

The art of asking the right question

Corporate coaching is on the rise in Hong Kong, and the exponents of this new form of executive training have set their sights on the Mainland

BY LIEF O'REILLY

Hong Kong's astonishing transformation in the second half of the 20th century from war-torn colonial relic to vibrant economic powerhouse owed much to the work ethic of its population married to an international, corporate-style business philosophy. Yet this potent brew came at a price. The pressure-cooker economy and work environment spawned a host of stressed-out executives struggling to cope with the demands of juggling an increasingly affluent, educated and ambitious workforce, the need for demonstrable results, an unprecedented rate of technological change, and the

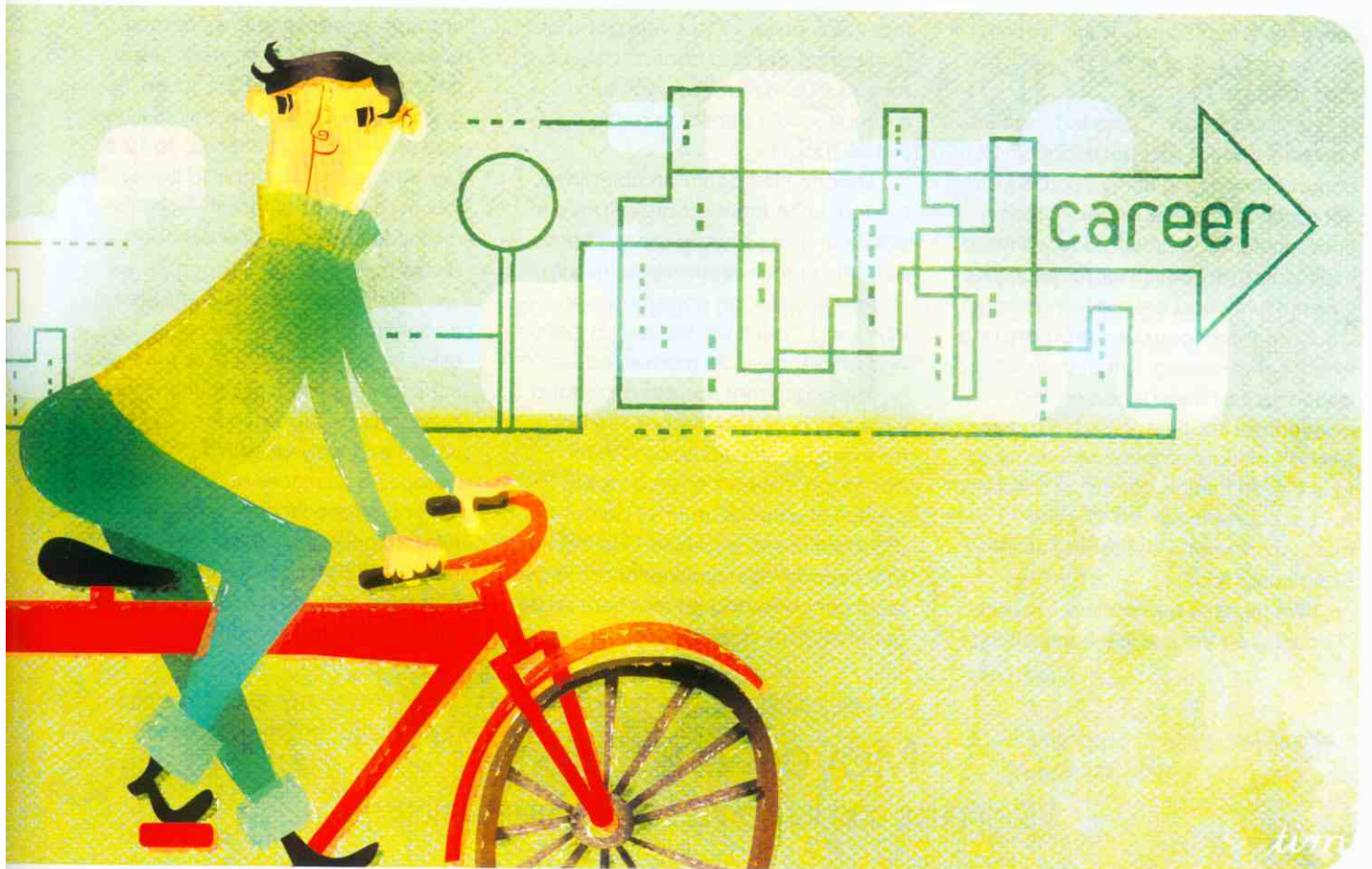
desire for quality personal development — a scenario now also being played out in the boom cities of China. Executives were, as they say, under the cosh.

