

(L-R) Terry Fearon, executive coach with Leadership Management Canada, with Pierre Zundel, dean of Renaissance College, University of New Brunswick. Photo credit: Keith Minchin.



## Coach's Corner

Executive coaches help business leaders hone skills, boost sales and dominate the competition

**W**hen Pierre Zundel became a volunteer fire chief in 2000, he walked into one of the greatest leadership challenges of his life. Thanks to rural outmigration and falling volunteer rates, the Stanley, New Brunswick fire department had only seven firefighters, compared to 15 from a few years before. “Not enough to put out a candle,” Zundel reflects.

At the time, Zundel, then a forestry

professor at the University of New Brunswick (UNB), also volunteered with a community engagement group in the nearby city of Fredericton. That’s where he first caught on to an emerging business trend: executive coaching. Having seen how coaching helped community leaders in that group, Zundel convinced the tiny village of Stanley (population 350) to pay an executive coach \$16,000

to work one-on-one with the fire brigade over several months, to develop and implement a growth plan for the fire department. For the fledgling fire chief, it was a bold move – the cost of the coach was equivalent to the department’s entire annual budget. But Zundel wanted his firefighters to be strong leaders who would attract others to join the force. “The thing that holds volunteers to their



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Zundel’s gamble paid off. Within four years, the department had recruited 30 new firefighters, and a 10-person emergency support auxiliary. They fundraised \$250,000 to purchase a new pumper truck and almost all the firefighters who received coaching went on to secure promotions at work. When Zundel accepted a new job as dean of Renaissance College, a leadership faculty at UNB, he hired the same coach to help him manage his staff, set organizational goals and ease the transition into his new role.

Executive coaching has been around since the 1980s when the American Psychological Association coined the term to describe an emerging area of consulting: one-on-one sessions with executives to address performance gaps and business outcomes. Similar to the coach-athlete relationship, the idea was that these typically hour-long sessions conducted over a few months could give business leaders personal support to set and stick to goals, manage stress and combat professional isolation. Fuelled by the personal development movement and massive economic restructuring that upped the competency requirement and

performance review rates for corporate executives, coaching took off; today the International Coaching Federation claims coaching is the second fastest-growing occupation in the world, after IT-related jobs. More and more, Atlantic Canadian businesses are using coaches to help shape corporate strategies and align

business and personal goals. The benefits, which can include greater job satisfaction, fewer HR problems and a better bottom line, have helped promote coaching culture to the mainstream. Here’s how some Atlantic business leaders are using coaching to grow their companies.



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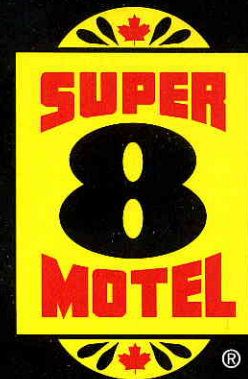
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### Where’s the Board?

Over the past five years, coaches are reporting as much as a 10-fold increase in their business. What’s fueling the craze? Peter Porteous, of Woodstock, NB-based management consulting firm PineRidge, points to the changing role of corporate boards.

“Board focus has become highly skewed to measuring operating performance,” he says. Which means that traditional board functions, such as mentoring the CEO, are being ignored. “As CEOs, we’re taught to be focused on giving open, candid feedback to our team,” he says. Unfortunately, Porteous says CEOs aren’t getting that feedback from their board, fueling the need to look outside the firm.

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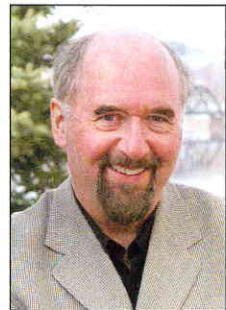
Peter Porteous

### 1. Managing during a merger

In the mid-2000s, CEO Peter Porteous oversaw the merger of a recently acquired US-based lawn-and-garden replacement parts and accessories business with Freeplay Energy PLC, a manufacturer of clean energy consumer products. Porteous, who cut his teeth as a senior executive with Woodstock, NB-based Barrett Corporation, knew that fusing both the visions and the staff of a traditional, family-owned, regionally-focused firm with Freeplay's modern culture and ambitious global agenda, would be tough. So he retained an executive coach to work one-on-one with him and his management team on a weekly basis.

