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The Practice of Coaching

Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see.

—Mark Twain

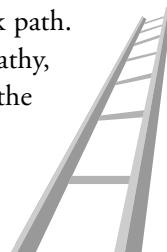
Coaching might be best described as much as a form of consulting as a subset of therapy and counseling. It, in fact, combines aspects of both. It is a *distinct field* as well as a *methodology* as well as a *set of specific skills* that can be incorporated into one's existing work as a social worker, psychotherapist, physician, nurse, mental health practitioner, consultant, or manager.

One need not become a coach to incorporate coaching into one's work. Physicians and nurse practitioners can benefit from learning how to coach patients to take their medications and follow their diets and exercise regimes; collaborative lawyers need coaches to help guide couples through the divorce process and prevent relationships from deteriorating into chaos; and even prisoners can benefit from being coached to think about their situations from new perspectives so they can become productive citizens when they are released.

Coaching is strengths based. It emphasizes that people are *whole, complete, and resourceful* as they are. The role of the coach (or of "coaching," if one is serving in another capacity such as social worker, doctor, or nurse) is to help bring an individual's strengths to the foreground and move the individual to engage in the right actions to improve his or her personal and/or work lives. The coach is at once teacher, mentor, guide, cheerleader, "nag" (D. White, 1998), visionary, keeper of the vision, and process agent, facilitating meaningful linkages between inner and outer work in the lives of clients. "Whole" refers to the whole self, for which career, family and friends, health, spirituality, finances, and physical environment all matter. "Complete and resourceful" are the qualities we uncover when we mine for gold and find the strengths each individual or system already has within.

Coaching begins with the identification of the core values, sense of purpose, and vision of client and coach. A client works from the inside out, from examining his or her own passions, goals, and abilities to clarifying a more fulfilling life or work path. The coach facilitates the journey by asking wise questions, providing empathy, probing and confronting, sometimes training, and usually extracting from the client a vision and a plan for taking action toward realizing a new future.

The coach works primarily in the present, helping people separate fact and interpretation so that they can be clear and focused on doing what they need to do to get where they want to go. Similar to a sports coach,



the life or business coach wants his or her client to experience “wins.” Many wins—even small ones—over time can transform the client’s outlook as well as produce concrete results in major, lasting, and generalizable ways. Coaching, above all, is truly inspiring. It gives as much to the practitioner as to the client because it moves both into the realm of what is really possible for people—individually, in families, in groups, and in communities. One has only to use one’s imagination to see a myriad of possibilities for individuals and potential applications beyond those I describe in the pages that follow.

Laura

Dear Marilyn,

I wanted to send greetings to you. It’s been just about one year since I took your intro to coaching course. I wanted to let you know the powerful and positive impact your work has had on my personal and professional life. It was through my brush with coaching that I gave myself permission to put myself out there and expect success.

Over the past year, I advocated for our local daily paper to do a feature story on my work as an art therapist and trainer (printed in January), and I will be involved in another story in an arts paper next November. I also began advertising my private practice and workshops and am slowly building my business. Now when people see me on the street, they greet me by saying “There’s the famous Laura Seftel.” I asked one client where she saw my name, and she said “everywhere.” I would never have had the nerve without your workshop. My brother has also been an incredible role model—he’s a documentary filmmaker who needs to be brazen in his self-promotion. He sent 19 press packs to the *Boston Globe*; after the 20th they interviewed him.

I’m also still getting mileage out of the concept of “extreme self-care” and in turn teach this powerful tool to my workshop participants. One of my goals is to offer more workshops. Rather than compete with the approximately 500 therapists in the Northampton area, I decided to make them my clients! I offer various trainings for therapists, in the realm of art and healing. Several of the participants have gone on to become private clients.

The last accomplishment I want to share with you is a small local arts grant I won to coordinate a show called “The Secret Club: an exhibit about miscarriage.” Curating the show is part of an overall effort to develop expertise in this area. In addition to writing about this topic, I also plan to offer weekend retreats for women who have experienced miscarriage.

I am grateful that I found your workshop at a pivotal time in my life. Hope things are going well for you. Your spirit has helped me ride out the risks and the occasional loneliness of starting my own business. Thank you.

—Laura Seftel, Northampton, MA

Roughly one-third of coaches are therapists or even have psychologically oriented training; however, social workers, therapists, and other human service and health care providers who take a holistic view can make the best coaches, because they understand human nature, already take a whole-person view, and generally have good listening skills.

