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Lea Belair (above) and Liz Dallas of the Coaching Center of Vermont (CCVT) in Winooski, draw on their team of professional coaches in building on the best in company strengths.

By RACHEL CREE SHERMAN

Businesses of all sizes are increasingly turning to professional coaches for help in enhancing individuals' skills, abilities and talents.

Professional coaching builds on leadership and management techniques through identifying employee strengths that might otherwise go unnoticed. At the Coaching Center of Vermont (CCVT) at the Champlain Mill in Winooski, Lea Belair and Liz Dallas and staff draw on Vermont's professional coaches, most of whom are certified and all of whom own their own businesses.

"Business has really been the forward-seeing entity to embrace the coaching culture," Belair said. "I do a lot of work in educating people around the value of coaching and how it relates to the bottom-line results of a company through investing in their people."

Said Belair, an educator at the University of Vermont Business School: "In business, the difference between managing and coaching is huge. The most important thing for business owners to understand is how to be a savvy purchaser of coaching."

Coaching for success

The International Coaching Federation (ICF), of which Belair is a member, defines coaching as "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential," she said.

"You may do some teaching, advising, guiding, training, but it's done from the basis of research that proves that collaboration brings out the best in both coach and coachee," said Belair. Coaching, she said, "is purposefully messy, because you're helping people to maximize their potential, not knowing how you're going to get the result, but trusting a process that works. To quote Thomas Leonard, a founder of the coaching profession, 'results are the by-product of coaching.'"

The trend, Belair said, is to incorporate coaching skills in-house so that it becomes part of the way businesses do business, making coaching a part of the fabric of the business. "Coaching is like teaching a man to fish, instead of giving him the fish," Belair said, as the action of learning and doing becomes integrated into the actual job at hand.

Different coaches have different specialties. Belair works with people and organizations involved with cultural transformation as a full-fledged partner in co-creating sustainable change. "I do that," she said, "with teams, leaders, emerging leaders and managers. This is my passion."

James Papiano of Shoreham, who also works with CCVT at times, travels the East Coast to coach executives and consult in human resources and management. "A lot of coaches make the distinction between coaching and consulting," Papiano said. "I do something a little more hybrid."

With a background in human resources, he is familiar with organizational life and how to affect change. "Mostly, I'm there to advise or develop strategies around employee relations, organizational effectiveness, succession planning and talent management," he said.

Sarah Gillen of Vermont Business Coaching

in Montpelier has yet another approach to coaching. A licensed marriage and family therapist and author, Gillen, who also works with CCVT, uses her background in energy work in combination with her business-coaching abilities to teach upper-level managers how to become more authentic.

"I'm not just talking about strategies, but about having a connection with yourself that makes it so that you can almost not be authentic," she said.

"It's the crux of things; that's where I like to play," Gillen said. "Lots of times businesses send me their 'problem people.'" She likens such people to the canary in the mine shaft, indicating a systemic problem the company needs to work on as a whole.

"Because I see things energetically, I see how energy gets blocked or misdirected in a company," she said. "I think it's pretty unusual to blend energy work and business, but it's turning out to be very effective."

Green Mountain Power (GMP) and Tertl Studios of Montpelier are two of the many companies that have integrated coaching into the structure of their business. When GMP began to launch a few major business-changing initiatives a few years ago, "we knew that there would be huge change as we implemented these projects as we became more technologically focused on large-scale project management," said administration manager Rebecca Towne.

"Moving into times of change, we knew we needed to give our leaders a larger, broader tool kit in navigating the future," she said.

Belair, Dallas and Gillen have been working with GMP. Next year, said Belair, a new program called Coaching for Great Work will be implemented there. She said she is one of only 12 people in the world with the expertise to conduct the program.

Chris Hancock of Tertl Studios said he needed someone who he could think strategically with. He found Gillen, and said that the company functions much more effectively as a result of their work together. Two of his employees have also



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Sarah Gillen of Vermont Business Coaching in Montpelier, is one of the state's professional coaches who collaborate with the Coaching Center of Vermont to work with businesses of every size.

been involved with the program.

Companies from Fortune 500 companies to small businesses such as Tertl Studios with eight to 10 employees are enjoying the benefits of professional coaching. "If these companies weren't yielding a return on that investment, they wouldn't spend time and money bringing it into their organization," Belair said.

However, the correct approach is critical. "You can get coaching skills right away," she said, "but if you don't have follow-up coaching for training, you lose 80 percent of what you've learned. We're training people to use coaching skills within their positions."

Added Towne: "I've been in HR (human resources) for 12 years, and it's the most comprehensive and powerful program that I've experienced in terms of development and leadership growth in an organization.

"The process involved in coaching promotes ownership: it's a subtle evolution of where business in general is going and in other ways a very powerful business and personal tool. It's just growing." ♦