who understands our faster, ever changing world. These are competencies of a board member (not usually listed with other competencies such as financial, legal and risk management) and ones that had not even occurred to me.

Crenigan encouraged me to complete a 360 degree feedback survey with my colleagues, friends and family. Aside from the usual questions about my strengths and areas for development, I asked them to recommend one thing they would like me to focus on that would have a profound positive impact on my performance and how they could help me. This is where the word "reluctance" came up again. I was not completely comfortable about this process, yet, after completing it, I was humbled and inspired by many of the comments.

Nothing is off limits with Crenigan. We have talked about my diet and exercise (or lack of it) – he noted low energy levels from me and recommended I lose 10 kilograms in the next six months. We explored further and discovered that I was not managing my time well, that I was taking on too many projects and needed to be more ruthless about prioritising how I spent my week and to ensure that I was "networking purposely."

We also spoke about the "five regrets of the dying." The inspiration for this was Bronnie Ware, an Australian palliative care nurse who spent several years caring for patients in the last weeks of their lives, and who wrote about her experiences in a blog later turned into a book called *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying* (Hay House, 2011). What was the most common regret of all? "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me".

My journey with Crenigan has not ended. I am currently turning the soul searching from the past few months into a personal and professional plan which I will then test with people who have already done the things that I would like to accomplish. My energy is back.

THE TURNING POINT

As we approach a new year, many of us are focused on our new year's resolutions. After reading this article, what is your call to action? What are you going to do differently next Monday? Will you engage an executive coach or perhaps offer to coach and mentor somebody?