

Staying in the Game with Help on the Sidelines
Demand for Coaches Is Steady as Executives Try to Hone Skills in Recession
By [SARAH E. NEEDLEMAN](#)

Executive coaches report steady demand for their services despite the recession. Individual and corporate clients say the one-on-one counseling is critical for career success, especially during tough economic times.

Coaches typically are hired by companies, at \$300 an hour or more, to hone the management skills of senior leaders and rising stars. Even with the recession, many coaches say some companies are retaining their services to help them get lean and efficient. Coaches also said they are seeing an increase in individuals hiring coaches on their own.

Eric Chaffin, a 38-year-old partner at law firm Bernstein Liebhard LLP in New York, has paid coach Dee Soder out of his own pocket on a retainer since 2003, and has no plans to stop. "In a down economy, it's particularly important to have someone on your side," he said. "Instead of 10 client opportunities this year, there might be five. You have to make each one count."

Mr. Chaffin said Dr. Soder, founder of the CEO Perspective Group, a assessment and advisory firm in New York, helps him with tough career and practice decisions. For example, in 2003, she helped him weigh job offers from private firms after his four-year stint as a federal prosecutor. Recently Dr. Soder advised him on how to work with clients who are hurting because of the recession. Mr. Chaffin said Dr. Soder gives him a different perspective than business associates. "Most lawyers think alike," he said. "She's helped me understand some of the characteristics of my clients and their motivations."

Executive coaches say they're being hired by more individuals like Mr. Chaffin, a trend that has helped offset tighter budgets at some corporate clients. Dr. Soder says the number of her clients who are individuals paying on their own has nearly doubled since November.

Some small-business owners use coaches as sounding boards. Nancy A. May, president and chief executive of BoardBench Cos. LLC, an advisory firm in Conn., pays her own way to meet periodically with Dr. Soder. Ms. May says she relies on Dr. Soder for honest advice. "You wouldn't go to somebody junior and say, 'I've screwed up, what do I do?'" she says.

Ms. May, 50, began working with Dr. Soder about a year ago on ways to improve her interactions with clients, among other issues. Sessions are held over the phone, and occasionally in person, twice a month for up to an hour. "At times I have a big personality and the enthusiasm can sometimes be off-putting to somebody who's more of an introvert," says Ms. May. "My coach is working with me to manage that based on the personalities of other CEOs or board people I might be working with."

Ms. May says she has noticed changes, particularly "how people are stopping and listening, and being drawn into a conversation with me a little differently."

(Note: Within a week of starting his own firm Chaffin had a major victory; while May reports a substantial increase in business.)