

How To Become Even More Successful (And Stress Free) Through Coaching

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There are many times in life where you may want to accomplish more than you are right now. Maybe you want to expand your business or change to a new career that's totally unfamiliar to you. Maybe you're having trouble in certain areas of your life and can't seem to overcome these challenges on your own. Or maybe you just want to take up a new sport, such as golf, tennis, or snowboarding.

I don't know about you, but when I encounter such roadblocks or new transitions, I often look for an experienced coach to assist me. Somebody who's been there before, and who has a passion for helping others achieve similar success.

I have also served as a coach for many people. Most of my coaching has centered on health related issues, such as helping people learn how to reduce their stress, lose weight, or exercise more regularly. Whatever the focus of coaching might be, there are some general principles for how you can benefit from coaching that are universal.

The purpose of this article is to highlight some of these core aspects of coaching so you can get the most from your future or existing coaching relationships.

Coaching Is Often Poorly Understood

We've all benefited from coaching relationships throughout our lives. From a very young age, we experience relationships with athletic coaches, music teachers, dance instructors, academic tutors, business consultants, therapists, counselors, health professionals, attorneys, and a wide range of other helpful people.

We've also seen examples of good and bad coaching in professional sports, the Olympics, and in movies such as Hoosiers, The Color of Money, and the Karate Kid. Wax on, wax off.

Despite this wealth of experience, many of us fail to enter into coaching relationships that could help us, or we establish coaching relationships and then fail to behave in the ways necessary for us to benefit.

Why Are People Reluctant To Engage A Coach?

One thing that's amazed me over the years is how reluctant people can be about benefiting from a coach, especially when they need one. Sometimes the barrier can be lack of money (you don't always have to pay people to coach you) or a stubborn commitment to solving major problems entirely on your own. But there also seems to be a pervasive, negative attitude about coaching, even though it's very beneficial.

One reason for our reluctance is that we tend to confuse personal coaching with psychotherapy. To ask for help with a troubling life problem often makes people feel they are weak, incompetent, or even mentally ill. Such feelings result from an incorrect understanding of what coaching is and how it differs from psychotherapy.

Coaching Vs. Psychotherapy

➤NOTE: The comments below are not intended to be critical of psychotherapy or psychotherapists. Many therapists function as highly capable coaches. My primary aim is to point out that "coaching" and "psychotherapy" are essentially two different activities. In other words, when a psychotherapist is "coaching," he or she is doing something different than when he or she is doing therapy. I also want to highlight how the helper-helpee relationships for coaching and psychotherapy are also very different. These distinctions are important because many people who are not psychiatrists or psychologists can function as excellent "coaches" for other people. When you don't understand how these two activities differ, you may have difficulty deciding when and how to use each appropriately.

Coaching and psychotherapy differ in a number of important ways. First, psychotherapists tend to view people from a disease-oriented perspective. Their job is to diagnose "illnesses" and treat individuals accordingly. Coaches, on the other hand, do not operate from a disease or disability model. They view people as being capable and able--lacking only in knowledge and instruction--and consider their job to be helping you bring out the true "champion" within you.

Second, the goals of coaching are never vague, imprecise, or potentially conflicting. When you enter psychotherapy, both you and your therapist will often be unclear about the outcomes to be achieved. You may have a vague sense of being unhappy or otherwise dissatisfied and an equally vague sense that you would like things to change. As therapy proceeds, you may get clearer about your goals, only to find that some of them clash with the goals your therapist has in mind.

When you ask for coaching, however, both you and your coach are always clear about what is to be accomplished:

- "I want to learn to win at tennis"
- "I want to play golf and shoot below par"
- "I want to double my business profits"
- "I want to learn how to stop yelling at my children."

Such well-defined goals are at the heart of every coaching relationship. They are never vague or imprecise, and they are always shared by all parties involved. While you may occasionally disagree about the best way to achieve your stated goals, both you and your coach will always be aiming at the same clearly-defined objectives.

A third way in which coaching differs from psychotherapy is that past history, past events, and past personal performance are not that important to a coach. Psychotherapists, in contrast, often place a great deal of emphasis on the past. Coaches are much more present and future oriented. Their concern is not so much what went on in the past, but what you want to have happen *now*. While your past may explain your previous level of performance, it does not necessarily limit what you can achieve in the future.

Another difference between coaching and psychotherapy is that coaches mainly engage in *pointing* and *empowering*, not theorizing. The function of a coach is to **help you see where you are blind**. A baseball player, for example, cannot see the fine points of his swing or batting stance when he is focusing on a ball coming toward him at 90 miles an hour. An experienced hitting coach, on the other hand, can observe certain flaws that the player may not notice. If a problem is detected, the coach brings it to the player's attention--by pointing to it--and suggests ways to correct it.