Just as there are over 125 types of therapy (“List of Therapies,” n.d.), there are many types and schools of coaching. At the time of this writing, 45 accredited coach training programs (programs that provide all 125 hours of coach-specific training required for certification) were listed on the International Coach Federation (ICF) Web site, and six were pending approval. A number of others, including a growing number offered by academic institutions (most of which focus on business coaching), were listed as offering a minimum of 30 hours of approved coach-specific training hours.

The flexibility of the coaching discipline does not lend itself to fitting into neat categories, but there are some key areas in which coaching can be both critical and empowering to human service professionals—in private practice, agency work, and community work. Listed here are five areas in which coaching is relevant to social work and human services:

Personal and Professional or “Life” Coaching

Life coaching is a practice focused on helping clients determine and achieve personal goals. Life coaches use multiple methods to help clients with the process of setting and reaching goals. Coaching is not targeted at psychological illness, and coaches are not trained as therapists, although there are overlapping skills. Coaching is unlike therapy in that it does not focus on examining the past or diagnosing mental dysfunctions. Instead, coaching focuses on effecting change in a client’s current and future behavior.

According to a 1998 survey of coaching clients, “sounding board” and “motivator” were the top roles selected for a coach. Clients are looking for a coach “to really listen to them and give honest feedback.”

Coaching provides an alternate means of making a difference in the lives of individuals who do not have a psychiatric diagnosis but do have life issues, concerns, needs, wishes, and desires to address. Some of these needs might not be viewed as “critical” services, but to the individuals concerned, they are. Examples from my students’ coaching niches include helping breast cancer survivors find inspiration to reengage fully in life and helping returning expatriot’s families successfully reengage and find new purpose in their communities. Coaching is also increasingly being used as an adjunct to healthcare treatment—for example, with patients with diabetes and teenagers who are HIV positive—and it has been used with challenging populations such as incarcerated prisoners.

In my own practice, career dissatisfaction is the primary issue for which clients seek services. These clients vary from those who are suffering job displacement in a changing global economy, are looking to escape the stresses of corporate America, or are underearning or want to improve their careers to those experiencing severe distress in the workplace who do not wish to use traditional employee assistance program (EAP) services. Although they

are aware that EAP is confidential, they may wish to keep coaching separate, particularly if they are considering a job change.

Social workers and other professionals can and do provide coaching, usually for executives, as part of EAP services when client companies include it in their contract. Social workers are the predominant providers of EAP services. Additional knowledge and awareness of coaching can equip these providers with new tools and techniques to help any employee with distress related to job-specific issues.

As an example, here is one coaching request I received:

Single successful professional leading a life that feels incomplete! Trapped in a routine, and losing prospective on what I really want in life. Have been working alone on some internal and external conflicts for years with no resolution. Need a coach with an open mind who understands cultural diversity and has experience dealing with highly educated clients.

Another client sought coaching because she was dissatisfied with her job of 15 years in her ex-in-law's company. A friend had forwarded an issue of my newsletter to her. She saw a quote I used from Napoleon Hill, author of *Think and Grow Rich*—the very same quote she had used in an article she wrote for a trade magazine—and she knew it was time for her to move herself forward. Her complaint was, “I always do things that make others succeed. . . . It's time to do it for myself!”

Business Coaching

Business coaching is the practice of providing support and advice to an individual or group to help them recognize ways in which they can improve the effectiveness of their business and leadership skills. Business coaches often specialize in different practice areas such as executive coaching, corporate coaching, and leadership coaching or small business coaching.

A business coach need not have specific business expertise or experience in the same field as the person receiving the coaching to provide quality business coaching services, but some of the most successful executive coaches have been executives themselves, and some of the best entrepreneur coaches have been entrepreneurs. The most important thing is to have good interpersonal skills and values that match the client's needs. I have personally enjoyed, for instance, coaching family businesses and government executives because their dedication to service is very similar to that of nonprofit leaders (case examples are provided later).

Nonprofit Coaching

Coaching in the nonprofit world is a perfect fit for social worker coaches and other human service professionals.

