

Understanding What Coaching Is All About & How You Can Benefit From Working With A Coach

By Bill Shirley

Introduction

This is a comprehensive discussion of Life Coaching as compared to Sports Coaching. It looks at both Business or Professional Coaching and Life or Personal Coaching. It covers the history of its development as an emerging profession for the past 20 years, and its roots in philosophy, psychology, and emotional intelligence theory. It distinguishes between managing, consulting, training, and psychotherapy. It answers the question: “Why would I want to work with a coach” and discusses how the coaching process works. Next, it lists some examples of the benefits of business and personal coaching. Then it suggests how to select a coach that is right for you and the cost of engaging a coach. The last section, “Concluding Comments”, discusses where coaching fits into our universal quest for Success and Happiness.

A Bit of Recent History

In the late 1980's, Coaching - specifically Life Coaching as compared to Sports Coaching - emerged from the primordial swamp of humanity's fundamental needs. The unhappiness, alienation and loneliness of leaders in particular and society in general, provided the evolutionary energy for its (nearly) simultaneous creation by several thought leaders. Coaching began to evolve quite rapidly in 1989 after Thomas Leonard presented his ideas on Life Planning in a weekend workshop to a group of men and women dedicated to personal growth and human development. Many of these people went on to create their own schools of coaching, as did Thomas (Coach U).

The early thought leaders collaborated in developing the vocabulary, fundamental coaching skills, and core competencies that define the discipline of Life Coaching. They established the performance standards that define excellence in the emerging Coaching Profession.

In 1995, these pioneers created the International Coach Federation (ICF) as a self-regulating body for the profession. The ICF sets the ethical standards, educational requirements, and performance requirements of the profession. It examines the schools of coaching that apply for official recognition and accreditation. It has created an effective peer-review process insuring that its ethics and performance standards are maintained. The ICF has the clear intent that Coaching become recognized by society as a highly valued profession alongside of Medicine, Law, Engineering, and Accounting.

As of the beginning of 2005, the organization has about 8000 members. Its growth rate is accelerating as more people complete the rigorous training required to become a true professional in this field. Nominally, 1500 members have qualified for an ICF coaching credential. The organization has established demanding professional standards for certifying three levels of professional experience and excellence: Associate Certified Coach (ACC), Professional Certified Coach (PCC), and Master Certified Coach (MCC). It generally takes someone (with a day job) over three years training and coaching experience to attain the ACC credential.

There are at least 60,000 people who label themselves as coaches. “Coaching” is a popular and trendy word used to describe several activities that are anything but coaching. Lots of consulting, mentoring, advice giving – and even therapy -- occur under the label of “coaching.” Many managers say they are “coaching” their employees when telling them what they did wrong. The public is understandably confused as to what coaching really is – and is not. While there are many excellent coaches who do not have an ICF credential, at this time, this is the only standard of excellence a layman can fully trust.

The impact of Professional Coaching on people’s lives is profound. Many corporations use trained coaches extensively throughout their organization to reduce stress and improve performance. Several corporations – IBM and Boeing for example – require their coaches to be credentialed by the ICF.

A Bit of Ancient History

The philosophical ground under coaching reaches back to (at least) Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre. These philosophers examined the “predicament of existence” and what it is to live a fully engaged, authentic life. Coaching confronts the realities of our existence and how we choose to experience life.

Today’s coaching paradigm evolved from the self-actualizing human potential movement of the 1960’s and 70’s. Coaching is indebted to the Transpersonal Psychology of Maslow, Rogers, May and others. Coaching is exclusively devoted to the self-actualizing psychology of *healthy* people. These creative trailblazers demonstrated the power of the close, personal relationship between coach (though they did not use that label) and client, one of total positive regard, embracing trust, passion, and compassion. Coaching, like Transpersonal Psychology, is a performance and results oriented process, enabling the client to achieve greater self-awareness, self-management, and effectiveness.

From this heritage, coaching is a *generative* use of psychology. The focus is on such questions as:

- How can I make my life even better?
- How can I make my life more fulfilling?
- How can I become even more imaginative, resourceful, and creative?
- What is next for me in my pursuit of excellence and adventure?
- How do I create a low stress, fulfilling life adventure of my own design?

Coaching theory and practice also draws heavily on the Daniel Goleman’s development of Emotional Intelligence concepts over the past 25 years. Goleman has proven the destructive fallacy of denying emotions in rational, decision-making environments such as business as well as our everyday life. Coaching brings the power and wisdom of our feelings and intuition into our conscious lives. While our knowledge resides in our mind, we now realize that our wisdom resides in our heart: our intuition is our “quiet knowing without conscious thought.”

