

Coaches Helping Coaches

by Brent Combrink

One of the basic tenets of any profession is that, as professionals, we enter the field of our profession through the profession's normative rules, ie. the rules of technical competence. When we can prove that we're technically competent, we're admitted into our profession. Make no doubt, it's a momentous occasion when we become licenced to practice!

But, paraphrasing Michael Gerber in his highly popular and seminal guide to entrepreneurs, *E-Myth Revisited*, the "E" standing for entrepreneur, it takes more than coaching expertise to be successful in one's own coaching practice.

Whilst a skilled coach may be an outstanding technician in the game of coaching, an outstanding coach does not necessarily make for a skilled entrepreneur. Moreover, in the fields of coaching and mentoring, a limited practice management ability is exacerbated by our work being largely intangible and also intrinsic to the professional him- or herself. If you're in the business of selling possibilities and not results, then you're probably familiar with this challenge.

Unfortunately, practice management skills development is largely neglected in the formal education of coaches and mentors.

Perhaps rightly so, according to John Paisley, co-owner and MD of The Coaching Centre, based in Cape Town. Paisley contends: "There is an argument that it is not a coach training school's function to deal with the challenges faced by coaches setting up their practices. Name me a university or technikon which does that! We are there to develop competences."

In a survey conducted amongst coaches in August 2008 by Michelle Clarke, a coaches' coach, 12 topics were identified by respondents as priority challenges in their practices. Of all 12 priorities, only one fell squarely in the academic area of technical skills, namely continuing professional development (CPD).

All 11 other priorities are non-technical and relate to the practice management aspects of coaching and mentoring. These include topics like how to find the right clients, time management, writing deal-winning proposals, managing a business, networking, knowing how to package the often nebulous offer of coaching or mentoring services, streamlining business processes and how to outsource work.

Perhaps one statistic that should set alarm bells ringing is that over 1 in 4 survey respondents felt uncertain about how to set their coaching fee. As a professional in private practice, this is likely to be an unhealthy situation for the practice, the practitioner and the practitioner's clients.

If success as a professional coach is to be measured not only by technical competence, but additionally by a sustainable client base, a value-based hourly rate or a high ratio of coaching revenue to total revenue, then what seems to be missing is practice management competence, including the ability to market oneself.

Where the coaching and mentoring education system needs to fill some gaps is in the development of practice management skills, especially for those new to the profession.

On the upside, this critical need is being fulfilled by several players who offer practice management development or related support specifically to coaches and mentors. We see activity most notably from Coaches and Mentors South Africa (COMENSA) and from some coach training institutions and others like the COMENSA-endorsed *Launch Your Practice!*

COMENSA, for example, regularly holds specialised events for members in each chapter's major cities that, to a large degree, provide opportunities to fulfil several CPD, networking and practice management skills development needs. Also, through COMENSA's on-line publication of research papers, newsletters and articles, members have additional learning opportunities. These resources are available on COMENSA's web site at www.comensa.org.za.

Some of the coach training colleges are stepping up to bat for the profession by providing various forms of support, especially to recently-graduated delegates. Centre for Coaching (www.gsb.uct.ac.za) at University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business has involved some of their graduate coaches in work opportunities to fulfil the centre's coaching contracts with client organisations.

The Coaching Centre (www.thecoachingcentre.co.za) offers similar work opportunities to a selection of their graduate associates. They further provide, for example, networking and marketing on behalf of their associate coaches in addition to their CPD-focussed workshops.

Creative Consciousness International (CCI, www.cci-coachingacademy.co.za) also gets positive feedback from its graduates for CCI's role in helping its graduates find their motivation and commercial feet through competition and rewards to high achievers at regular ceremonies.

While most of the coaching colleges could claim to be playing some sort of role in supporting coaches and mentors in practice, perhaps the most specialised contributions are coming from the smaller, non-training college organisations.

For example, at *Launch Your Practice!* (www.launchyourpractice.biz) the partners, Brent Combrink and Michelle Clarke, proffer a wholistic approach to building a practice. Says Clarke, "If we're clear on our authentic offering, we'll know in which ideal clients to invest. More importantly, we'll know how to integrate tools, systems and internationally-recognised practice-management methodologies to sustain and continually grow a healthy business."

As a young profession, however, the pressure to develop practice management skill is not as pervasive as in other, established professions. This leads to conjecture over the factors that lead to a practitioner to choose to put time and money into developing entrepreneurial acumen. Paisley sums it up succinctly: "It is interesting to speculate that if [Clarke's] research elicits the challenges, why so few coaches do much about them."

The outlook amongst those interviewed on this topic seems to be optimistic. As Combrink suggests, "Our expectation is that, as coaching and mentoring mature into a profession, a greater professionalism will be expected from practitioners in service quality, ethics, reputation and competitiveness. This underpins our positioning of *Launch Your Practice!* to fulfil an increasing need for niche practice management training and support services.

The bottom line appears to be similar to other professions like medical specialists, engineers and attorneys: as a practitioner coach or mentor, you have two options to achieve professional success:

1. align yourself with an organisation that brings opportunities to you, much like an employer-contractor relationship, or
2. learn to manage your practice and market yourself to bring your own opportunities your way.

The appropriate parting question of every practitioner coach and mentor is therefore: "What are you doing to build your practice?"

Brent Combrink is Chairman of COMENSA's Western Cape Chapter and, as founding owner of ProMentor, has worked with hundreds of coaches, professionals and entrepreneurs in various industries to build their businesses through better marketing, people and business systems. Contact Brent at brent@promentor.co.za or +27 (0)21 683 7575. Join Launch Your Practice! in May 2009 in Cape Town: visit www.launchyourpractice.biz for details. This report was originally published in ProMentor's monthly newsletter at www.promentor.co.za.

Contacts and references:

Original publication: *Fulfilment*, a monthly, free-to-subscribe email newsletter published by ProMentor CC in Cape Town, South Africa.

Contact person: Brent Combrink, 021 683 7575, brent@promentor.co.za

Web: www.promentor.co.za