

Coaching for Workplace Success

Workplace coaching: What's it all about?

Jennifer Wright

52 Grey Street, Opoho, Dunedin, New Zealand

Tel./Fax: +64 3 473-0934; E-mail: jenn@wrightdirection.net

1. Introduction

Coaching in the workplace is a passion of mine, and I am honoured to have this opportunity to share it with you. This opportunity came about through networking, the people-connecting activity, which allowed me to be in the perfect place at the perfect time. I ran into Karen Jacobs by accident while visiting the University of Indianapolis in July of last year. Then in September, Karen and I met again in New Zealand as she keynoted our National Occupational Therapy Conference. The rest is history.

Coaching is one of the fastest-growing professions in the Western world. Estimating the number of practicing coaches is close to impossible. The International Coach Federation, the oldest professional association of coaches, was founded in 1995 and currently has more than 7,000 members. Articles about coaching pop up regularly in the popular press and you might find the guy on the bus next to you has a personal coach. "Coaching" has become a buzz word and, as with most buzz words, misconceptions and misunderstandings abound. In this column I would like to clarify what coaching is, and what its origins were. In so doing, I will compare coaching to terms you may be more familiar with: mentoring, training, and therapy.

2. What is coaching?

According the International Coach Federation, "Professional coaches provide an ongoing partnership designed to help clients produce fulfilling results in their

personal and professional lives. Coaches help people improve their performances and enhance the quality of their lives. Coaches are trained to listen, to observe and to customize their approach to individual client needs. They seek to elicit solutions and strategies from the client; they believe the client is naturally creative and resourceful. The coach's job is to provide support to enhance the skills, resources, and creativity that the client already has."

3. Origins of coaching

Coaching's roots can be found in many different, evolving fields. The early theories of William James, America's father of psychology, influence coaches as they help clients work consciously and purposely to design their lives through discovering their hidden or buried worthiness. Alfred Adler saw individuals as creators and artists of their own life, and used the techniques of goal setting, life planning and future visions, all tenets of and approaches in coaching. Carl Rogers in 1951 wrote *Client Centered Therapy*, which purported that therapy should be a relationship in which the client was assumed to have the skills and abilities to change his life. This shift in perspective has been a significant predecessor to what today is called coaching. Other contributing theories include cognitive-behavioral, which supports life change through the client's changing their self-defeating beliefs. Abraham Maslow, through his research, viewed man as a naturally health-seeking being who, if obstacles to personal growth are removed, will naturally pursue

self-actualization, playfulness, curiosity, and creativity. This is the foundational belief of coaching today [1].

According to Williams, coaching today embodies the superior purpose of psychology. It is not just about pathology, diagnosis and the treatment of human frailties. It is, more importantly, about the study of human potential and possibility. When you empower people and help them discover what they can do instead of focusing on what is wrong and what they can't do, you dramatically improve their overall mental health and quality of life, both personally and professionally.

4. Coaching and therapy

While coaching and therapy share a common background, and coaching is clearly therapeutic in that its aim is to enhance an individual's performance or life experiences, there are distinct differences between the two. The differences in schools of psychotherapeutic thought make it difficult to make generalizations about therapeutic practice. In spite of differences in philosophy, techniques and practice, clinical psychology *per se* is primarily remedial and concerned with repairing or curing dysfunctionality [2]. A majority of schools are driven by the diagnostic medical model wherein in the client is regarded as ill or sick, and the therapist is seen as the expert with a high degree of domain-specific knowledge who cures or treats the unwell. Therapy is vital for those with serious presenting problems, or what we call pathologies [1].

Coaching, unlike therapy, spends very little time in the past and focuses on developing the person's future. Coaching is wellness- versus illness-oriented, and this ability to see clients as well and whole is the key to understanding the coaching relationship. Therapy is about *recovering and uncovering* [1] while coaching is about *discovering*.

5. Coaching and mentoring

In organizational settings, mentoring has traditionally been a hierarchical relationship in which a senior passes on his or her domain-specific knowledge to a junior. The key issue in comparing coaching to mentoring is that mentoring traditionally involves an individual with expert knowledge in a specific domain passing the knowledge on to someone without that knowledge or expertise. In contrast, coaching is a process in which the coach facilitates learning in the client.

Distinguishing coaching from mentoring via definitions is not easy, but in practice differences are easier to recognise. Three practice areas that are dissimilar are focus, skill, and ownership. The coach concentrates on helping the client to learn how to achieve more whereas the mentor's aim is to be a resource to the client or mentee. Skills required for the role of mentor include people skills, as well as training and/or teaching skills. A coach must have the knowledge, techniques, and skills to help the client achieve without directing. Coaching requires self-direction and ownership of performance by the client. Commonly, ownership of performance rests jointly with the mentor and client.

Of course, many coaches have great expertise in a particular area and use it to assist their clients' learning. Many mentors may have good coaching skills, but mentoring *per se* does not require coaching skills. Darwin [3] argues that to make mentoring a more effective practice, explicit training in coaching skills must be undertaken.

6. Coaching and training

The primary goal of any training program is to prepare trainees to perform effectively on a specific post-training task [4]. The trainer usually determines the training agenda, and trainees must adapt themselves to the process and structure of the training. In coaching the client sets the agenda and determines the goals to be achieved. That said, many trainers have excellent coaching skills, and coaches can be trainers.

According to [5], there are many instances where successful completion of a training program does not result in enhanced performance. Hesketh [6] suggests that this is due to a lack of teaching metacognitive skills to trainees. Metacognitive skills, the ability to think about one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, are essential in mastering new skill sets. Hesketh [6] defined metacognition as knowledge and control of self and knowledge and control of process. Both are important in self-regulation of commitment, attitude, attention, and executive control of behaviour.

