

- Josh Mehlman
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Photo credit: Hilbert Ho

Are business coaches the key to success? Armed with nothing more than a notepad and digital recorder, Josh Mehlman steps into the ring with seven leading coaches and asks them to prove they're worth your time and money. Who lands the knockout blow?

Business coaches are everywhere.

You can't open a business magazine without tripping over ads for and articles from them, and while there are very few hard numbers, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest Australia is facing a plague to rival cane toads and Elvis impersonators.

Where have they all come from? One reason there are no hard numbers is Australia has no industry group or association of business coaches, and no accreditation is required. You simply set yourself up as a business coach and let your work speak for itself. It's no wonder many business owners are sceptical about the benefits of hiring a coach.

Still, we know plenty of businesses that have achieved remarkable success with external tutelage, so *Nett* magazine set out to discover what makes business coaches tick and whether they're worth the money and effort. We set up the ultimate rumble in the boardroom, pitting charts and diagrams against business models to help you find the best coach for your needs.

Why would you want one?

In July 2007, boutique design agency Rysen comprised its two owners and a few regular freelancers. Co-owner and managing director Ryuji Uematsu had big plans, but didn't know how to achieve them.

“We always wanted to be a medium-sized agency of around 12 to 20 people,” he says. “We had some financial goals [to hit] certain targets so it would be more rewarding personally. We realised that to achieve those goals, we needed external advice.”

The partners investigated a range of business coaches and found one who “genuinely seemed interested” and had the right skills, Uematsu explains.

“We highlighted a few key areas where our business needed improvement – the main one was sales development,” he says. “The second part was having systems in place for invoicing, backup, documentation and so on.”

Engaging a coach was a serious financial commitment for a small agency.

“Their first goal was to recoup the costs of the investment we were making in them – to increase our sales so they could prove themselves,” says Uematsu.

Rysen now has six permanent staff and a larger pool of external contractors.

“Since engaging the business coach, we’ve tripled our turnover, so they’ve more than paid for themselves,” says Uematsu. “The business is also more profitable.”

“Apart from the great advice, they keep us honest and more responsible. When you’re paying someone, you want to make it worthwhile.”

Truth or dare

Rysen’s experience with a business coach was overwhelmingly positive. Uematsu and his business partner did all the right things when looking for a coach. They set concrete goals, shopped around and found an adviser who was a good personality fit and had the capabilities to achieve their aims. They were also fortunate to find a coach willing to pay their own way by ensuring increased sales.

To find out more about the bewildering array of business coaches available to Australian small businesses, we did the same kinds of research: looked through business and trade magazines, asked people in our professional network and searched on the internet.

Were we surprised that some coaches we approached chickened out? Not really.

After some screening, we came up with six coaches willing to be interviewed, photographed, poked and prodded, and you’ll see their profiles throughout this article. A seventh coach was overseas and not available for the photo session, but gave us answers by email.

We questioned them about their background, experience as coaches, stand-out successes and understanding of small business needs. We also asked them to explain how they would help a business owner solve common problems such as:

- A salesperson keeps missing targets
- One of the owners doesn't get along with his/her business partner
- The business takes up all of the owner's time and is destroying his/her marriage
- The company can't hang on to staff and recruitment costs are going through the roof
- Staff spend all day on Facebook
- The owner doesn't see the point of running the business anymore
- Continually losing clients to a major competitor
- The company's profit margin has been whittled away to zero by increasing costs
- The owners have trouble finding the cash to pay upcoming bills
- Customers constantly complain about poor quality or service

Finally, we encouraged them to choose a task they would perform for a customer as a proof of concept or to demonstrate their abilities.

Meet the coaches

Roland Hanekroot

New Perspectives Business Coaching

Age: 49, old enough to know better

Coaching career: Five years

Past lives: Journalist, charter-boat skipper, taxi driver, boat builder, renovator