Help was at hand. Around five years ago the first "executive coaches" started appearing in Hong Kong. Billed as a new tool for personal and professional development, professional coaching promised a fresh approach to many aspects of corporate life, from leadership and management to business development, career planning and personal growth.

The Hong Kong Coaching Community (HKCC), a society for professional coaches and those interested in

coaching, defines coaching as "a client-driven partnership focused on creating positive change, expanding possibilities and unleashing potential, and aiming to realise extraordinary results." Dozens of coaches now offer their services, covering the whole gamut of professional and personal needs. But marketing phraseology aside, what exactly is professional coaching and how does it differ from, for instance, consultancy?

"There's a key distinction," says Douglas Gerber, CEO of FocusOne, a provider of professional coaching services. "A consultant gives you the answer to your question. A coach helps you to find the answer yourself." This



tailored approach often involves one-on-one sessions in which an executive is guided by a coach to a self-generated solution to his or her problems. Bonnie Chan of Coachlite stresses the need to tease out answers from the executive under coaching: "He may have his own solution already but he may need a catalyst. It's important to let the words come out from the client because then they are owned by him."

This is a coaching tenet echoed by Vivien Pau of VP Worldwide: "If people don't feel they own the process, they won't implement it." It's a passive-proactive approach that can yield surprising results. "I observe clients in action with bosses, peers and subordinates, then give them an objective picture, which is very often a shock to them," says Pau. "In the one-on-one sessions I find they open up to external people more than they would to their internal HR personnel. This enables me to give '360-degree' feedback."

Charles Lang of Progress-U Ltd elaborates on the methodology: "The coach doesn't have solutions. He has expertise to help the client figure out

what to do by himself. In the first place, we have to get him to think."

Professional coaching first appeared in the US about 20 years ago with exclusively top-executive (CEO) coaching. This seminal development catered to a market of lonely leaders who found it difficult to talk to wives, colleagues or competitors and needed someone to relate to. A couple of years later, the phenomenon had spread to Europe, and since then it has expanded its scope and established itself as a bona fide profession with two major international certification bodies, the International Coach Federation (ICF) and the International Association of Coaches (IAC).

Schools such as Coach-U were established to train coaches through ICF- and IAC-certified courses up to Certified Master Coach, and in 2001 the first Hong Kong-based graduating class of Coach-U began meeting informally to exchange views, a collaboration that led in 2002 to the creation of the HKCC, which now boasts over 80 members.

However, the fledgling community was powerless to prevent unqualified

individuals from marketing themselves as executive coaches, and feared the damage these maverick coaches — characterised as "black sheep" by Lang — could cause to the image of professional coaching. As a result, in 2004 Lang sought out Pau, Chan and Gerber to establish the Master Coach Alliance (MCA), Hong Kong's first dedicated quality assurance body, to enhance trust in coaching.

That's not to say that the MCA and the broader-based HKCC are at loggerheads — indeed, Chan and Lang hold senior positions in the HKCC — but while HKCC membership is open to anyone with an interest in coaching, the MCA sets minimum standards of professional experience, coach training and coaching experience for membership. This will make it easier for clients to distinguish between high-quality coaches and black sheep. Lang says.