Over the course of regular, hour-long sessions, the coach helped to align the nine-person team around the firm's new vision to spread affordable clean energy to the developing world. In the process, the coach was a sounding board for the nine senior managers, freeing up Porteous' time to deal with other issues related to the merger.

Looking back, Porteous says the greatest advantage in coaching is that it helps to overcome the isolation related to the corner office. "There are times when you're either not comfortable or cannot share certain information with your managers," Porteous says. "It's useful to have someone you can trust to talk to."



Executive coaching helped my company break free of corporate stagnation to achieve significant sales growth.

Bob Miller

### 2. Kick-starting Growth

Bob Miller, president of Fredericton, NB-based production company Atlantic Mediaworks Ltd., hired an executive coach four years ago to help his 22-year-old firm deal with corporate stagnation. After two decades in business, Miller says he and his partner were beginning to notice signs of a rut: they were losing clients to competitors, missing out on bids and struggling to deal with increasing industry competition. "We were getting stressed because we were doing the same things we'd always done, and they were no longer working," he says.

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**It's like honing the sharp edge of a sword: coaching works best with people who are already good at their job.**

Darrell Bishop

So he and his partner began an intensive coaching program to help them bust out of the rut. For one month, they spent one day a week in group sessions with three other business leaders. With the help of their coach, the group discussed common problems and evaluated their individual businesses. After that, the coach followed up with bi-weekly one-on-one coaching sessions for several more months.

"It was like a cold splash of water in the face," says Miller. After identifying barriers to growth such as poor quality control mechanisms and a lack of product innovation, he and his coach developed strategies to overcome each obstacle. What's more, the coach held Miller accountable for implementing the strategies at the following coaching session. "That added accountability, follow-through and ownership," Miller says.


In the last six years, Miller estimates his firm has experienced 30-to-50 per cent growth in sales thanks to new product offerings, new business development and existing client growth. And while the cost of coaching was significant (coaches can cost as much as \$300 per hour), Miller says it was a worthwhile investment.

### 3. Stepping into a new role

When Darrell Bishop stepped into his role as executive vice-president of Strategic Planning at New Brunswick Power, he knew he'd have to learn to delegate better if he had any hope of reaching the ambitious goals he'd set for himself. But while he had talented operations managers working for him, he believed that many of them, like him, needed help to stay focused on overarching corporate goals. "We were more comfortable down in the weeds, problem solving," he reflected.

So, he hired a coach and started a four-month intensive coaching session during which he devoted as much as 10 hours per week to business and personal evaluation exercises and one-on-one sessions with his coach. Then, he enlisted the coach to work with his senior managers and plant superintendents for a similar period. Bishop began noticing some major changes. His managers began delegating more work and using their time to take on new projects, such as testing different combinations of fuels for maximum efficiency. Managers of different generating plants began to work together – a marked change to their typical silo approach. Together, the plants began coordinating maintenance schedules and sharing resources, which created greater efficiencies and cost savings.

But while it worked for him to invest in coaching, not only for senior managers but superintendents as well, Bishop warns that coaching is best when it's applied to people who are already good at their job. "It takes good people to start with," he said. "You're honing the sharp edge of the sword."

Of course, experts say success in coaching is based largely on the chemistry between the coach and client. Terry Fearon, an executive coach with Leadership Management Canada, uses personality tests, and assessments to ensure he and his clients click. "It comes down to understanding three main things," he says. "(As a coach), I need to know the person first, I need to understand the company and I need to know that person's relationship with staff." 

**Dawn Says:** Eastlink CEO and blueberry baron John Bragg prefers his "coaching" in a different format. See "Book of John", page 54.



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