Impact on Agencies and Services

Coaching can bring new energy and creativity to some of our most frustrating social issues. For instance, an agency in Philadelphia that worked with teenagers who are HIV positive converted from a casework approach to a coaching approach. Clients were asked what they wanted to do with their lives. After initial responses of anger or confusion, the youths started to think differently about their future—about having futures at all, in fact. A key unforeseen consequence was a dramatic increase in drug compliance. A pediatric social worker brought coaching to a children’s diabetes unit to encourage patients’ compliance with their diabetes regimens, and the findings were similar. Other venues where I have presented coaching or in which coaching has been used include the following:

- a Veteran’s Administration outpatient service;
- a coaching and mindfulness class in a school-to-work program in the Boston public school system;
- a teen drug and alcohol state conference;
- Epilepsy Foundation of Massachusetts and Rhode Island jobs programs and education of corporate employers; and
- a (pending) National Institutes of Health grant to measure the effectiveness of training nurse-practitioners to coach diabetic patients.

Coaching skills and techniques can be used successfully to launch and develop new nonprofit organizations. Two case studies (Birthday Wishes and Women’s Empowerment for Cape Area Networking) are discussed in chapter 14.

Coaching Nonprofit Leaders and Organizations

Nonprofit leaders are often torn between the enormous demands of providing for their organizations and their personal lives. Coaching is an obvious choice to help these leaders to successfully prioritize and balance demands on their time and personal and organizational resources and become more effective at delegating and focusing on what is most important.

I have personally coached leaders of several nonprofits. Not all were social workers or human service professionals, but all were making significant contributions in their communities, collaborating successfully with existing social service agencies, and the successful growth of their organizations would provide prospective employment for social workers.

Health and Wellness Coaching

Staggering health costs associated with the rise of diseases like cancer and AIDS as well as the epidemics of childhood obesity and diabetes all speak to a tremendous need for coaching around health-related issues. Just as coaches have been recognized for their skills in helping athletes, teams, and executives to be their best, coaches are now beginning to

help individuals create lasting improvement in their health and well-being. If two-thirds of our health status is related to our personal choices, learning new life skills so that we engage in healthy behaviors—diet, exercise, moderate drinking, nonsmoking, and relaxation—can make a huge difference.

Companies such as Wellcoaches Corporation (<http://www.wellcoaches.com>) are setting the trend in this new field of coaching, offering a range of services for both wellness and sports medicine, including “laser coaching”—sessions lasting just 10 to 15 minutes, provided in person or by phone. Some insurance companies and health management organizations have already incorporated health coaching into their programs, and I predict that this trend will explode in years to come.

Supervision and Management

Coaching skills add knowledge and best practices to supervision and management. In clinical settings, clinical supervision can be distinguished from administrative supervision or management.

As a supervisory model, coaching offers the opportunity to draw the learning from the supervisee. Questions like the following are all possible lines of inquiry: What is the learning here? About this patient (or client)? About their illness? About yourself? What might you have done differently if you knew what the outcome would be? How would you need to be different or have more success with this kind of case in the future?

The coaching manager (Hunt & Weintraub, 2002) focuses on helping his or her supervisees or employees learn and grow. Coaching managers are developers of talent and achievers of results. A coaching context encourages learning and takes mistakes, questions, and concerns and turns them into learning opportunities. Employees are encouraged to be open with their questions and concerns. If people are punished for making honest mistakes, coaching will not mean much. If you want to encourage learning, you have to cope with the frustration you may feel knowing that you could have done a job better,

Profile of Coaching Industry (ICF, 2008)

- Estimated 30,000 coaches globally
- 67 percent female
- 38.8 percent between ages 46 and 55
- 60.8 percent part time, the majority being female; 39.2 percent full time
- 86.4 percent coaching 10 years or fewer
- 53 percent have advanced degrees—master’s or doctorate degree
- 71 percent received training through an ICF-accredited program
- Annual incomes averaged \$82,671 for full time and \$26,150 for part time

faster, or cheaper yourself. If you are coaching, you must try and stay on the sidelines. You cannot say “What did you learn from that?” one minute and chew an employee out the next. People are more receptive to learning new skills and using both positive and negative feedback if they feel engaged in the process and see the value for themselves.

Some good manager coaching questions are simple:

- What were you trying to do?
- What were you hoping to accomplish?
- What did you actually accomplish?
- Where do you see gaps?
- How do you understand the gaps?
- What, if anything, do you need to start doing, keep doing, or stop doing?

A coaching manager also looks out for the career development of his or her employees. What is their potential? How can their overall career development needs be met while helping them be successful at the job at hand? How can coaching/supervision meetings be used to help employees move in the desired direction?