

Coaching for a Creative Life

By [Ellie Stevenson](#) Arts Hub | Wednesday, December 24, 2008

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Why do creatives need a coach? And isn't it expensive? Coaching, which has its origins in sport and education, is still a relatively new industry, but is becoming more prominent. It's even infiltrating the creative industries, although take-up is still limited. Arts Hub gives you the latest on coaching and why it could be right for you, your business and the creative sector.

“The benefits of coaching can't be underestimated,” explains [Diane Parker](#), coaching consultant for the creative industries. “You'd be amazed at the transformation that can happen after just one or two sessions with an effective coach. That might be all that you need to help you through a particular transition.” So what does coaching deliver?

“Coaching is good for creative endeavours,” says [Mark McGuinness](#), business coach for creative professionals. “It offers a structured approach and gets clients into action mode. Coaching is goal-focussed: it looks at what the client wants to achieve, how they can achieve it and how they will know they've achieved it. A coach will also hold you accountable. Coaching is stretching and challenging, but also supportive. A good coach will give you structure but allow you to manage the process in your own way. A coach should be non-judgmental and facilitate creativity.”

Coaching, then, is about improving performance and developing potential. Central to this is the individual's role in the coaching process: “Coaching is outcome-based but client-determined,” says [Steve Nobel](#), coach, author and NLP master practitioner. He goes on to explain that coaching can help in a number of areas, from assisting people in prioritising, clearing blocks and working on strategy, to dealing with specific problems. It can also help you to handle change.

There are coaches for all circumstances, from life and career coaches to the executive kind and those who work on developing on-the-job performance. But what kinds of client do they deal with? Mark McGuinness comments, “I've found* that coaching isn't all that common in the creative sector. It's seen more in large

organisations such as the BBC and areas such as advertising, where there's more of a corporate environment. It's not so common in SMEs – not surprisingly, as small businesses don't usually have the resources for training and development.” But there's a growing interest in coaching, within the sector. And as Diane Parker explains, “It's not necessarily about the external business coach coming in and offering executive coaching to top-level management, but about giving managers, leaders and professionals coaching skills themselves – about educating and changing the culture of an organisation from the inside out.”

Claudie Plen, business coach and trainer for [Edge Thinking](#), which does a lot of work in corporate environments, concurs. “For us, the goal is not just to go in and coach the staff themselves,” she says. “What we've done in various project situations is design a management development programme which includes developing a coaching culture for the organisation. That's far more powerful than any other intervention, because the managers are coaching the teams themselves and actually developing that culture from the inside. It's more powerful and more sustainable.”

Coaching can be invaluable in businesses where people are promoted on the basis of their creative work, and can benefit from leadership training. It can also assist with communication issues between creative and business teams, helping them to understand each other and buy into a shared vision for expansion.

But what if you're a freelancer or run a micro business? Diane Parker says, “Many creatives are experiencing a daily balancing act between making their art and developing a business so they're juggling the demands of a portfolio career. Some might be teaching or working at a completely unrelated job in order to fund their art-making, and could benefit from help with prioritising and focus. For those who do make a living from their creativity, there's a danger of creative burnout. Coaching can give you a fresh way of looking at things, a renewed sense of purpose and help you get back into flow.” She continues:

“If you work within the arts and creative industries, you tend to go through a lot of transitions. Coaching can help you to see the opportunities in something like a redundancy or in a project coming to an end – to turn it into a plus rather than a negative.” And coaching can be very effective in giving people the confidence to deal with the business side of things and plan for growth.

So what about the costs – isn't coaching expensive? One thing about coaching is that it tends to be short-term. Depending on their requirements, a client may need as few as 1-3 sessions. And as to the cost, Steve Nobel comments that it's a question of the benefits in terms of time, energy and results. “If someone's been stuck for several years on a project,” he says, “and one or two sessions can move them on, then it has to be worth it.”

Claudie Plen talks about the return on investment. “What I tend to find with my clients is that generally they're making more money, using their time more effectively. You should be able to see an absolute concrete return on investment in terms of the time and money spent. In a corporate environment, for example, effective coaching can help reduce staff turnover, thereby saving thousands in recruitment and retraining.”

Diane Parker adds, “It's important to remember that some coaches that specialise in coaching for the creative industries offer pro bono services or services on a sliding scale. Some coaches may charge a particular fee for an organisation, but might drop their prices for an individual, according to need and ability to pay.”

So how do you find the right coach, in a sector with no clear regulation, and a variety of qualification routes? Research is the key, Diane tells us, and deciding what you need and can afford at that moment. And, crucially,

having a conversation with a coach about these issues, *before* you enter into an agreement. Diane's report, [Coaching, Mentoring and Facilitation for Creative and Cultural Leadership](#) has some valuable tips on finding a coach. And, she comments, "One of the outcomes of some research commissioned by the Cultural Leadership Programme a couple of years ago is the development of a network of coaches and mentors working within the sector. When it's completed, it will be delivered through [Creative Choices](#)^o – before the end of the year."

Coaching has much to offer the rapidly growing creative sector, even in the current economic climate. Says Claudie Plen, "There's a real potential for the creative sector to keep on growing and it's important for businesses to be aware of the extent to which coaching can support productivity in these circumstances. You're making sure that people are still happy and motivated when things are very challenging financially. I'd encourage people to think about the impact this can have on their business. It's not all doom and gloom at the moment, especially in the creative sector. What coaching does is support that level of growth."

* Mark McGuinness: *Perceptions of Coaching in the UK Creative Industries* (Research Project)

Websites

[Creative Management for Creative Teams](#) (free e-book from Mark McGuinness)

[Time Management for Creative People](#) (free e-book from Mark McGuinness)