Central to the coaching process is the use of such metacognitive skills. Perhaps some training programs may be enhanced with one-to-one coaching. One study [7] found productivity was significantly increased with the addition of one-to-one coaching, compared to training alone. Additional research needs to focus on the detailed factors to enhanced performance.

7. Coaching core competencies

We have looked at the origins of what is currently called coaching and have compared it to therapy, mentoring, and training. However, we have not examined the skills that a coach utilizes for successful coaching. No matter what “school of thought” a coach comes from, salient listening skills are the backbone of all coaching.

The International Coaching Federation (ICF) and the International Association of Coaches (IAC), both certification bodies, have identified coaching core competencies. The ICF’s competencies, listed below, are very process-oriented and can be found in greater detail at www.coachfederation.org.

1. Meeting Ethical Guidelines and Professional Standards.
2. *Establishing the Coaching Agreement*: Ability to understand what is required in the specific coaching interaction and to come to agreement with the prospective and new client about the coaching process and relationship.
3. *Establishing Trust and Intimacy with the Client*: Ability to create a safe, supportive environment that produces ongoing mutual respect and trust.
4. *Coaching Presence*: Ability to be fully conscious and create spontaneous relationship with the client, employing a style that is open, flexible and confident.
5. *Active Listening*: Ability to focus completely on what the client is saying and is not saying, to understand the meaning of what is said in the context of the client’s desires, and to support client self-expression.
6. *Powerful Questioning*: Ability to ask questions that reveal the information needed for maximum benefit to the coaching relationship and the client.
7. *Direct Communication*: Ability to communicate effectively during coaching sessions, and to use language that has the greatest positive impact on the client.
8. *Creating Awareness*: Ability to integrate and accurately evaluate multiple sources of information, and to make interpretations that help the client to gain awareness and thereby achieve agreed-upon results.
9. *Designing Actions*: Ability to create with the client opportunities for ongoing learning, during coaching and in work/life situations, and for taking new actions that will most effectively lead to agreed-upon coaching results.
10. *Planning and Goal Setting*: Ability to develop and maintain an effective coaching plan with the client.
11. *Managing Progress and Accountability*: Ability to hold attention on what is important for the client, and to leave responsibility with the client to take action.

8. An appreciative approach

Coaching incorporates an appreciative approach. This approach is grounded in what’s right, what’s working, what’s wanted, and what’s needed to get there. The incorporation of discovery-based inquiry, proactive versus reactive ways of managing opportunities and challenges, and envisioning success with focusing can have profound effects in the client moving forward.

9. Coaching in the workplace

Coaching has become a popular tool in the workplace. Increase in job transition and self-employment along with downsizing and restructuring all make for stressed, out-of-focus, less effective employees. A saying that is commonly heard in coaching is “In coaching, the whole person shows up”. This is a way of recognizing that many times what’s surfacing at work has its roots in the personal life of the individual. Coaching allows everything to be put “on the table” for the client so that s/he can determine priorities and create strategies for moving out of “stuck”.

Future columns will look at workplace coaching in more detail. I will provide case studies from a particular work population, present coaching solutions, and give real practice examples of how coaching has unstuck a client.

Coaching is a powerful strategy for the 21st century workplace. The most successful businesses will be those where the people who work there, from the owner to the janitor, begin to get a clear sense of their own individual values, as well as to identify and recognize the values of the company. When they then act on both sets of values, the benefits will resonate through the business, to its clients and other stakeholders, and, potentially, to the community as a whole.

Professional biography

Jennifer Wright, M.S., owns Wright Directions, a coaching and consultancy firm located on New Zealand's South Island. Along with individual coaching, she runs on-line and in-person women's groups. She also teaches part-time at the Otago Polytechnic School of Occupational Therapy in Dunedin. Jennifer earned her Masters degree in occupational therapy from the University of Indianapolis. She has worked in a variety of positions across the health sector, as clinician, manager, vice-president of operations, private consultant, researcher, author and associate professor. From 1995-99 she coordinated the post-professional occupational masters program at the University of Indianapolis. In 1999, seeking a sea change, Jennifer accepted the teaching position at Otago Polytechnic and moved to New Zealand. In 2001, she completed coaching training and received certification from the International Association of Coaches. She is a member of the American Occupational Therapy Association, the International Coach Federation (ICF), the International Association of Coaching, Coachville and International Women's Chamber of Commerce.

References

- [1] P. Williams, *The Continuing Debate: Therapy or Coaching?* www.choice-online.com, **2** (2004), 38–39, reprinted on www.coachfederation.org, found, 12/15/2004.
- [2] A. Grant, *Towards a Psychology of Coaching*, Ph.D Thesis, Coaching Psychology Unit, School of Psychology, University of Sydney. 2001.
- [3] A. Darwin, Critical reflections on mentoring in work settings, *Adult Education Quarterly* **50** (2000), 197–211.
- [4] D. Druckman and R. Bjork, *In the mind's eye: Enhancing human Performance*, Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1991.
- [5] R. Schmidt and R. Bjork, New Conceptualizations of practice: Common principles in three paradigms suggest new concepts for training, *Psychological Science* **3** (1992), 207–217.
- [6] B. Hesketh, Dilemmas in training for transfer and retention, *Applied Psychology: An International Review* **46** (1997), 317–386.
- [7] G. Olivero, K. Bane and R. Kopelman, Executive coaching as a transfer of training tool: Effects on productivity in a public agency, *Public Personnel Management* **26** (1997), 461–469.

Copyright of Work is the property of IOS Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.