

JOB MARKET

A C.E.O. Needs a Certain Shine Best Learned at Finishing School

By HILLARY CHURA AUG. 27, 2006

When he became president of PepsiCola East in 1989, Michael K. Lorelli had chief executive aspirations and the finesse associated with that job. Nonetheless, he joined the ranks of professionals who have enlisted executive coaches to help them smooth the rough edges that can impede a climb up the corporate ladder — in essence, to make them more linen tablecloth, less paper napkin.

Part therapist, part drill sergeant, an executive coach concentrates less on business plans than on reversing potentially self-defeating barriers to success — a loping walk, clumsy presence or inarticulate speech, as well as poor interpersonal skills, naïvete about conducting business abroad and failure to navigate office politics.

“I was a simple middle-class Italian kid from Queens, and C.E.O.’s are expected to have a certain amount of polish,” said Mr. Lorelli, now president and chief executive of Latex International, who in 1990 paid about \$2,000 to have his table manners, dress, mannerisms, voice and other characteristics assessed. For the next eight years, he periodically booked refresher courses and sent employees as well.

Most coaches are hired by businesses to help up-and-coming executives or those who have arrived but still lack that certain *je ne sais quoi*. Human resource professionals say it is money well spent because it gives employees — and companies — an edge in a hypercompetitive world.

Esab Welding and Cutting Products, which has North American headquarters in Florence, S.C., used a coach, Gloria Petersen, to help a regional manager who had been named a vice president. Ms. Petersen and the man worked together five days and covered topics as diverse as shopping, eyeglasses, charisma and presentation. Jill Heiden, North American group vice president for human resources, estimated the company paid about \$7,500 for the program.

Suggesting a coach can be a ticklish situation when dealing with executives who believe they should be judged on their work alone. “This is 100 percent finishing school,” she said. “It’s not just how you dress. It’s your delivery, how you speak — it’s everything. If you are somebody who is going to be with customers, you really need to know what is correct and what is not because you are representing your company. We all have customers, and each one of us has to feel we know what we are doing, how to do it, how to be proper.”

Ms. Petersen, president of Global Protocol Inc. in Chicago, runs daylong group seminars at which she coaches students on posture, stride and eye contact. Her private three-day course runs \$4,500 and covers subjects like dress, body language, table manners, the art of small talk and how to leave phone and e-mail messages. She teaches people how to enter a room with a sense of purpose, even placing books on the heads of slow learners.

“We have to use our presence as a tool that we are very competent within ourselves, that we are prepared,” she said. “If people read that you are confident and self-assured — even if you blunder — they are forgiving because you just look like you have it together.”

Rates range from \$150 to \$1,000 an hour, with the commitment varying from an afternoon to more than a year. Some consultants charge by the hour, while others do it by the month or by project. The International Coach Federation in Lexington, Ky., said its worldwide membership this year increased to 10,500, up from 2,100 in 1999.

According to Right Management Consultants, an outplacement and coaching firm in Philadelphia, almost half of 168 companies surveyed in 2005 provide development training and coaching to high-potential employees.

Colleges are also recognizing the unwritten rules. Executive coaching is part of the executive M.B.A. program at the University of Texas at Dallas, and the United States Military Academy has counseled cadets on the subject since 1931.

Camille Lavington, author of “You’ve Only Got Three Seconds: How to Make the Right Impression in Your Business and Social Life” (Doubleday, 1996) was Mr. Lorelli’s coach.

Based in Manhattan, she charges up to \$10,000 a client and says she has worked with investment companies, real estate companies and international marketers.

“When people go from middle management to senior management, they desperately need it,” she said. “There is very little awareness of the lifestyle and the demeanor and the protocol of the more refined areas. It’s subtle. You’ve got to play to the audience.”

Think of Melanie Griffith in “Working Girl.”

Before he became president of Big O Tires in Centennial, Colo., in 2000, John Adams looked to William S. Frank, president and chief executive of CareerLab, in Englewood, Colo., to help him create a more professional résumé and to build his experience so he could move into director positions at other companies and become a more effective leader.

“There is not a class you go to that tells you how to be a president,” Mr. Adams said. “In your role as president, you are always on. When you walk into a room full of people, they are going to be looking at you. Every mannerism, everything you do, is going to be watched. If you slouch, people will wonder what is going wrong. If you’ve got a frown, people will wonder what’s wrong.”

Anton Belzer, now a general sales manager at Radio One in Houston, used a coach when he was preparing to switch jobs two years ago.

“Corporate America is a chess game about how you position yourself,” Mr. Belzer said. “If you position yourself well or handle yourself well, you can exit or

enter a new situation with ease and with 10 percent to 15 percent more in salary than if you did it yourself.”

Emily Barnes, a senior associate with Executive Coaching and Consulting Associates, a consortium in Washington, has worked with some clients for up to 18 months on table manners and body language, wardrobe, water cooler chat and how to interview more effectively.

“The way you carry yourself becomes critical to your success,” she said. “It’s just how things are.”

One client, a lawyer in Richmond, Va., was having trouble finding a job despite his Ivy League background and his joint M.B.A. and law degree. He is doing legal work in a temporary job now as he continues to seek a permanent position.

He acknowledged that his conversational skills were poor and that he was so ill at ease with himself that he made people uncomfortable.

“I knew I had good stuff inside of me,” said the lawyer, who insisted on anonymity because he was embarrassed to disclose his shortcomings publicly. “But I felt like I needed some assistance in how to put myself forward in the best possible way — to really show what I’ve got.”

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