



Hey, Coach! What's the Play?

We live in a remarkable time; our definitions of communication, entertainment, commerce, workplace, business choices and self are evolving and expanding at a pace unheard of just 3 years ago. Multiply this rate of change with the need to stay current, to learn the new languages of business and technology, to absorb new information from an array of sources bombarding us from all directions and what do we get? A searing measure of stress to adult lives already complex with too many responsibilities and personal goals. Out of this explosive pressure has arisen a new field, coaching. Growing (by all media accounts including Fortune Magazine this past February) at a rate commensurate with the new economy of the new century, a coach is a combination of personal consultant, buddy and resource extraordinaire. And, when properly trained, a coach can have a powerful impact, whether the client is an individual or a business.

The foundation of coaching is its devotion to the balanced, stress-free health of clients. The review of a client, from the inside out, has as its goal the enhancement of the client's Personal Foundation, a term coined by Coach University (the premier training program for certified coaches). The strengthening of this Personal Foundation - essentially consisting of who we are and what we have, internally - creates a powerful base from which all coaching guidance and client success stems.

The route for this personal review includes a simple but powerful concept: the realization that how we respond to the realities and circumstances of our individual lives can have a fundamental impact on what those realities and circumstances are. By shifting our learned responses in a given situation we may find more productive, quicker results. The ability to make this shift, to take the strongest healthiest action in reply to an event, obstacle or opportunity is one of the long term benefits a coach can provide, regardless of the arena in which the client needs support. Long after the client may have ended the coaching relationship, this new skill - just one of many a coach can impart- will remain within the client's grasp.

Here's an example. I have a client, a pediatrician, who purchased her practice complete with existing staff. As she became comfortable with this business - its patients, the surrounding community, colleagues, etc. - the Dr. realized that her staff, a comforting fixture for the patients, did not fit her image of professional support personnel, helping the business succeed. They were resistant to suggestions and attempts at training. She agonized about replacing these assistants who had been in the office for many years longer than she: the impact it could have on her business, the patients who might leave because of personal relationships developed with the staff, and the bad word of mouth which might result, the lost business due to time needed to find and train new staff. So, she did nothing. But this "nothing" had an insidious impact. She was spending an inordinate amount of time checking work and correcting errors made by her employees, taking up tasks she felt they were incapable of performing, worrying about inappropriate comments they were making in view of waiting patients, feeling constantly disappointed by their inability to have a positive impact.

When this client came to me, it wasn't because she wanted to make necessary changes in her business. Instead, she was experiencing a sense of overwhelming stress and exhaustion all the time, unable to enjoy what had been a multi-faceted life. She was not ill, didn't have longstanding difficulty coping with life but had, over a period of months, developed a constant sensation of stress and inability to leave the office behind at day's end. She couldn't sleep well, couldn't concentrate on her families' need for her time, dropped out of several charitable commitments, lost touch with her distant friends and relatives. It was this sense of stress she wanted to correct. It took awhile until we found its cause at her place of business - she had begun to accept her circumstances there as just the usual business owner's problems. She admitted her unwillingness to make changes for fear of the negative results. We spent some time exploring the negative effects resulting from not making changes. I had her list the worst she could imagine happening if she did replace her staff. We compared the relative value of these two lists of negatives. Then we started to talk about the positives she could effect with planning her desired changes in a systematic way, with constant care for the profitability of her business. By looking carefully at all her options and applying a simple numerical value to each one, this client began to see the choices she had and their results. We determined that she was "tolerating" rather than "choosing" many aspects of her

business life, an unacceptable circumstance. With this tool, it was easier to recognize the value in responding to her business environment differently than she had previously. It gave her a measure of control over her business she'd given up and taught her the value of recognizing choices rather than assigning importance to her constant feeling of frustration and paralysis.

Another tool reinforced by a coach is the alignment of one's personal values and goals with the amount of time and attention devoted to each of these. Learning to live our lives (or run our businesses) in a fashion completely consistent with these priorities can immediately remove a common source of stress: the sense that we are neglecting the people or activities we deem important to our lives or success. Another benefit of this alignment of time spent in accordance with our priorities is that we learn to fully appreciate and concentrate on the present. Too often stress leads us to devalue or not fully concentrate on what we are doing in the present; instead we concentrate on what we should have done in the past or what we are supposed to do next, in the future. This preoccupation with "should" instead of "want" can destroy any joy in our lives right now.