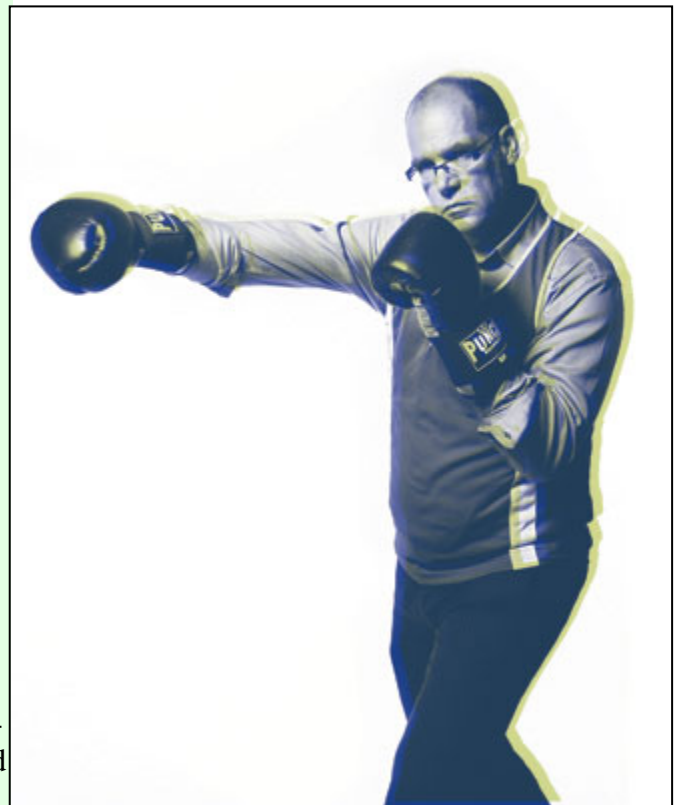
How did you get into coaching?

For most of my business life, nearly 20 years, I was the founder and owner of a building company that specialised in residential renovations and heritage restoration.

What's unique about your style?

A few things are different about me. I combine the best of consulting, mentoring and personal coaching for a unique level and quality of support. I work with my clients in a defined six-month time frame. It has a beginning and an end and clients know exactly what we will do together, when we will do it by and how much it will cost. My programs and projects are designed completely from scratch for each

client and each situation. The programs are entirely flexible and responsive to developments as they take place for the client and their business. I give my clients as



much of my time as they need from week to week, as opposed to a fixed number of hours or sessions per month.

Proudest achievement?

In the middle of last year, I worked with an electrician client whose business was on track to lose a lot of money. By the end of the year, we had turned the ship around and he actually ended the year with a modest profit.



Shivani

Passionate People

Age: 36, but I feel younger and wiser

Coaching career: Seven years for a living, but unofficially 20 years

Past lives: Engineer, manager

How did you get into coaching?

I was a senior manager with BHP Billiton making and saving them a lot of money. I loved the role but realised that this was not my passion and what I wanted to do in the long term. I did not want someone at my funeral saying, “She dedicated her life to BHP”. I wanted people to say how amazing I was and what a legacy I had left behind.

What’s unique about your style?

Connecting the head and the heart. A lot of coaching is very intellectual. Although we use models to develop your thinking and grow your business, coaching to us is about getting people’s authentic selves to come out so they become excellent leaders and people. The foundation of our business and three words we use constantly are: inspire, challenge and transform.

Proudest achievement?

My vision is to touch a billion people in this lifetime. I have reached nearly 30 million people already through speaking, coaching, TV work and my books. Helping people

to unlock their passion, achieve their vision and be successful is very rewarding. One example is the Chinese printer who worked on my book *Passion @ Work*. She wrote to me in broken English and told me that the book had inspired her to quit the printing business. It was not her passion. This was great for her; however, we did need to find another printer!

Casey Gollan

www.caseygollan.com.au 

Age: 36

Coaching career: 12 years

Past lives: Student, sports event promoter

How did you get into coaching?

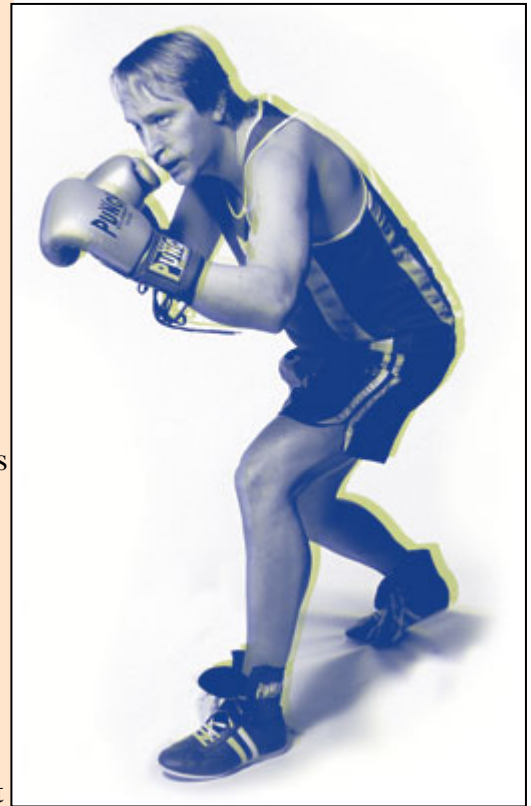
I had a lot of success starting, promoting and running sporting events at university while I was studying. After graduating, I went straight into my own business of coaching business people to grow their business. I just figured I'd be good at it! I was a tad naive and confident! One of my first clients tripled her sales after three months working with me. She gave me 48 referrals – she wrote all their contact details down on several pieces of A4 paper! I contacted them one by one and I was away.

