

What the Heck is Coaching, Anyway?



How this misunderstood field can help you get unstuck and reach your potential

By Dan Trommater

“You are perfect exactly as you are and there’s always room for improvement.”

That’s a Zen philosophy that I embody in my coaching practice. At first glance, it’s counterintuitive. If you’re ‘perfect’, then there shouldn’t be room for improvement. But in this context, perfection isn’t about being flawless. Perfection isn’t being the best. It’s accepting yourself (flaws and all) and knowing that you can always get better. Coaching can be a fantastic way to do just that. Coaching is a buzzword lately. Life coaches and executive coaches seem to be everywhere. But what does ‘coaching’ even mean? If you’ve ever wondered what coaching is all about (and if it is a good fit for you), I’m writing this for you.

The International Coaching Federation (the world’s leading coach accrediting organization) defines coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.”

That’s great, but what does it really mean? Let’s start with a high-level answer, then I’ll dig in a little deeper and

explain what it actually looks like in practice. Broadly stated, coaching is for people who want to grow, achieve goals, and reach their potential; and they want a trusted partner to assist them along the way.

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WHAT COACHING IS:

Coaching is an equal partnership between a coach and a client – It’s a structured conversational partnership that leads to the client moving from where they are, to where they want to be in any area of their life. Depending upon the client, ‘where they want to be’ can mean different things. I’ve worked with a wide variety of clients with a wide variety of goals ranging from career concerns to relationship struggles to increasing confidence. While it’s an equal partnership, it’s one in which the client leads. It’s up to the client to decide what areas to focus upon, as well as the goals for each

session. That brings us to the next quality of good coaching...

Coaching is a confidential and judgement-free process – The coach’s main goal is to create a safe, judgement-free environment in which the client can improve and move toward their goals. The ‘judgement-free’ part is important. A good coach will push their client to new heights, but will never harshly judge any shortcomings. Once that safe environment is created, the coach asks questions designed to help the client get clear on their goals and how they’ll reach them.

Coaching is rooted in curiosity – Instead of judgement, a coach’s power comes from curiosity. By turning down the judgement and cranking up the curiosity, we can move past guilt and shame, and start to make forward momentum. By asking powerful questions, the coach helps the client uncover assumptions and find new approaches.

Coaching is future-focused. – While it may be interesting to think about why things are the way they are, it’s not always very productive. Coaching is about looking at the current state of affairs and then working towards a better future. It’s like this – would you rather figure out

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why you're not good at saving for the future, or would you rather come up with a plan and actually start saving for the future?

Once there's a plan in place, coaches then help clients stay accountable for the things they say they are going to do. When it comes to achieving one's goals, a little bit of gentle accountability goes a long way.

WHAT COACHING IS NOT:

Given the common misconceptions about coaching, it's important to clarify what coaching is not. When we're talking about the coaching that you'll get from an accredited professional coach like me, it is not about getting advice or learning new skills, and it's certainly not therapy.

Coaching is not Advice – Getting advice from someone you trust can occasionally be useful, but coaches trust that you already have everything you need. It's the coach's job to help you uncover your own best solutions to the problems you're facing.

Coaching is not Skill Building – A good coach will help you tap into your own strengths to reach your goals, but it's not the job of the coach to teach you anything. However, during the course of a coaching program, you might decide that learning a skill will help you reach your goals. Coaches can help you identify areas for growth, and then it's up to you to seek out training from external sources.

Coaching is not Therapy – As you work to maximize your potential, you may deal with (and make progress on) some fairly heavy stuff. While coaching can be a great way to overcome psychological blocks and get you moving forward, it's not a substitute for professional mental health treatment. If you have issues with clinical depression,



anxiety, and the like, your coach can help you seek out qualified professionals that can help.

OK, BUT WHAT DOES COACHING LOOK LIKE?

So, coaching is not advice, training or therapy. Instead, coaching is rooted in curiosity and non-judgement, is an equal partnership, and is designed to move the client forward in their life. But what does it look like?

When working with a coach who is accredited with the International Coaching Federation, the coach and client work together to identify areas of growth, set goals, and develop a plan. The coach will ask a lot of questions and give the client space to find their own best answers. There is a lot of back and forth, and gentle probing for deeper understanding and insights. As a coach, it can be described as an organic process that can take a great deal of training and experience to learn and cultivate. By the end of each session, the client decides

on a course of action and goes out into the world to make it happen. At the next session, the coach checks in on the progress made and the process continues.

As for time commitment, coaching is usually done in 45-60 minute sessions over the phone or via video conference (though some clients meet their coaches in person.) These meetings occur at a pace that's decided upon depending on the nature of the goals and the life circumstances of the client. They can be weekly, bi-weekly, or on an as-needed basis.

CONVERSATIONAL ALCHEMY

So that's the nuts and bolts of it, but it's rather difficult to convey the nuances of a coaching session. It's one of those things that you have to experience to really get it. There's a strange and powerful conversational alchemy that takes place. I can honestly say that coaching can sometimes feel like real magic. I often marvel at my clients' ability to uncover their assumptions and discover new ways forward. One of my favourite things to hear a client say is, "gosh, I never thought about it like this," because when we get a fresh perspective, we're better equipped to make changes and reach our full potential.

And remember, you are perfect just as you are, and there's always room for improvement.

Dan Trommater is a keynote speaker, workshop facilitator, one-on-one coach and professional magician. Check out Dan's website, blog, and coaching services at dantrommater.com

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