

“Safe Harbor” Coaching for Growing Leaders

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A safe harbor is what a sailor seeks for temporary protection when the seas are stormy and rough. Ships, of course, were never intended to stay in a harbor for long. A ship's purpose is to carry people and goods from one location to a desired destination. Ships were designed to be out on the high seas, making progress toward a desired destination!

So it is with a leader. You are typically on the move, headed from your organization's current reality toward your vision of "what could be." You align all the resources needed to make the voyage: people, money, time, physical space, material, and processes. You set the direction, monitor the progress, and make course corrections along the way.

Occasionally, however, you'd like to pause and reflect. The seas can be hostile. We're entering hurricane season, and anyone who watches The Weather Channel can easily observe the damage that wind, rain, and a choppy body of water can inflict.

The business equivalent of rough seas is the incessant stream of information, inquiries, customer issues, conference calls, complaints, and reports that bombard the leader. Electronic hand-held devices keep you always "in touch," yet there is never enough time to do all that needs your attention.

Some of my clients, those who have made significant progress, often utilized my time and skill for "safe harbor" coaching. That is, they can safely blow off steam or think creatively about potential opportunities that lie ahead. Typically, those conversations are conducted in the workplace--with direct reports, bosses, colleagues, mentors, and even friends.

Sometimes, however, you'd prefer to talk with someone who has no authority or role in your organization. Sure, the trusted person must have an appreciation for your organization's mission and the many pressures in your world of work, but you'd like to speak freely and not risk having repercussions come back to haunt you.

Imagine the implications of just blowing off steam with one of your direct reports. He or she could easily presume you wanted some action taken on that issue, and with every good intention go off and create fresh problems!

Imagine sharing some wild ideas about what the organization might be able to create. Or imagine thinking aloud about making some assignment changes to free certain people to initiate needed progress. Can you envision the rumors that could start?

In discussing a situation with me, my clients will occasionally pause and think for a moment, then smile and admit, "Aah, I just realized something! Thank you for letting me think out loud!" Paradigm shifts and other increases in awareness are a common occurrence during my "safe harbor" coaching sessions.

Those three paragraphs explain the huge increase in the popularity of "executive coaching" over the past ten years. You may have wondered, "Why would the executives need coaching? I was under the impression that they are the most experienced and best-trained individuals in the company!"

Yes, you may be experienced and knowledgeable about leadership and the functional or technical specialties of your organization, but to whom do you complain when you're frustrated? And what if you have a revolutionary idea and want to explore how to avoid a political mistake in presenting it? Who do you call?

You arrange a meeting with your friendly, understanding, supportive, and trustworthy executive coach!

There are other alternatives, of course. Vistage International is an organization open to owners and executives of small and mid-sized businesses. Members meet monthly in groups of up to 15 executives from non-competing industries. Members air their business problems and other members offer perspectives and potential solutions. (See www.vistage.com.)

C12 is a similar organization for Christians who are business owners or chief executives. Monthly meetings are limited also to 15 members. On the website (www.C12group.com), one testimonial says, "This is the only place I see Christians telling each other the truth in love." A similar Christian organization for business leader peer support is Convene at www.convenenow.com.

Another peer network for business owners is The Alternative Board (TAB) at www.thealternativeboard.com.

If you are not a business owner or chief executive, you might be thinking, "What about me? I'm not a business owner yet, but I have that potential. I'd like to have the freedom to talk confidentially with someone who is committed to helping me develop the skills to become a chief executive officer! What resources are available for folks like me?"

Many associations for coaches have developed with the growth of the profession. Most have "find a coach" services on their websites. I have sought specialty coaches on the websites of each of the three organizations where I have been a member.

The International Coach Federation is the largest association of coaches. Their website is www.coachfederation.org.

Many Christian coaches are members of the rapidly growing Christian Coaches Network: (www.christiancoaches.com).

The Georgia Coach Association is in Atlanta yet includes coaches across the state: (www.icfgeorgia.org).

If you seek a confidential, caring relationship with a professionally trained confidant where you can be candid and creative, find a professional coach. For an hour once or twice a month, under the protection of a safe harbor, you can do some maintenance work while planning your visionary next voyage!