

Deb Merion: Good coaching may rejuvenate stressed executives

by Deb Merion | for Ann Arbor Business Review

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How can business leaders stay both healthy and high-performing these days when simply reading the newspaper can cause stress headaches?

One option for staying focused and inspired is executive training and coaching, but finding the right program can be a challenge in itself.

"Executive training is a very personal thing," said Jesse Bernstein, CEO of the Ann Arbor Chamber of Commerce.

"There has to be a payoff for me. How is training going to help me to do my job better?" said University of Michigan manager Joanne McFarland O'Rourke.

David Chinsky's Institute for Leadership Fitness is of interest because its approach includes an emphasis on health.

"If leaders don't balance their personal and professional responsibilities, they won't go the distance," said Chinsky. "They need to attend to their own health: psychological, mental, emotional, and spiritual."

Chinsky isn't a personal trainer blowing a whistle like Brad Pitt in "Burn After Reading."

A former business executive with an MBA and PhD in Health policy, he has been training executives full-time since 2001. He says his twelve-month leadership development experience helps leaders with two primary challenges to vitality: finding the time to rejuvenate, and overcoming overload from too much stimulus.

His approach seems logical. To compete in a global economy, we need staying power. As a nation, we're neither lean and mean, nor fat and happy.

Adult obesity rates have doubled since 1980, ballooning health-care costs by \$61 billion annually. Major depressive disorder is the leading cause of disability in the U.S. for ages 15-44.

The U.S. spends more per capita on health care (\$5,700 per year) than any other country, but the U.S. has the 42nd highest average life expectancy in the world.

Big changes start with smaller ones. Chinsky's Leadership Fitness trainees set up customized metrics to measure their changes in clarity, confidence, effectiveness and vitality in their first class last month. O'Rourke is enrolled in the program, and she says its coaching aspect attracted her.

"My plan has to do with bringing lunch to work every day, because buying lunch takes time that I would rather spend working. If I go out for lunch, at times, I make less healthy choices," said O'Rourke.



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Her coach suggested having three breakfast options and three lunch options for simplicity in planning and shopping.

"Every morning he has an apple and a hard boiled egg...a protein and a fruit."

The cost - paid by participating companies including TRW Automotive, Thompson-Reuters and U-M - is \$3750 for four classroom sessions and eight personal executive coaching sessions.

Chinsky says one advantage of this approach is that leaders on a tight budget can explore options and vet their strategies with coaches.

"We have a notion that once you get a degree you know everything, but we really need a mindset that speaks to lifelong learning," said Bernstein.

"But I would suggest you be careful. Look for people who have established programs," said Bernstein.

Chinsky also teaches a time-management technique called "The Vanishing To-Do List" to empty your to-do list at the end of every day.

That approach sounds enviable. My to-do list hasn't been empty since 1964. But I keep trying to improve, and I hope, for our nation's sake, that our leaders do, too.

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