

National Post  
Wednesday, October 19, 2005

## Executive coach can boost career

*Focus is on listening and team building*

BY MICHELLE MCQUIGGE  
*Financial Post*

Four years ago, Lindsay Sukornyk returned from a trip around the world wondering where to take her career. She had a commerce degree from Queen's University and had worked as a management consultant, but found she was not fulfilled by her work. After noticing the popularity of executive coaching in the United States, Ms. Sukornyk was astonished at the lack of similar resources in Canada. As a result, North Star Coaches was born.

Today, Ms. Sukornyk delights in the fact she has plenty of competition from other companies providing coaching to executives on topics ranging from strategic planning to conflict resolution.

Her company employs 15 coaches, who specialize in different industries. Amid the variety of workshops Ms. Sukornyk offers clients, she has noticed one common area of concern.

"Most of the time, executives want us to design programs to work on communication skills," Ms. Sukornyk says.

"People are tired of butting heads over reports and talking in circles at meetings. They want to build a more collaborative culture and need a more sophisticated way to communicate."

To that end, Ms. Sukornyk and her associates work with clients — including law firms, financial institutions and telecommunications firms — to customize programs that will improve communication techniques from the top down. Executives can work one-on-one with a North Star coach for a minimum of six months, workshops can be organized for individual teams, or online seminars can be provided to reach out to thousands of employees at a time.

One of North Star's clients, a senior executive with a major telecommunications firm who has been working one-on-one with Ms. Sukornyk, says the coaching has given her the support she needs to be a better manager.

"In a lot of ways, Lindsay is the boss I don't have," she says. "She provides guidance and support that you can't get from peers when you're at a certain level. Lindsay allows me to give to my team what I don't get myself."

The skills she learns from her coach are centred on listening and team-building skills. Ms. Sukornyk is an advocate for positive and interactive listening at all times. In the workshops and individual sessions she leads, she demonstrates the principles she believes in. For instance, she forbids clients to use the word "but" when discussing an issue.

"As soon as you say 'but,' you're basically negating everything that someone just said. I try to get people into the habit of looking for the positives in other people's ideas in the hope that they'll take that back to their teams later," Ms. Sukornyk says. "Most people at this level are already good communicators, but I'm trying to get them to master the simple things that have a huge impact."

Melanie Novis, president of Corporate Speech Consultants who also teaches at the University of Toronto, uses a similar approach when teaching executives how to talk their way up the corporate ladder.

"Public speaking and presenting is a skill; it can be learned," Ms. Novis says. "You don't have to change who you are to get a message across, you just need to know how to do it effectively."

Her strategy is to focus on the way in which people deliver a message, whether on a podium or across a desk. She works with managers to improve their body language and voice inflections, as these two elements make up 93% of listener impact. "I've watched people get promoted from middle manager to president," Ms. Novis says of her clients.

"Or I'll hear about an executive who got a standing ovation after a speech on taxes. The subtle communication skills are what make the difference."

While a rising number of executives are taking advantage of coaching services, there is still a stigma around the subject.

"The name of personal coaching is unfortunate," says one of Ms. Sukornyk's clients. "It describes the process well, but when people hear that, they will wonder if something is wrong with you. But I think for anyone who wants to improve their own performance, a service like that is necessary."

[mmcquigge@nationalpost.com](mailto:mmcquigge@nationalpost.com)



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