

November 2005www.universityaffairs.ca

Coaching for life – my life

Juggling a demanding academic career with family responsibilities – sound familiar? I nearly called it quits. Instead, I called a coach

by Dawn Bazely

If you teach in a business faculty or are a fan of the *Globe and Mail* career pages, then you'll no doubt have heard about executive coaches, also known as life coaches outside the corporate world. Simply put, a coach helps a person to identify his or her goals, personally or professionally, and the means to get there. Most academics I know don't have the foggiest idea what these coaches are about, but many overworked and stressed-out professors could likely benefit from one.

As a mother of two young children, juggling a heavy teaching load, an active research program and mushrooming administrative duties, with a husband who travels a lot and a position on the board of my children's daycare, I found myself exhausted and overwhelmed in 2000. The general atmosphere in my department was chilly and unsupportive of my situation. I was no longer the 24/7 academic and had to work basically daycare hours.

At one point a colleague berated me for not pulling my weight and declared that my husband should get a job in a doughnut shop so that I could work longer hours than 9 to 5. I was so stunned that I didn't know what to say. After some long and hard thinking about whether to resign, I instead decided to get a life coach.

Professional coaching can be viewed as akin to the practice of a psychologist or therapist. The coach offers feedback and insights from an outside vantage point and helps the client to clarify issues and define a desired outcome. Deborah, my coach, has a PhD in clinical psychology, which means she has experience of academia. This is still an evolving profession, so practitioners may have a patchwork of qualifications, although more and more are taking certification and training programs. I found her through my jogging partner who was an executive in human resources. Deborah charges \$140 an hour, while executive coaches hired through businesses may command upwards of \$300 an hour.

Deborah has coached me in such areas as active listening, constructive confrontation, and controlling anxiety and the related insomnia. Thanks to her, I am much better at balancing family and work demands. The good thing about having a psychologist as a life coach is that she can deal with underlying issues such as: why am I such a driven, overachieving workaholic?

With Deborah's help, I have developed more effective and satisfying ways of interacting with unsupportive colleagues. Recently, when a colleague at one of my sabbatical universities commented that no other colleagues were in the department on a Saturday morning and that this reflected a lack of commitment to their research, my life-coaching training enabled me to snap back, "That's because they have lives outside of their work!"

As I approached my second sabbatical – which is effectively my first, since my previous one came directly on the heels of a faculty strike and was broken by a maternity leave, meaning that in the second half I had a baby and pre-school child on my hands – I knew that I wanted to

plan it with my life coach. Naturally, I had a stupidly long wish list: papers to write, another book, tidying my files, and catching up on reams of e-mail. I had visions of redirecting my research program back to studies that I had dropped in the mid-1990s, when my older daughter was born, which would mean travelling to Europe again. I also wanted to go back to doing Arctic-based research, which I hadn't done for 20 years, and had a number of other projects that I had never quite been able to finish. And finally, I wanted to collaborate with colleagues outside of the sciences and develop a new course. It was an insane list.

So, we started planning and coaching. The European bit was easy, since I had started research with Swedish colleagues in 2002, but the main difficulty was working out how to do it. I was reluctant to leave my six- and nine-year-old daughters, and my husband was not in any position to come with me. Deborah and I decided that I could manage two months away, one month at a time. My colleague in Sweden had been thinking about offering a new graduate course and suggested that if we applied for travel and research funding for our project, we could add the course to it. This worked and we got funds for me to go to Sweden, where I developed and taught their first-ever PhD course on invasive species, which 13 students from around the country turned up to take.

Leaving my family behind was both tough and liberating. I bounced brightly into work at my Swedish desk each morning because I only had me to deal with and didn't have to fight over lunches and homework. When I'm away from home, my workdays stretch out from eight hours to whenever I want. The fact is that people without young kids or other major personal responsibilities really do have unlimited amounts of time and can make an active choice about being a workaholic.

I had also mapped out, with Deborah's advice, a way to manage my long list of goals by dividing tasks into three general categories:

1. Research-related projects that directly related to my interests – including manuscripts and papers (top-priority);
2. Fun non-science projects that nevertheless had an academic aspect. For example, I prepared a nomination for a group of colleagues for a national teaching award that was the equivalent of writing a book chapter;
3. A "guilty" category of things that I felt I had to do for other people. This has to do with my inability to say "no" and included stuff like agreeing to stay on people's graduate supervisory committees and doing grant reviews.

We decided that it was realistic for me to do one thing from each category every two to four weeks (at first I thought I would do one each a week!). Naturally, the first thing that happened, when I returned from family holidays, was that I did not meet two of my three targets in the specified time. What was happening? I headed to my coach to figure it out.

It turns out that since I was not yet in Sweden and away from such temptation, I was going onto campus and frittering away my time in university-related trivial tasks, such as opening all of my mail – both e-mail and snail mail – simply because I had the time to do it. We put me on a schedule, literally writing out everything on a timetable. It worked. I also put enormous physical boundaries about my person – the Atlantic Ocean, for one – and when back in Toronto, I hid in a basement library at the University of Toronto that allows no cell phones and the entrance to which is guarded by a porter at a gatehouse. I have discovered that working mothers with children need higher walls than anyone else I know, but that putting those boundaries in place is the hardest task of all.

Deborah also made me move from my usual frantic multi-tasking way of dealing with everyday university life back to a single-tasking lifestyle. Essentially I have returned to the focused working style of a graduate student. I have not done everything on my list of things to do, but I have done a significant number of them. From a practical perspective, I have pretty much

adopted all of the standard advice in those business self-help books. But, I could not have done this by just reading about it.

Of course, the real proof of the effectiveness of my life-coach-led sabbatical will be whether I can effectively maintain these boundaries when I return to my non-sabbatical way of life and once again get bogged down in the ever-accelerating hamster wheel of teaching and administrative duties. The good news is that Deborah will be there, keeping me focused and feeling much less stressed.

Dawn Bazely is a mildly obsessive-compulsive biology professor at York University and a suppressed workaholic who does not feel a bit guilty about being one.

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