

# Self improvement

HOW A PERSONAL BUSINESS COACH CAN PUSH YOU TO YOUR PEAK PERFORMANCE

By Maryann Hammers

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In a slump? Feeling stuck? Sales dropping? Stress mounting? Maybe you should join a gym, take a vacation, find a new job, or call a therapist.

Or...perhaps you need a coach in your corner. A personal business coach can help you identify your strengths, push past obstacles and move into action. With the help of a coach, you can find ways to meet your goals, whether you want to become more efficient, generate more leads, expand your client base, or develop better rapport with customers and colleagues.

“A sales coach becomes your partner. Together you brainstorm, set goals and design plans. The coach gives you encouragement and feedback, celebrates your wins, and keeps you focused if you lose an account or have a tough day,” says Phyllis Sisenwine of Yardley, PA who has earned the designation of “Master

Certified Coach” from the International Coach Federation, a professional association of more than 6,000 personal and business coaches. If you’re thinking maybe there’s a coach in your future, here’s a guide to what a coach could do for your sales. So let’s start at the beginning. Here’s what a sales coach is not.

## No Quick Fix

Coaches don’t come armed with a bag of tricks or quick-fix techniques. They do not feed you information or tell you what you should be doing. Coaches don’t focus on the past or attempt to “heal” you. And though they may

challenge you, business coaches never issue mandates or orders.

Since they believe that you know yourself and your business best, coaches are not likely to spout off answers. They are more likely to listen, observe and ask questions. “The coach is not the expert – the client is,” says certified coach Rachna Jain of Columbia, MD, director of operations for SalesCoachTraining.com. “The coach is there to assist clients in reaching their goals, whether in gaining new customers, generating greater revenue or boosting profits.”



Jain, who has a doctorate in psychology, explains that business coaches work from an “inside-out” approach – focusing on the whole person, not just the numbers and dollars. “Coaching is not a quick fix,” she cautions. “We want to create lasting change, so we may delve into work-life balance, family issues, quality of life and underlying stressors. We get in touch with opportunities that clients may not see in the day-to-day running of their business, and we uncover obstacles that get in their way.”

For example, one of her clients struggled with keeping customers. Through Jain’s coaching, he realized that he acted rushed and self-centered during presentations. “He didn’t ask what they needed,” Jain says. “Instead, he focused on himself and said things like, ‘here’s what I can do.’” Once he became aware of how he presented himself, he changed his approach.”

And because the client – not the coach – discovers the solutions, they are more likely to stick. “My coach never gave me easy pat answers. He always made me struggle a little so I could find the



answer that worked best for me,” says John Brunetti, a strategic account executive with IKON Office Solutions in Owings Mills, MD, who hired New York City coach Doug Sundheim last year. “As a result, the insights I acquired have stuck with me, which doesn’t happen with other training programs. Rarely have training courses helped me change my behavior or given me the sense of focus and energy the way coaching has.”

### Getting to the Bottom of Your Situation

Like most coaches, Linda Finkle of Potomac, MD, says that her coaching technique mostly consists of asking a lot of questions. “I probe into how my clients approach the sales process. Do they cold call? Do they rely on referrals? What have they been doing that seems stale? What have they tried that didn’t work? What has worked? I spend time finding out their problems and issues and figure out what is blocking them, whether it’s a fear of making cold calls, a dislike of writing letters, or a pain-in-neck customer. I ask them, ‘Where do you want to be by when?’”

Armed with that kind of information, Finkle and her clients work together to develop short-term goals, as well as six-month and annual plans with specific action steps and time lines along the way. “Most people can do more than they think is possible, so I challenge them to do something beyond what seems reasonable. Usually they can do it,” she says. For instance, when a client realized that his poor follow-up was costing sales, Finkle challenged him to commit to making a certain number of callbacks

## finding your coach

Before you commit to a coach, it’s a good idea to interview at least three. Start your search with the International Coach Federation, which offers a free referral service that lets you search by experience, credentials, specialties, location, coaching methods, gender and fees. Go to [coachfederation.org](http://coachfederation.org), or call 1-888-236-9262.

Once you have a few coaches on your list, consider these factors:

What is the coach’s education, experience and qualifications? How has he or she helped people in situations similar to yours? Ask for at least two references. Find a coach with a sales background. “Many coaches come from such fields as human resources or psychology, but it’s best if your coach has been in the sales trenches and understands your issues,” says Nancy Holland, who held the position of assistant vice president of sales for Diner’s Club and now works as a sales trainer and executive coach in Charlotte, NC.

Chemistry is critical. “Look for a good fit,” says Rachna Jain of Columbia, MD, director of operations for [SalesCoachTraining.com](http://SalesCoachTraining.com). “You should see and feel results almost immediately.” Many coaches offer an initial complimentary session. Take advantage of that to ensure that you have instant rapport and feel comfortable with your coach.

## what a coach will cost

Coaches charge, on average \$200 to \$450 per month for weekly half-hour sessions or about \$100 to \$150 per hour for one- or two-hour meetings, according to the International Coaching Federation, a professional association of personal and business coaches with more than 6,000 members.

