



Choosing the right Business Development Coach or Sales Trainer

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Hans Morse

Helping professional service firms to retain and win more business using evidence based and proven commercial skilling methodologies. An experienced business developer, BD coach, trainer and client feedback reviewer.

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And why soft skills training is even more important now.

Being a great practitioner is not enough in a competitive market. Many practitioners, including accountants, lawyers, engineers and management consultants can lack experience and confidence in business development and commercial skills. Client relationship management, client acquisition, networking and negotiation skills are areas that need masterful development. Gaining trust and building long-term relationships is the key to success in professional services and we can only do this by really understanding what drives our clients professionally and personally.

Being a good business developer also requires you to hone in on your own personal style and strengths - something that can't be explored or developed through traditional sales training that's focus can be on slick sales techniques. Moreover, we are seeing a contraction from organisations desperately and rightfully so, endeavouring to cut unwanted costs. Many consulting assignments unfortunately, can be seen as a *nice to haves* and something advisors need to work harder on, articulating the real value and importance to their clients and prospects. Additionally, new graduates are expected to gain client-facing experience, with little or no commercial skills – experience that just isn't part of their career's curriculum. So,

the need for focused training, or coaching, is a must to gain momentum in a professional career. Personally, I target two key outcomes, which are measurable: Positive behavioural change and increased revenue. Both of which are important goals, not only for high performers, but also for remedial and more junior staff.

The interesting thing is that soft skills, which includes communication skills, effective negotiations and even defusing conflict, is all part of what we call EQ skills (emotional intelligence), also known as emotional quotient. Training and coaching to develop these skills are not limited to client or customer facing staff, but also valuable for procurement or purchasing department staff, who need to engage in high value negotiations to secure services or products with potential long-term business partnerships and relationships.

So how do you select the right BD coach or sales trainer for your organisation?

I recall when first starting out, a very experienced executive coach who was introduced to me by a senior and very well respected non-executive director on a hand full of top 100 ASX listed Australian companies. It was interesting to hear that in most cases, executive coaches didn't come from coaching organisations, with a good number of coaches to choose from, but simply those working for themselves. If you look at some of the best athletes for example, most have coaches and managers who work independently and there's key reasons and benefits to have independence, not just for executive coaches or BD coaches, but even for sales trainers. Nevertheless, I found in most cases, being approached and asked by Partners at PwC, EY and KPMG to coach them, because I worked at these firms as an employee or contractor at some stage and had good knowledge of their working environment and professional service culture.

In most cases, executive coaches are semi-retired, or retired CEOs, or other C level executives. Just like coaches and managers to athletes, they themselves are former athletes. In fact, I have personally coached a few CEOs and other senior executives keen to better position themselves commercially, but I would never venture into other areas, like finance, HR, treasury or capital raising. Surprisingly, as a result of having personally worked on contract at an executive coaching organisation, many executive coaches on the books don't possess the skills or experience to provide specific coaching on BD or commercial skills. Thus, the reason to engage a focused and experienced BD Coach. It's simply not the same focus. I recall having to run several very quick sessions for these executive coaches, who were to some extent, providing sales coaching to their clients, with very little knowledge, or no experience in the field. So, do keep in mind, BD, or sales coaching, if you like, is quite different to executive coaching.

BD Coaching is focused on honing commercial skills, developing EQ skills and setting a functional BD personal plan for an individual in a firm. BD Coaching also varies according to the individuals needs and this could include advice and suggestions on a particular bid approach or managing a difficult client.

Sales training programs on the other hand, work well to provide teams with the commercial skills, methodologies and tools to undertake business development tasks with confidence. Both work well in professional services, or even other industries with very technical and complex, long-term client relationships, for example IT and medical devices. I have attended

many sales training courses over the past 20 years and none of them really address the important things. Most are based around value propositions or meeting client needs through solution selling. These antiquated approaches just don't cut it with savvy buyers. Important methods of approach are based around the buying process, as opposed to a sales process. This includes the client's decision style and based on whether the client has indicated a need, or the approach for potential process improvement or transition. Again, something regular sales processes do not capture.

This is why we have developed evidence-based BD with the ability to story-tell, which is such an important part of L&D and training in general. So why do we agree to attend sales courses facilitated by trainers with no real selling experience? In fact, I have seen books written about sales, pitching or even account management by individuals who have never held sales roles, let alone, seen an actual client or customer!

So, why not leave it to internal business development staff? Well, there are a number of reasons and again, independence is important. The other being specific skills and experience as a trainer or coach and the simple fact business development staff are generally occupied with account management, set revenue goals, other BAU goals and KPIs to achieve. Finally, many smaller firms just don't have BD resources, nor do they need them on a day-to-day basis.

Important considerations when selecting a BD coach or sales trainer for your organisation:

1. Comfort + Trust = Rapport:

Firstly, you must feel you are in a non-judgmental environment when interacting with your BD coach or sales trainer. Meaning, you feel comfortable, safe and willing to have open communication. Yes, at times you may feel vulnerable and raw, which is uncomfortable, however this mood state is needed to allow your BD coach or sales trainer to gain insight into you as an individual. Only then can they identify needed skill development, to support positive behavioural change and outcomes.

So before engaging your BD coach or sales trainer, ask yourself the following questions: Do you feel comfortable with the coach, safe to share openly your fears, concerns, limitations and weaknesses? Do you like their style and approach? Do you trust they have the skills you need and the ability to identify and support needed skill development to help you reach your true potential?

If your answer yes, then rapport can be established. A working partnership formed. It's not rocket science when you think about it. It is no different as to why your clients choose to work with you!

2. Be realistic with your goals and expectations:

What do you really want to achieve? Is it realistic? Are clear steps to goal achievement in place, which are measurable and time framed, to support positive outcomes?

I've worked with firms which want to take a short-cut and try to "cold-call" their way to winning new business in a very short time frame (although this worked well 20 years ago) –

all in the allocated and wasted time period of the coaching framework. Believe me, I've seen firms reluctant to take business development seriously to build a client centric business. Let's be realistic in understanding, that if you want to target new business it can take well over 12 months from meet and greet (the average is 18 months for large clients), to billing a new client. By this stage, your coaching engagement should be wrapped up, with a good level of skills development and a strong plan of attack.

3. The skills you need with the experience to back it

It's important, most of all, that the BD coach or trainer has real life experience in business development, or sales if you like. Have they actually sold anything? Particularly professional services! Many coaches focus purely on and state vague and generalised claims such as "How to generate new business" or "Generate more business through effective networking" etc, etc, as tactics are only half the process. An experienced BD coach, or even a seasoned sales trainer will also focus on understanding decision styles with real live client situations and address these with techniques to overcome any obstacles along the way. Not to mention, your current skill level in this area. In fact, most sales training programs in general use slick, but flawed techniques, which fail to address decision styles and the heuristic bias of decision making in general, let alone focus on the coachee's personal style and EQ skills.

4. Has the coach walked in your shoes, or the shoes you want to walk in?

The problem today is that many BD coaches and trainers have either never met a client or worked for a professional services firm. So, can you imagine appointing a former CEO as an executive coach who has never actually worked for an organisation or understands specific industry cultures? The experience comes from imparting real-life examples as case studies to allow you to reflect on it in your own real-world situation.

Hans Morse is Australia's most experienced professional services business development coach and trainers, previously working with EY, KPMG, PwC, Deloitte and several law firms in full time and contract consulting roles. Having worked in Australia and the United Kingdom he also has specialist expertise in conducting qualitative insight reviews. Working with leaders and teams to improve sales enablement, by enhancing their commercials skills, resulting in improved client relationships and increased revenue generation.