Meanwhile, the demand for coaching services is growing rapidly. The MCA estimates that coaching in the more progressive Asian cities such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Seoul and Tokyo will reach the current maturity

level of Western Europe within the next five years, and that of the US within the next 10 years.

Needless to say, China is of particular interest to the fledgling coaching community in Hong Kong. "Borders are contiguous," asserts Gerber. "China is undergoing huge growth and will need more coaches. Shanghai, for example, is about two years behind Hong Kong. Coaches there focus on corporate and executive coaching, rather than life coaching, but there is no certified programme in China. It's a big market with lots of local employees who need to adapt to foreign company culture. And of course there are Chinese multinationals who are setting up in Hong Kong, too."

"We need to be sensitive," says Pau. "Focusing on the positive is something

that Asian culture is not very good at. The 'command and control' style of senior locals in multinationals for example could benefit from the right sort of coaching."

Despite their common objectives, the four MCA founders are at pains to point out that coaches are not homogeneous in their approach or focus. "Theoretically I can coach anyone," says Lang, "but if we focus on a certain kind of client we are more effective."

These different focuses allow for a wide range of approaches. Gerber, for example, stresses passion in his approach. "There's often a lack of passion. It extends up to 90 percent of organisations and people." He believes that executives in multinationals, large local concerns and government posts generally lack passion, while those in

entrepreneurial positions are more passionate about their work. "Most people leave their job because they don't love what they're doing. If you can only get satisfaction up to 10-20 percent you're probably in the wrong job. In China it's different — people are already passionate. We need to discipline that passion."

Whatever the focus, professional coaching looks set to become established as a major executive tool in Hong Kong and, particularly, the burgeoning corporations of China, where relatively unsophisticated corporate practices and the frantic scramble for a bigger slice of the international business pie could yield fertile coaching grounds. For the members of the MCA, it's all about the art of asking the right question. □

Movers & shakers

Visionaries and luminaries in Chinese business

Pan Yue

China takes a hit in the world press every time environmental issues surface, so much so that it's easy to be persuaded that nothing is being done to counter the admittedly enormous environmental challenges facing the world's fastest growing economy and most populous nation.

That perception is incorrect, however: organisations and individuals dedicated to relieving China's environmental woes do exist within the current government, and these are spearheaded by the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) and its determined vice minister, Pan Yue.

Hailing from Nanjing, Pan began his adult life in the PLA and 13th Division of the Railway Corps (his father was a military engineer), but in the 1980s he became a journalist for China Environment News before moving into the government sector. He worked his way through various departments, including a stint as vice chief editor of the *China Youth Daily*, and later vice director of the Office for Economic Restructuring of the State Council. Finally, in March 2003, he was appointed to his current position with SEPA.

Pan has shown himself to be a fearless foe of big industry whenever it falls foul of environmental regulations. At the forefront of the nation's problems are water and waste pollution. This, according to the 45-year-old vice minister, is "the bottleneck constraining economic growth in China". Certainly a balance between sustainable development and economic growth will have to be found and maintained in the not too distant future — the World Bank estimates that pollution costs China 8-12



SEPA vice minister Pan Yue is crusading for a greener China.

percent of its annual US\$1.4 trillion GDP, so it's simply good business to initiate change as soon as possible.

"Our natural resources will soon be unable to support our population," says Pan, who has called for public hearings so that citizens affected by big development projects can discuss their environmental consequences. He faces a steep uphill battle, of course — SEPA has difficulty enforcing its central edicts because it does not directly employ environmental personnel at the local level, and its crusade for a greener China has attracted opposition from powerful economic and political interests.

Nevertheless, Pan continues to call for a "green rise" of environmental activism, and it is hoped that those big industry players who resist him now will quickly realise that, ultimately, Pan's plans for China's future should also be their own.