But when we interviewed coaches for this article about their fees and sessions, we heard a variety of answers. Phyllis Sisenwine of Yardley, PA charges \$400 per month for three 40-minute phone sessions. Rachna Jain of Columbia, MD, prefers weekly 30- to 45-minute phone meetings, for which she charges \$300 to \$500 per month. Doug Sundheim of New York City, who mostly meets clients in person, charges \$200 per one-hour session. And Linda Finkle of Potomac, MD charges from \$700 to \$1,200 a month for two monthly one-hour phone sessions, depending on how much additional on-call or phone, email or in-person support the client requests.

With that kind of disparity, it's important when selecting a coach that you ask how often you and the coach will meet, if sessions will be conducted by phone or in person, what the fee is, and how the coach charges – per session, per month, or on retainer.

every week and helped him develop a system for tracking them.

Another client wanted to generate more business but was already working 50 to 60 hours a week. With Finkle's coaching, he found that he was spending too much time on servicing and paperwork. Once he hired an assistant to handle the routine stuff, he was able to get out in the field and up his sales. "My goal is not to provide answers but to help my clients ferret out solutions, whether it's changing their target market, doing more marketing, or adjusting how they sell," Finkle says.

Brunetti says he hired his coach to help him set and achieve goals. "I had spent a lot of time looking at things month to month to meet my numbers, but I hadn't taken a step back to focus on my values and reevaluate what I do and how I do it. In my first conversation with my coach, he referred to himself as a 'thinking partner' who wouldn't tell me what to do, but rather challenge me to think in different ways. I liked that idea." For example, Brunetti says, he used to "waste a lot of time obsessing" about his goals. Would

he meet them? Were they the right goals? "But Doug would tell me, 'Just set the goal and go.' That was one of the core insights I acquired from having a coach."

### Coaching Sessions

Every coach has an individual approach, style and format. Some will talk to you for a half hour each week; others prefer more in-depth, one- or two-hour weekly sessions. While many coaches conduct sessions by phone or even email, Sundheim says he prefers one-on-one meetings. "Body language tells me a lot," he says. "For instance, if someone says they're really on their game, but their body is slumped in their chair, we can have a discussion about mixed messages they might be sending."

Sundheim asks his clients to come prepared to answer the same five questions at each session: How am I doing right now? How has my week been? What new insights have I had since last session? What do I want to be acknowledged for? What do I want to focus on today? "Their answers dictate the direction we take," he says.



Sherry Essig, a Raleigh, NC coach, likes to keep her sessions fairly fluid and flexible. “We meet two or three times per month, depending on client needs,” she says. “While we always focus on moving toward the client’s goals, each session may be totally different. Some people prefer to work on one goal at a time; others like to move among several. For example, one week we may look at the sales cycle, and the next talk about how they fit with the corporate culture. Or the client may want to focus on something that’s happened since we last talked, for example, they lost a big sale and are having a hard time bouncing back, they just started working with a new prospect, or they want to brainstorm about a new approach they’d like to try.” To make the most of a coach, it’s important to have an open mind and be willing to make changes, says Cecilia MacPhee, an inside rep with Vancouver, British Columbia-based Maximizer Software, which hired a coach to work one-on-one with members of the sales team. MacPhee had struggled with customers who wanted to immediately talk about price before allowing her to launch into her pitch for her company’s CRM and contact-management software. “I had to be will-

ing to try new techniques and overcome resistance to changing how I deal with customers,” she says. “A coach can help you see your own blind spots.”

### **Accountability is Key**

Salespeople are more likely to take the necessary steps to meet their goals if they know that their coach is watching over them and counting on them to succeed. “Most salespeople know what they need to do; however, doing it is another story,” says Rachelle Disbennett-Lee, an Aurora, CO coach and publisher of *365 Days of Coaching*, an email newsletter. “My clients know they have to check in with me each week, which motivates them to follow through on their goals. For some reason, telling someone else you are going to do something is powerful – you are more likely to follow through.”

Coaches and clients say that accountability is one of the main benefits of having a coach. “I don’t want to let my coach down,” says Nancy Holland of Charlotte, NC, who worked with her coach to help her thrive in her sales position with Diner’s Club and later used her coach as a mentor to help her launch her own budding sales-training and executive-coaching business.

“At the end of each session, we agree on what I will do by next time, and I make sure that I have done what I said I would. My coach encourages face-to-face involvement and networking, such as chamber meetings, client appointments and conducting seminars, and she’s made me commit to three or four a week. Without her, I’d still be thinking about doing those things. She has been a tremendous support system.”

Sundheim likes to use a no-excuses exercise he calls “feet to the fire.” He asks his clients to finish this sentence: “In three months, if I haven’t achieved the goal we have set, I will tell you it’s because...(fill in the excuse).” The exercise works, he says, because it exposes “a nasty tendency we all have to commit to something on the outside, while on the inside we are secretly building the case that it won’t happen. This exercise forces them to rat on themselves up front.” And as a result, his clients are more likely to follow through on their action steps and meet their goals.

“All in all, I help salespeople get into action,” Sundheim adds. “Every salesperson gets tripped up from time to time. Perhaps a big deal falls through, or it seems everyone is pushing you off until next year. When that happens, it’s easy for disempowering thoughts that can slow us down or stop us to creep into our minds. Coaches help clients move past the places where they get stuck.”

Brunetti, Sundheim’s client, can vouch for that. “Tiger Woods – the best golfer in the world – has a coach to make him better,” he says. “So why shouldn’t everyone who wants to excel at what they do have one?” ✓