My client Linda is consumed by a part-time position she recently took on. After having been a stay-at-home mom for several years, she's loving the diversity of her job, learning a new profession and the satisfaction of doing it well. Each week, she chooses to spend more and more time there. Her husband and young child miss her and have become resentful of her volunteering so much time to the job. We know there's a reason for this but her immediate concern is whether she should quit the position she's grown to love. She believes herself incapable of handling all the elements of her life. Instead, she jumps into a new "project" 110% and leaves nothing for previously existing obligations and pleasures. We start to unravel this problem with a simple list: the top 5 priorities in her life. Then I have Linda prepare her schedule for the week, showing her allocation of 24 hours each day. Immediately, this visual presentation shows her the inconsistency between what she values and how she spends her time. It also reveals that among her top 5, she did not list time for herself - whether in fun, meditation, physical health, appearance, socializing or solitude. Not only has Linda neglected those elements which she acknowledges are fundamentally important but she's neglected to value herself.

In addition to balancing Linda's values with her activities we discussed the concept of Extreme Selfishness, not an easy one for many people to take on. But look at it from this angle: Every time you get on a plane, the stewards present the standard safety measures including proper use of the oxygen mask which will descend from the ceiling during an emergency. Remember what they tell you? Put it over your own head first and breathe in before attempting to assist the child or passenger next to you. Obviously, if you're about to pass out, you won't be much help to your traveling companion who needs you to be strong and alert. And that is "extreme selfishness". Without ensuring your own health - including all the elements of your life such as physical surroundings, finances, emotional well-being and pride in appearance - your ability to assist others is compromised. The more you have in personal reserve, the more you can give.

Unlike therapy, coaching assumes a client is healthy and whole from the start. And yet, as with these 2 examples, there are many reasons why someone might seek out a coach for some assistance: transitions, loss, confusion and that overwhelming stress I mentioned earlier. From a personal perspective coaching can assist someone who wants to build or change a career, cope with loss of any kind, give up an addiction (such as food or smoking), find and achieve a goal, make a bigger impact in the world. In a business setting reasons might include the desire to expand, develop new products or services, become or train better managers, enhance productivity and employee performance or reduce turnover and absenteeism.

Unlike consulting, a coach and client establish their relationship, plans, goals and timetable jointly. A coach assumes there is as much to learn from each engagement as does a client. Also unlike consulting, a client does most of the work. As a result, clients have tremendous personal investment in the coaching relationship, beyond its cost, and therefore have a greater likelihood of following the plan and finding success. And what success! Just as in sports, the personal or business coach plants the dream for "unreasonable" success and then nurtures the client to develop those internal skills needed to obtain the dream. This leaves the client with recognition that they can accomplish far more than they ever imagined if they'll allow themselves to dream big and truly plan to succeed, another healthy result of the coaching process.

Coaching is action-oriented and designed to propel a client to transform their life or business. A simple coaching model consists of 3 mandates:

- discover and understand who the client is and, perhaps along the way give the client a deeper self awareness;

- help clarify what the client wants and connect these "wants" to who the client is, making sure the client's expressed "wants" are consistent with the client's values;
- empower the client to obtain and attract their goals with their own efforts (yes, I mean "attract",), thereby teaching the client that they can achieve more than they ever thought possible.

Because this field is attracting its practitioners from a broad variety of professions, coaches tend to specialize, using their previous careers and credentials to find a niche market ideally suited for their skills. For example, I am a personal and business coach. I like to focus on finding and capitalizing upon the hidden assets we all possess and tend to underutilize. As a former Wall Street manager I specialized in developing new services for an employer with huge name recognition and tremendously underused resources. As an entrepreneur I found the resources within me to handle every contingency and, with limited funds, learned to make every circumstance of my business - even the possible negatives - a selling tool.

I came to coaching through the "back door". While developing a consulting practice I began reading literature on coaching and had too many "aha!" moments to ignore: its concepts and theories were so much in tune with my own thinking and seemed to call on skills I believe I possess in a way not previously used. Additionally, through its teachings, it offered me the opportunity to gain insight and wisdom with each client I encounter, a tremendous asset.

Intuitively, we all know the value of a coach for an athlete, musician or sports team: focus, inner strength, motivation, vision. All this plus the support of someone who unconditionally believes in you and is devoted to helping you live your dreams are benefits to which we are all entitled. Professional and personal coaching is here to meet this need in all of us.

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