What's unique about your style?

Each business is unique, so for maximum results, it requires a unique coaching approach to support and encourage it. I tailor my approach, tools, strategies to suit each individual, their business, their market and their situation. There are no boring books or unnecessary modules involved.

Proudest achievement?

Helping people bring out the best in themselves and others. I helped start, shape and develop business coaching here in Australia and around the world. When I started in the late '90s, no one knew what the word 'coaching' meant in business. People would say, "Oh, so you're a consultant". Now coaching has become an accepted term. To me that has been extraordinary. Many coaches now use the approaches and tools that I help pioneer and develop early in my career.



Eve Dallas

Marchant Dallas

Age: Over 50

Works with husband Trevor Marchant

Coaching career: 15 years

Past lives: Real estate, consulting

How did you get into coaching?

I worked in real estate and always had my own consulting business specialising in work-life balance. Trevor held a number of senior and executive positions with banks and insurance companies, including the head of training for Westpac.

What's unique about your style?

It's hard to say if they're unique or not – we don't look at what the competition is doing because we believe there are always plenty of opportunities for everyone ... providing you get the results! We take a balanced approach to coaching. Trevor and I both get involved in the process (bringing male and female perspectives) and we always insist that all the owners get involved. We are just as interested in the individual's growth as the business. We look at five key result areas in life: health, wealth, self, relationships and time.

We have designed a range of tools and models to explain the concepts behind what we do. Our job is to coach – we fail in that job if we don't get the desired outcome. Sporting teams hire coaches to help them win premierships; business owners hire coaches to help win in the game of business.

Proudest achievement?

Our coach-led business development course is now a nationally accredited course. We have turned around sales for clients from abysmal to record breaking. Several larger companies use our methods and courseware. We are proud that no matter what the situation, we're able to help in some way.



Laurence Harrould



Aviel

Age: 56 going on 28

Works with partner Danita Needleman and Sancho, a Maltese x Lhasa Apso

Coaching career: Seven years

Past lives: Biotechnology researcher, truck driver-labourer, astrologer, high school teacher, IT consultant

How did you get into coaching?

At last count I'd had about five careers; not sure if that means I'm unstable or flexible! I finally worked out that I needed to learn from other people's experience – I won't live long enough to make all the mistakes myself.

What's unique about your style?

We understand the owner sets the tone of a small business, so we aim to work directly with the business owner to achieve their objectives for their business and their personal life. This

requires us to understand the deeper drivers a person has and we use a diverse range of tools including astrology and tarot as well as more traditional ones. Also, we have a money-back guarantee. We believe so strongly in our system that we are prepared to back ourselves this way.

Proudest achievement?

One company I worked with was taking bets on whether a salesperson would quit before he got fired. As part of the coaching process, I found that he had huge financial issues, sick children and significant pressure from his father to guarantee a loan. He was overwhelmed and wasn't able to focus or be positive at work. At the end of the coaching series, the business owner was so thrilled with the changes, he indicated he would create a role for this staff member in order to keep him in the company.

Toby Mills

Carnegie Management Group 

Age: 38

Coaching career: Nine years

Past lives: Technology consultant

How did you get into coaching?

I was working as an IT consultant but realised the majority of what I was doing was coaching. While I had a very technical background, a lot of what I did was helping people through difficult situations. I didn't recognise it until much later, until someone sat me down and said, "You coached that person really well". The difference is, a consultant fixes problems, while I was helping people fix their own problems.

What's unique about your style?

I know where everybody wants to get to, it's a matter of how to get everyone married at the same point. Sometimes you have to accelerate one and put the brakes on the other. The trick to that is getting people to hold their nerve during the acceleration and braking. Other companies focus on the 'small' in small business, but we don't focus on the size, we look at their vision. If they want to go for a goal, we're right behind them. You're only limited by your imagination. I found a niche sitting between clients and big system integrators, being the go-to-guy for both, the peacemaker. I do a fair few big deal negotiations.

