

MANAGING YOUR CAREER

Now, Add One More To the Hiring Process: The Boss's Coach

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Carol Shapiro badly needed a second in command for Family Justice, the booming New York nonprofit that she founded and runs with fervor. She really liked one prospect because "she had amazing energy."

But Ms. Shapiro didn't pick her -- partly because the executive coach she used had also interviewed the candidate and found she lacked enough managerial experience. Elisabet Eklind, another contender, won kudos from the coach. She joined Family Justice as chief operating officer in late February.

Welcome to the latest development in job hunting. You impressed the recruiter, treated the receptionist politely and bonded with the hiring official. Now, you must also pass muster with the executive coach for your likely boss. The rising popularity of such additional screening reflects management's increased use of coaches and its worries about the high turnover among new hires.

Coaches can offer "an objective perspective on the candidate as well as on the potential candidate's fit," says Ben Dattner, a New York industrial and organizational psychologist. He has interviewed staffing prospects for four executives. And the extra hoop can have an added benefit for the job seeker "because an executive coach can describe what this new boss will really be like," suggests Marilyn Machlowitz, a New York recruiter who handled Ms. Shapiro's search.

Yet a close encounter with someone else's coach makes many applicants anxious. A look at the Family Justice experience offers a road map for navigating this hurdle and taking advantage of a coach's insights.

Trained as a social worker, Ms. Shapiro launched her organization from a storefront 11 years ago with hopes of breaking generational cycles of involvement in the criminal-justice system. Family Justice employs 33, offering training and technical assistance nationwide.

Last spring, the founder turned to Kathleen Pogue White, an executive coach and leadership consultant, for assistance with her rapid expansion, staffing problems and difficulty sharing power. "There were clear signs I wasn't doing a good job," Ms. Shapiro remembers.

Ms. White says she urged the driven Family Justice president to be more collaborative with associates, among other things. "It is challenging to let go," Ms. Shapiro concedes.

Ms. Shapiro asked her coach to interview prospective No. 2 executives because the coach deeply understood her passionate commitment -- and the importance of a proper match.

A good fit meant a lot to Ms. Eklind, too. The veteran nonprofit official pursued the Family Justice vacancy shortly after starting a position that "turned out to be a very different job than what I was expecting."

The notion of being screened by Ms. White didn't daunt Ms. Eklind. A coach had counseled her for a year after she became an executive director for the first time.

Ms. White quickly judged Ms. Eklind's suitability. Even before they chatted, the coach sensed that the candidate was unflappable, based on how she twice rescheduled their interview due to last-minute work commitments. "This is out of my control," Ms. Eklind calmly stated in one email.

The candidate prepared for the session by jotting down what she had gleaned about Ms. Shapiro from her and her subordinates. Ms. Eklind told Ms. White about her own operational strengths and sought further clues about the president's style.

How will she react when my decisions differ from hers? Ms. Eklind inquired. "Will she be comfortable handing over power?"

"Yes, but you will have to watch out and work on that," Ms. White replied.

In meeting the coach for a would-be superior, you will elicit greater candor by posing nonthreatening questions, career experts advise. Request guidance about how to flourish under the person's command rather than demand a list of flaws.

Ms. Eklind was blunt. She got Ms. White to confirm that Ms. Shapiro "acts with a lot of enthusiasm, but not a lot of attention to detail."

The coach wondered whether Ms. Eklind could accept playing second fiddle again. The prospect explained that while an executive director, she had enjoyed her COO duties the most and decided that should be her next job.

Ms. White recommended Ms. Eklind because she was mature enough to "withstand my ridiculous optimism," while "our values are strikingly the same," Ms. Shapiro recalls. The Family Justice leader didn't fear sharing authority with the recruit. She even took a business trip the week Ms. Eklind arrived. "It set the tone that somebody else is in charge," she said about her staff.

Ms. Shapiro intends to keep using Ms. White for several months to "insure that the honeymoon is still going on." Ms. Eklind doesn't mind. In fact, she appreciates the consultant's willingness to help her build a partnership with her new boss.

Applicants vetted by a hiring manager's coach should plum the nature of that relationship. Executives heavily dependent on outside counselors "may have difficulty coming to their own conclusions," cautions Dr. Dattner.