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Paul Bernard has a warning for you: "If you don't have a rabbi, you're going to the chopping block"

Mr Bernard is an executive coach - something between a psychologist and a management guru who works with business people to improve their performance.

During the bull market clients paid him \$30,000 a year to refine their skills and help them climb the corporate ladder. These days, they are calling him with a very different purpose - to save their jobs.

After a decade of rising salaries and shares, US executives are suddenly feeling vulnerable. The economy has slowed and corporate catastrophes like Enron, Tyco and WorldCom continue to pile up.

Times are particularly bleak on Wall Street, where the market slide has sent tens of thousands of bankers to the proverbial block.

"Clients are very anxious. I'm getting a lot of emergency calls from people I haven't worked with in a long time," Mr Bernard says. "My job is to help them survive."

The coach is no miracle worker. But he can help executives assess their job situation and refine their strategies. He is particularly sought as an independent voice of reason by those wrestling with sinking profits, job cuts and scandal.

Mr Bernard typically drills his clients in weekly one-hour meetings or phone calls, in which they review the week's events much as a person would in psychotherapy.

They then plan a course of action. Mr Bernard forces them repeatedly to address basic questions: Does the company have legs? Does their boss have legs? How close are they to the company's revenue streams? Is there anything they are doing that directly generates profit or saves money for the company?

More often than not, however, his advice deals with office politics.

"Politics is about power and relationships. In a tumultuous environment like this, that becomes very important," he argues. "There is a lot of plotting going on right now, particularly at investment banks."

In one recent crisis, an exasperated banker rang Mr Bernard at 7am. A colleague had used a group meeting the previous day to humiliate him in front of senior managers.

Mr Bernard found his client was under attack because he covers an old-economy sector, and is one of a handful of bankers whose revenues are up this year. So internal rivals were trying to restructure the division to steal his turf. After tracing the political nuances of the situation, Mr Bernard offered his advice: His client needed a rabbi - a patron higher up in the organisation to look after him.

He recommended that the banker join boards at senior managers' favourite charities. He also urged him to volunteer for recruitment, training and compensation committee duties to raise his profile.

"His attitude was: 'I'm a good banker. It should be self-evident.' It's not. Life isn't fair. You can save money, raise revenues and be more efficient and someone else can still win the race because they're a political animal," Mr Bernard explains.

In other cases, he has helped executives decide when they should go to the board to neutralise a rival. He has advised them on the subtleties of overhauling a family business without alienating the family.

He even suggested a client should lose weight to fit an image-driven corporate culture. "I had to read him the riot act," Mr Bernard recalls. "He was miffed at first, but he thanked me two days later."

Some might dismiss Mr Bernard as a corporate Machiavelli for hire. But in many ways, he and other consultants are stepping into a hole in the fabric of corporate America rent by downsizing.

Gone are the days of job security and training programmes, in which senior executives would mentor young workers and teach them to navigate the organisation.

Mr Bernard knows this first-hand. He earned an MBA from the University of Michigan and then set to work in finance and human resources. He was devastated when his employer, Time Inc, took him to the chopping block in the 1980s.

"They used to say that the only way you could get let go at Time Inc in those days was if you took an axe to your secretary - and caused bodily harm," says Mr Bernard.

He was disappointed that the spreadsheets and financial-modelling tools he had studied in business school failed to arm him for the uncertainty of the modern corporation - particularly its politics.

These days, he is finding a similar ill-preparedness in mid-level Wall Street bankers.

Many gained advancement because of their ability to close deals during the bull market. But they never learned to manage people, and the constant turnover in their divisions has made enemies of the human resources department.

They were protected because they were rainmakers. But now their revenues are drying up and their fears rising.

Some of Mr Bernard's students decide they simply cannot stomach the politics that certain jobs require. Mr Bernard works with them to adjust their career paths.

But others find that they start to hear the political music, and even like it. They will send thank-you notes and remember the small gestures that might entrench them in a company. They will identify allies who can help them through lean times. They will seek out rabbis.

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