EXAMPLE: In 1989, The Baltimore Orioles signed a promising young pitcher named Ben McDonald to his first professional contract. McDonald was one of the best college pitchers to come along in recent years. A few days after signing his contract, he traveled to Baltimore to audition for manager Frank Robinson and several of his coaches. To McDonald's surprise, the manager correctly yelled out "curve ball" or "fastball" just before McDonald released every pitch. Robinson and his staff had studied films of McDonald's delivery and had spotted certain movements that "tipped off" the pitch he was planning to throw. By pointing these out to the astonished rookie, the manager made him aware of certain unconscious habits **that he was previously blind to**. This is the type of "seeing" and "pointing" that is the hallmark of effective coaching.

Psychotherapists, on the other hand, frequently theorize (this is why there is so much disagreement and variation within the field). When coaches speak and point, however, there is rarely disagreement. Once a problem has been spotted, it can usually be recognized by everyone. Good coaches, therefore, rarely engage in supposition. They observe you in action, point out what you are doing wrong (and what you may be doing well), and communicate with you in a way that enables you to improve your performance.

What Is Demanded Of You In A Coaching Relationship

The roles of both parties in a coaching relationship also differ from the client-therapist roles in psychotherapy. For coaching to be successful, you must agree to empower your coach. This means *surrendering* to your coach's wisdom and judgement and following his or her instructions explicitly. Your coach, in turn, must be willing to assume such a leadership role.

Many psychotherapists, however, adopt a more passive role. They are very willing to assist you with your problems, but they consider you to be one who primarily directs the process.

Good coaches, on the other hand, rarely encourage you to "do your own thing" or "find your own way." To the contrary, they often take the position "it's my way or the highway." Your job, therefore, is to find a competent coach you can trust and then *surrender to his or her guidance*. Often, this will require you to trust his or her opinion more than you trust your own.

This requirement—to temporarily turn over control of part of your life to another human being—is another major obstacle that keeps people from benefiting from coaching. It can cause you to refuse to ask for help altogether or to enter into a coaching relationship with little intention of giving up control. **Surrendering to your coach**, therefore, is one of the most difficult, yet important, things you must do.

➤NOTE: What stops most of us from surrendering to another person is distrust--not distrust of our coach, but *distrust of ourselves*. We fear that if we give up control to someone else, this person could abuse us. While this could happen, we don't trust that we can protect ourselves if it does. Surrendering to the will of another person doesn't mean we give up all of our critical faculties. It just means we acknowledge that our own ideas and strategies are insufficient to achieve our goals and that if we truly want to succeed, we will have to let others help us.

The final way in which coaching differs from psychotherapy is that both you and your coach always know how the process is going. Since the goals are clear from the outset, both people know if results are being produced. If they are not, adjustments must be made.

In coaching, the burden for such adjustments rests mainly with the coach. In psychotherapy, the failure to make progress is often blamed on the client. A coach will usually look within himself or herself whenever things are not going well.

The Poisoned Apple

Here's one example from my stress counseling work of what I mean by the difference between coaching and psychotherapy.

Jake, who was divorced, had been living alone for more than ten years. Then, he met Janet, a vivacious, attractive woman who recently joined his company. Janet quickly made friends with Jake. They soon started dating and eventually began living together. All went well for about a year until Janet complained that she was bored with the relationship. She told Jake she wanted to date other men, and a short while later she moved back into her old apartment. She continued to see Jake on a regular basis at work, but all she wanted from him was a "friendly" relationship.

Needless to say, Jake was devastated by Janet's sudden turnaround. He longed to be with her and broke into tears whenever he saw her at the office. He blamed himself for the failure of their relationship, even though Janet had been married and divorced three times before, and even though he had done everything he could to please her and make her happy. He came to me for counseling because he was finding it difficult to "get over her" and because he wanted to stop feeling sad whenever he saw her at the office.

After working with Jake for one or two sessions, I could see why he was having trouble. While he was very willing to acknowledge his own role in the relationship's demise, he never mentioned a word about Janet's deficiencies. After all, he thought, she was so lovely, personable, and attractive that it must have been his fault the relationship failed.

What Jake had not seen was that Janet had a long-standing problem with commitment. She was easily attracted to men, but when this initial attraction wore off, so did her commitment. Jake had actually sensed this about her when they first met, but he was so enthralled with her that he ignored his "gut" reaction.

The coaching I offered Jake was to repeatedly create the visual image that Janet was like a poisoned apple--attractive and alluring but deadly to eat. Whenever he saw her at work, he was to consciously remind himself of this image. I even told him to place an apple on his desk every day, just to remind him of this association. When I saw him two weeks later, he was greatly improved. The coaching had worked wonders, and he was no longer despondent about the breakup of the relationship.

How To Find And Utilize Coaches In Your Life

Coaching is one of the most abundant resources available to all human beings. Good coaches exist everywhere around us. All you have to do is know how to: a) spot them; b) enlist their support; and c) use them wisely. In the remainder of this article, I will focus on each of these issues.

