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NEWS

Reaching for a better life

Career and life coach helps employees, corporations and entrepreneurs steer a clearer path to success

By Carol Latter

In the past few years, many companies — forced by a downturn in the economy to cut staff to the bare minimum needed to cope with day-to-day tasks — have issued a challenge for everyone to “do more with less.” As a result, employees, managers, executives and business owners alike have faced higher levels of job-related stress.

Now, in growing numbers, says a life and career coach based in Glastonbury, they are seeking help to restore some kind of balance — not only on the job, but in every part of their lives. Some are looking to improve their existing job situations, while others are looking for an entirely new direction.

Personal and career coaching isn't new. Nearly everyone, it seems, at one time or another, has seen or listened to life coach Cheryl Richardson (a coach who regularly appeared on Oprah in the 1990s), or heard about the best-selling book “What Color Is Your Parachute?”

But Jill Berquist of Berquist Coaching Services says today's high-stress business environment has made it more socially acceptable to get help in dealing with career challenges and choices, much as seeking help from a family counselor, once stigmatized, has become mainstream.

Her own career history helps her relate to clients who may feel overworked, unchallenged, dissatisfied or gradually begin to wonder whether the career choices they've made were the best fit for them. Her career as a coach got its start in 1997, when she was still a human resources professional at a



Career and life coach Jill Berquist says more people are seeking help to improve their work situations.

major corporation.

“I was hiring people, mentoring, and doing retention programs. I was also sought after within the organization to help people solve problems,” she says. “But I didn't feel the passion was there, like it used to be. I knew I'd reached a point in my career where I wanted to explore other options.”

Berquist says she finally realized that working in a corporate setting was not the best fit for her. “In a bigger organization, you feel like you're steering the big ship, managing processes and managing big groups of people. I

always found my bigger impact was in one-on-one situations.”

When she realized that her interest lay in setting up her own coaching business, Berquist took training and received her certification from the International Coaching Federation. She hung out her shingle in June 1997, about a year before she finally gave up her corporate job.

And she hasn't looked back. She says when people searching for a new career direction are finally able to put a name

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PHOTO: CAROL LATTER

on what they really want, they realize “it’s probably something they’ve been doing all their life.”

That personal experience continues to help her on a daily basis in exploring with her clients what their next career moves should be.

Berquist’s clients range from business owners and entrepreneurs to professionals and company executives. “They transcend industries, and sometimes they’re between industries, looking for the next thing or the better thing,” she says.

Half of her clients are men, the other half, women. They may be married or single, have children or have none. But what they have in common, she says, is a certain kind of personality that makes them seek out the help of a coach.

“They really want a lot for themselves. They want to have quality of life,” she says. “They’re fairly high performers, and want to make a mark in their lives, personally and professionally.”

Many, she adds, have already taken some steps to get out of the rut they’re in. “They want to look at things differently, and they’re open to it.”

In the course of as few as three meetings — or more commonly, numerous sessions spanning three to six months — Berquist helps clients explore what their talents, strengths and interests are, and how they might use them to best advantage.

For people who are seeking a career transition, “we might look at things like recent experiences, work style, management style, natural tendencies, what their work asks of them, and where the gaps are that are causing stress,” she says.

“We look at what has and has not gone well, their values, what they want to earn, and what compromises they’re willing to make, if any.”

Overall, however, the coaching process is less about the coach telling clients what they should do, and more

about “helping people guide themselves. The best part of coaching is to draw from people what they already know to be true about what is best for them.”

Sometimes, a client’s goal is not to find a new career, but to improve the one they’re in. Individuals may seek Berquist’s help on their own. In terms of personal career management, she says, some of her clients are looking for ways to advance themselves, build leadership

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—Jill Berquist, owner,

Berquist Coaching Services

and management skills, or set goals to balance their jobs and home lives.

But sometimes, a company enlists her aid to keep one of its valuable employees happy or challenged, or conversely, to assist someone who’s struggling.

When she is hired by a company, it’s usually to help achieve a “more tangible, finite result,” like helping to improve efficiency. She enjoys helping people to get better at what they do. A process she likes less is when she is brought in to deal with an employee who is “at risk in some way.” But she adds that these situations, while often uncomfortable for all involved, “can turn out tremendously well.”

At other times, she is hired by a business owner to steer the firm in a more effective and profitable direction.

Berquist says the demand for the services of career and life coaches, in her view, has been accelerating in recent years, because of the negative results of the downward economic spiral. Mergers, downsizing and outsourcing have all taken their toll.

“Our society creates so much pressure on people to do so much in so little time.

They’re really stretched by economic and social pressures, and the pace that we’ve succumbed to. It creates a lot of stress,” she says. “It’s just a very sensitive time for people. They feel very much at risk.”

Unfortunately, many people who would like to make a fresh start feel they have few options — something, Berquist says, that is almost never true.

She says while people who are looking for a way out may feel helpless or hopeless, in fact, “a lot of the people I work with are very much in demand in the workplace. But it’s hard for them to see their own talent. As a coach, you’re the person helping them hold onto that ideal, and see that what is possible and what isn’t possible. You’re helping them break out of that [negative] mindset.”

Sometimes, making small-scale improvements, like encouraging a client to recapture a hobby or personal interest, or to become involved in a fitness program, for example, can help begin to turn the tide in a more positive direction.

Other times, what’s needed is helping the client envision the type of career or life that he or she would like to have, then guiding that person through the steps of achieving it. The trick, she says, is “to define what you want in life, so you know it when you see it.”

She looks at coaching not as an expense, but as an investment in the future.

Berquist says one of the most satisfying parts of her job has been to assist a client, and then have that person come back for further help, having already achieved earlier goals. “It’s exciting when I see someone who has grown their business by working on their self-esteem and what they will accept in their life,” she says.

The biggest factor in any client’s success, she adds, is “what people are really willing to do.” If they’re willing to be open-minded and push the boundaries of what they think is possible, “they’re always going to do better, in any situation.” ■