Proudest achievement?

One of the best things I've done was to set up an international technology centre of excellence – the people and the processes they followed. It spanned Great Britain, Europe, Asia and America, and included more than 100,000 people. I had to marry different cultures, time zones, languages and ways of doing things. It was an amazing experience.

Brad Sugars

ActionCOACH 

Age: 36

Coaching career: 15 years

Past lives: Entrepreneur

[NOTE: Brad was unable to speak to us in person or attend our photo shoot – he emailed us these responses.]

How did you get into coaching?

I started ActionCOACH in 1993, but have been a business coach since my days at university when I was studying to be an accountant. I got started in business early, and by the time I was in my early 20s, I had owned or managed a retail shop, a magazine, an ad agency (for about a day), a pizza manufacturer and even a pet food operation. During this time, I got an offer from motivational speaker Robert Kiyosaki to teach my sales and marketing approach to his entrepreneur master classes in Hawaii. After that, I started my own company presenting the fundamentals of business growth to audiences around the world.

What is unique about your style?

Many of the things we teach aren't new, nor are they particularly difficult. They are, however, systemised ways of doing business that have been proven to improve business in any category and in any one of a number of different countries around the world. Simple doesn't mean easy, and for many businesses, implementing these strategies is difficult because it requires changing mindsets and ways of operating and marketing the business.

Proudest achievement?

Obviously, I'm very proud when a client succeeds and wins an industry award or is recognised for excellence in their field. However, I'm most proud of seeing owners get really good at the basics so they can build a business that pays the bills and builds a great lifestyle for themselves and their team. When I first started out, I was amazed when people would thank me for getting them to the point where they wouldn't have to get an overdraft.

Reputation building

Business coaches have to spend serious effort to stand out in an increasingly crowded and competitive marketplace. For this reason, many prefer to rely on referrals for the majority of their new business.

"Results are the best sales tool we have, so a great percentage of our business comes from referrals from business owners who have been successfully coached," says Brad Sugars of ActionCOACH.

"We do a lot of work through Family Business Australia and our national accreditation body, the Australian Institute of Company Directors," says Toby Mills of Carnegie Management Group.

Shivani Gupta of Passionate People makes heavy use of public relations, writing blogs and columns for major publications and producing the TV show *Risking It All*, which screened on SBS in mid-2008. (She further demonstrated her commitment to PR by driving from Newcastle to Sydney for our photo shoot while seven months pregnant.)

“The early days was a lot of offline marketing,” says solo coach Casey Gollan. “I did a lot of seminars, but breakfasts and evenings weren’t good for enjoyment of life, so I stopped that and got onto the web.”

All the coaches we spoke to had websites and used online marketing to varying degrees.

A range of perspectives

Some of the coaches we spoke to specialised in small business, while others had a mix of large and small clients and offered some unique perspectives on the needs of SMEs.

“If a small business owner can increase the bottom line 50%, 100% or 400%, those results can be life-changing, both inside and outside the business,” says Sugars, a small business specialist.

“That’s really the goal of coaching – and those are the kind of results business owners expect, but are sometimes surprised to see.”

“Small business owners are in direct, day-to-day control of all facets of the business and it is impossible to separate the business from the owner,” says Roland Hanekroot of New Perspectives Business Coaching, whose clients are almost all small businesses.

“In a small company personalities are 90% of the business,” agrees Mills. “The small business leader must know who they are, what they want and where they want the business and themselves to be in one, five or 10 years time. The loss of a key member of staff in a small company can often take up to half a year to recover the position.”

Some coaches take an approach to business that fits into a broader life philosophy.

“Happiness is an illusion,” says Gupta. “We’re constantly told in our society that we can attain happiness, but it’s impossible to stay happy all the time. When people are striving for happiness, that’s one of the reasons they’re unhappy, because they’re trying to achieve something impossible. Life is meant to be beautiful and challenging.”

“If you take an acorn and nurture it in a particular way, you get a big oak tree,” says Laurence Harrould of Aviel. “If you do things differently, you get a bonsai. The instant it starts growing contains the potential for what it can become, but what you do with it determines how it ends up. However, no matter what you do with an acorn, it will never become a carrot.