You Don't Always Need A Professional

To benefit from coaching, you don't always need a professional. While professional coaches get paid for what they do, many people in your life might be willing to coach you for free, especially if you ask them for help and allow them to support you.

What To Look For In A Coach

Suppose you are having a relationship problem, a work-related problem, or some other type of problem that you haven't been able to resolve. And suppose you want to call upon a friend, family member, or associate to coach you. Here are some of the qualities you should look for in a coach:

1) *Has the person mastered the type of problem you are having?*

Don't ask a 300 lb. person to coach you to lose weight. Ideally, you want someone who has personally solved a similar problem or who knows what it takes to do so. Look around for people who handle problems like yours very easily. You can even ask your friends "Do you know someone who's good at dealing with problem X?"

2) *Does the person have a track record of successfully helping others?*

While a successful track record isn't essential, it can be helpful. Some people can handle certain problems themselves but can't communicate to others what they know or what they did. Either ask for personal references, or otherwise check out your potential coach's record of success as tactfully as you can.

3) *Is the person good at "seeing" and "pointing" or are they prone to theorizing and hypothesizing?*

From your initial conversations, you can usually tell if someone has what it takes to coach you. Since "seeing" and "pointing" are what your coach will need to do, you should be able to get a feel for whether a person is oriented this way.

4) *Is the person trustworthy?*

You should feel that you could put your life in your coach's hands and you would be taken care of. If you get any hint of the opposite feeling, look for someone else.

5) *Is the person willing to work with you?*

When you find someone who meets your criteria, ask them to become involved. Tell them the specific problem or problems you are having and the specific outcomes you want to achieve. Then, ask if they would be willing to work with you to help you achieve these goals. If they say "yes" or "perhaps," then ask what they would expect of you. When both of you reach agreement on these terms, you have created the foundation for a successful coaching relationship. If, on the other hand,

you detect any unwillingness or hesitancy on the other person's part, don't force the issue. Promising to coach someone is a huge responsibility. Therefore, you should only work with people who are excited about your goals and who have a decent chance of helping you succeed.

6) *Does the person have a higher estimation of you and your abilities than you do yourself?*

Most people believe they will never solve their problems. Since they've tried many times in the past and failed, they have no reason to expect any other outcome. You want a coach, therefore, who can see through your pessimism, who has absolute confidence in your ability, and who knows you can succeed regardless of your beliefs to the contrary.

7) *Does the person tend to see things differently than you do?*

The last thing you want is a coach who thinks and sees things exactly as you do. What you need is someone who can help you break out of the conceptual "box" you're living in. For example, if you have trouble sticking to an exercise plan because you buy into any excuse that comes along, you don't want a coach who will sympathize with you. You want someone who is rarely stopped by excuses, who doesn't care how good your arguments are, and who will hold you to your exercise agreements no matter what you say or do.

How To Enlist A Coach's Committed Partnership

To enlist a coach's committed partnership you can either: 1) pay them, or 2) ask them to volunteer. Either way, you've got to assure them you are serious about wanting to work with them to achieve your stated goals. More importantly, you've got to assure them that you are willing to surrender to their guidance and support. The best way to do this is to promise this explicitly. Say to the person "Look, I really want you to coach me and I give you my word I will do whatever you say." Then stick to this promise as best as you can. This is what most coaches truly want to hear. They do not like trying to help someone who is going to fight them and resist them every step of the way.

➤NOTE: You can even get coaching without asking for it directly. If you find someone who is proficient or expert at something, you can tap that person's wisdom in many ways. You can follow them around to learn what they think and do. You can read any books or articles they may have written. You can attend their public lectures and workshops. You can even invite them to speak to your club or organization. As long as you have the desire to be coached in a particular area of life, you can usually find people who can help you succeed.

How To Use Your Coaches Wisely

The most important thing to remember about coaching is that the outcome is largely dependent upon you. The critical factors are:

- How badly do you want to solve your problem or develop a particular skill?
- Are you willing to invest the time and energy required?
- Are you truly open to the thoughts and ideas of others?
- Are you willing to be brutally honest (if necessary) about both your strengths and your weaknesses?
- Are you willing to surrender to the wisdom and guidance of another?

If the answers to these questions are all affirmative, you will find it easy and rewarding to use coaching as a widely available success strategy.

RECOMMENDATION:

After reading this article, go to a video store or Netflix and rent one of the following movies: a) *The Karate Kid, Part I*; b) *The Color Of Money*; c) *Hoosiers*. Even if you have seen the movie before, watch it again, recalling what you have learned from this discussion about the nature of the coaching relationship.

SOURCE: This article was adapted from a chapter written by the author and previously published in *The 14 Day Stress Cure* (1991).