

CAREER MANAGEMENT Q&A:

What a Top “Life Coach” Can Teach the Teaching Professional

Interview by David Gould

Do you know anyone who works on physical fitness with a personal trainer? There is a similar resource for those who want expert help with other top-priority matters. Among them would be work, career, money, relationships, family—including how best to balance them. Known either as “life coaches” or “executive coaches,” these well-trained advisors see things their clients don’t see and help change behaviors that are impeding progress.

The successful golf instructor is an expert on the swing, golf equipment, fitness for golf and individual learning styles. He or she may also be skilled in managing a practice facility. Very likely they’ve added some marketing and promotion skills, as well. On a personal level, people who teach golf become adept at spotting character traits, ego patterns and various quirks.

Other people’s traits and quirks, that is. It is notable among those who teach golf—even teachers with elite reputations—that they forget to study themselves. They seldom shine a bright light on the path of their careers. They fail to inquire into their priorities, their long-term goals and what their day-to-day work effort is doing for them—or to them. Any Proponent Group member could rightly ask: Do I know how to manage career changes, live a balanced life, ask for what I want, grow as a person and generally avoid burnout?

We referred those general questions, plus a lot of specific ones, to Elizabeth Carrington-House, an award-winning life/executive coach based in greater Boston and known for her work with such companies as Google, Bank of New York/Mellon, Deloitte and Thomson Financial.

Since 1996, Elizabeth has coached a myriad of individuals and teams internationally and across industries. Her clients consistently report having improved their abilities to negotiate effectively, hold people accountable, plan long-range and enjoy their lives more fully.

Proponent Group: Before we talk about golf instructors, what can you tell us about your approach to the life-coaching process?

Elizabeth Carrington-House: I start from the premise that humans are more capable and creative than we realize. We get stuck in habits and patterns that don’t serve us. When you gain access to an objective, but still compassionate, set of eyes and ears, you’ve got a big advantage. Very good things can happen—both with your self-confidence and in the capacity to tap inner resources.

PG: The successful golf instructor will focus intently on the needs of students. Their time for career planning or revising the business plan is never available, because work with students takes the whole day and week. Does this occur in other professions?

E C-H: Yes, that tends to be what happens. The choice is between working in the business and working on the business. The latter gets forgotten. This is a major reason people hire a coach. If they set up that life-coaching appointment they know they will be intently focusing for at least one hour a week on either the business or career issues. This could be forward planning, marketing, networking, reviewing strategy, all that long-term stuff.

PG: Talk about people who are very good at giving golf lessons and what that suggests about their approach to life and work.

“I start from the premise that humans are more capable and creative than we realize. We get stuck in habits and patterns that don’t serve us. When you gain access to an objective, but still compassionate, set of eyes and ears, you’ve got a big advantage. Very good things can happen...”

- Elizabeth Carrington-House



E C-H: In my experience, the skilled teacher is someone who is interested in improvement in general. This could be self-improvement, technique improvement or general ‘betterment’ of the self or others. They see a gap between where things are and where they could be and they enjoy helping people to bridge that gap. Research consistently reveals a strong human desire to “make a difference” or “have a positive impact”—it seems that someone very good at teaching golf has an especially strong desire for this. The golf instructor should look at this instinct they’ve got and make it your gateway into better management of

your business, your career and your life. Either coach yourself to improve and get better at that activity—to bridge the gap between potential and performance, or else hire a professional to coach you.

PG: The way you frame that challenge puts it into a familiar category: “It’s simple, but it isn’t easy.”

E C-H: It’s simple in theory. No one argues against taking these steps. Common sense shows us the value in stopping to evaluate, reflect, hit the reset button, or possibly seek different outlets and paths. The opportunity seldom seems to present itself. That’s why someone who breaks his leg and his arm on a ski slope will talk about all the time and space he has to reassess his life, because he’s laid up at home, unable to work. That guy has a chance to make big, important life decisions. The skier next to him who made it down the hill doesn’t.

PG: Along with feeling like we don’t have time, are there other reasons we don’t go through the assessment process?

E C-H: There’s an anxiety factor, in many cases. We all start with a ‘dream’ for our work. We have a dream for our overall life, as well. Then we go to execute it, and this puts us on a treadmill—or so we imagine. A golf instructor falls into the day-to-day of setting up lessons, teaching, communicating with students, getting up the next day and doing it again. You can get disconnected from that original vision or original dream of making a difference. It’s important to take stock on a yearly basis and think about what parts of the work are most satisfying, what connects you to that original purpose and what changes would be necessary to let you stay connected to the “good parts” of your work.

PG: You mean, do what the skier who broke all those bones was able to do—except without actually breaking them?

E C-H: That’s one way of looking at it. Another is to think about ideas and experiences you had, and the decisions you came to, the last time you took a week and immersed yourself in a professional activity that wasn’t your normal day-to-day job. For most people, those experiences really stand out in mind and the choices they inspire turn out to be lasting and important.

PG: Give us a quick case study of Client X who went through the process with you.

E C-H: One that comes to mind is a freelance engineer in software development. His career was made up of outsourced contract jobs. He was very good and the companies he worked for kept sending him assignments. One day an offer came from a San Francisco software company—they wanted him to quit freelancing, move overseas and open a satellite office. He hired me to help him morph from the role of solo-engineer to leader of a unit that has 18 engineers and would be a “real business,” to use his words. Without the benefit of a coach, he would have really struggled, because all he did originally was apply his old skills and work style to the new challenge. He was 100 percent

about lining up customers and doing great work for them. There was no focus on invoicing clients, paying employees, dealing with their benefits, none of that.

He had trouble trusting his instincts and was checking back with the San Francisco office too much. He was a person who was really blocked from moving forward unless he had great clarity on how things would proceed. He needed to learn to take risks and be willing to make a case for his decisions later, if challenged. He had a counter-productive tendency to be supremely selfless and his personal life suffered. He didn’t sleep, didn’t

exercise, spent very little time with his spouse. He needed to learn how “being selfish” could be a good thing for the business and for him in general. That’s something he is still learning. He needed to ask for more money, even though money didn’t mean a lot to him—but in good part that’s because he didn’t have any focus on the various practicalities of life, the things money helps with.

We worked closely together on all those places where he was blocked or stuck or had a blind spot—and operated as though simply doing more of the same things would address the issues. It was a gratifying experience for me. He made a lot of personal progress, the business developed nicely. He built it into something that is now replicable and is being sold to a much bigger outfit, with a wonderful bonus that he earned for his efforts.

PG: Was that success, on your part, pretty much a model for what you set out to do in your work?

E C-H: It’s hard to identify one model. A key factor that separates one assignment from the next is where the client is in her or his career. The focus is different for people at different stages of business and life. You start with the Building stage. After you get through that you enter a Maintain period. Some people break out of that to enter a new, separate Building phase. Then at some point, there is a Surveying process that happens. The client asks: Is this my final work? Is there another game I’d rather play? Those are big checkpoints and they each have their complexities.

PG: Too complex to go into, in the space we have for this article, it seems. Perhaps for another time?

E C-H: By all means—another time. I’d be happy to explain more about the process, whenever you like.

For More Information:
Elizabeth Carrington-House, MCC
Dolphin Leadership, Inc.
Hamilton, Massachusetts
Phone: 978-468-4568
Email: elizabeth@dolphinleadership.com