“A lot of people, because of peer pressure, are trying to be something they’re not, like a doctor who can’t stand the sight of blood.”

Solving business problems

A salesperson keeps missing targets

The first question to ask is whether the problem is the sales person or the targets, says Sugars. Assuming the targets are realistic, it could be the sales person isn't working hard enough or is working very hard but not making the sales due to a lack of skills.

"Make sure you have a system in place to set good targets, measure activity, train properly and hire the right people at the beginning, so you don't have to go through the expensive process of continually replacing or turning over your team," he says.

"Most people in small business know how to make the thing they sell but not how to sell the thing they make," says Eve Dallas of Marchant Dallas.

She proposes a three-part model based on a company's focus, capability and willingness. Companies only run smoothly when all three factors are aligned, she explains.

Gupta begins by "asking them how are they feeling emotionally and intellectually about the targets". A lack of support from management or colleagues could be a critical factor, or a limiting belief system that prevents them from doing their best, she says.

One of the owners doesn't get along with his or her business partner

People who start a business often have different visions of the future and ideas about what they want to get out of the experience, says Harrould. "They may have different skills ... but equality in ownership and decision-making; this can create tension." His solution is to work with the partners separately to understand both perspectives and to use that information to clearly define roles and responsibilities.

Hanekroot encourages the partners to take responsibility and find out what they need to do to turn the situation around. "When people in these situations truly decide to make it work and appreciate that they can only control their own behaviour and actions, the situation changes," he says.

"The other partner will likely respond positively." And, if not, "a much cleaner separation will follow".

The business takes up all of the owner's time and is destroying his or her marriage

Harrould says this situation occurs most often in a business that has grown organically without systems and procedures. As a result, every decision requires the owner's involvement. The answer? "Set up processes and responsibilities so everyone knows what their role is. Usually, this will give the owner time to refocus on the other important areas in their life."

According to Gupta, “Personal success is equally important as business success.” Business owners should pay more attention to feedback from their life partners or children and, assuming they want the relationship to work, make the necessary changes such as coming home early two nights a week.

The company can't hang on to staff and recruitment costs are going through the roof

Sadly, losing staff is a common situation with many small businesses, according to Mills. A business owner must be able to articulate his or her vision for the company to staff and “be strong enough to only invite those who wish to be a part of the journey”. Business owners must also recognise that “some people are good at certain moments of the journey and not for others”.

Continually losing clients to a major competitor

Hanekroot says business owners must develop a clear understanding of their “unique selling proposition – a horrible marketing term” and competitive advantages. He encourages business owners to focus on strategies to develop their own markets, “rather than worrying about what the competition does”.

Customers constantly complain about poor quality or service

Once a company becomes established, the wheels can get out of balance, says Dallas. “If enough customers complain, we know it's not the customer; there actually must be something wrong with the quality or service.” Management has to take responsibility and set standards. There are no excuses, she warns.

This situation is usually the result of disgruntled employees, according to Mills. “Employees who are totally engaged and know exactly where the company is going will rarely put a customer offside.” Once again, it's about communicating a vision. It's also a good idea to take the anonymity out of customer interactions so employees know they are accountable for good service, he explains.

Not convinced?

It's not uncommon in business relationships for a potential supplier to provide a proof of concept before starting work, or guarantee the quality of their service. Should business coaches be any different?

“I would probably choose some form of conversion rate strategy, showing an owner and team ways to convert more leads into sales,” says Sugars. “Proof of the concept ... means money in the bank, and that is easy to measure.”

However, some of the business coaches we spoke to were cool to the suggestion.

“I have never been asked this and I would probably decline,” says Gollan. “I choose to work with clients who are ready to start. If you have your marketing set up correctly, you’ll have any number of customers wanting to come without having to ‘prove yourself’.”

Unfortunately, not all coaches are in it for the right reason, warns Gupta. “People decide they’re going to make a life transition and think they should be a coach or a consultant.”

This explains why a large number of business coaches are middle-aged men in suits, rather than younger women, she believes.

“I don’t think that’s the right intention. Unless you really love coaching and getting people to make changes, you’re probably better off doing something else.”

Some coaches we spoke to, when pressed, said they would refund a customer’s money if they were unhappy with the service. Harrould offers a guarantee up-front, although “no clients have taken it up so far,” he says.

“A guy was trying to talk me into doing one of those motivational seminar programs. I asked if they had a money-back guarantee and he said ‘no way!’ So I said, ‘Well, you don’t believe in your product’.”

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