Existential Philosophy, Transpersonal Psychology and Emotional Intelligence concepts merge to ground the profession in our modern understanding of human nature. Coaching enables people to become more aware of their potential for passion, joy, prosperity, and ease in a chaotic world. Coaching helps people shift from being “Human Doings” to being “Human Beings.”

Distinguishing Coaching from Managing, Consulting, Training, and Psychotherapy

These activities are all related – and sometimes, overlap – but are distinct in their focus of attention and intended results.

A **Professional Coach** focuses on expanding the client’s self-awareness of her values, desires, and needs. The coach guides the client in realizing her intentions whether that be achieving a goal, solving a prob-

lem, or having an experience. The coach taps into the client's vision, knowledge, and wisdom in service of the client's agenda. Coaching inspires human development.

A Manager focuses on achieving specific organizational results by influencing the behavior of his people. To that end, he may use coaching skills in gaining loyal support and Buy-in to the mission and goals of the organization. Coaching skills are paramount in creating highly effective teams.

A Consultant focuses on achieving transformational results by infusing her specialized expertise into the existing organizational culture. Coaching skills may be used if the engagement includes transferring knowledge or skills to individuals in the client organization.

A Training Professional focuses on transferring specific information or skills to his clients. Very often, coaching skills are employed in this service. Coaching is a sophisticated mode of teaching.

A Psychotherapist focuses on the diagnosis, prescription, and interventional treatment of pathology. Therapy is remedial: the therapist addresses wounds and trauma, fixing what is broken. Therapists often use coaching skills in teaching the client new behavior patterns.

The Professional Coach is trained to recognize the situation where the client's needs require the specialized training of a therapist. However, all healthy people experience problems, issues, stress, distress, emotional pain, grief, disappointment, low self-esteem, anger, sadness, hurts, fears, sorrows, remorse, loneliness, overwhelm, isolation, and frustration. This is not pathology; this is the substance of everyday life! The Professional Coach is trained and seasoned in dealing with this full range of normal, healthy emotions in service of the client's agenda, intentions, and goals.

The Reason for Working with a Professional Coach

There are two separate but closely related venues for coaching: 1) Professional or Business Coaching, and 2) Personal or Life Coaching.

Business Coaching:

There is only one reason for a Business Owner, CEO, or a Managing Partner to engage a coach. They want to improve the long-term profitability of the business through the selection, development, and retention of the organization's human capital. All business success depends upon the efficient use of its capital as measured by its Return on Investment (ROI). Just a few years ago, businesses committed its capital to hard, tangible assets. Now most business capital is tied up in its people; its "human capital." *When examined closely, the only significant difference between successful and unsuccessful businesses in the 21st Century is the quality and effective deployment of its human capital.*

Every night, the company's most important assets leave the premises! If these assets return the next day, it is solely because they want to do so. Loyalty is critical to any organization's sustained profitability. Loyal customers come only from the efforts of loyal employees. Employee loyalty cannot be coerced or purchased. It must come from management's ability to gain Buy-in to its Values, Vision, and Goals. Without Buy-in, no loyalty; without loyalty, the employees may show up and perform as they must to get paid but they are not actually "engaged." They are not truly committed to the vision and mission of the business and will quickly leave when whatever is more "engaging" comes along.

In developing the leadership skills that create full engagement and loyalty throughout the organization, the executives generally discover that Business Coaching draws heavily upon the concepts of Personal Coaching.

Personal or Life Coaching:

There is only one reason for someone to engage a coach: they want even more from life than they have today. The client wants to experience (the coach's ability to inspire) personal development and growth. Coaching is a performance and results oriented process, enabling the client to change through greater self-awareness. In succinct, pragmatic language:

People engage a coach to create a low stress, fulfilling life adventure of their own design.

The implications of this statement are profound! Much of our unhappiness and alienation results from living by someone else's values, goals or priorities, rather than our own. Conversely, we experience our greatest joy when we are clear about our life purpose and know we are living in integrity with our values.

Almost all of the rest of our unhappiness and alienation results from taking responsibility for another person's choices. There is a very distinct, but subtle, difference between 1) being responsible *to* someone, and 2) being responsible *for* someone. When this distinction is not clear, our behavioral boundaries can become blurred and relationships become contaminated.

Life is not static! If we are alive, we are becoming more aware of all that we are and can become. We are also becoming more aware of our impact upon other people and our ability to help them become more of who they wish to become.

We are either "becoming" or we are "dead." We all know nice people who have "given up" on life; they believe that their life is over. They are "decaying" rather than "aging." (They are still around only because no one has gotten around to burying them.)

Coaching is all about "becoming." Coaching is about "change" and "growth." However, "change", in terms of real personality change, seldom ever happens. By late childhood, our true personality, our Essential Core, is fully formed. But more fundamentally, why would we want to change who we truly are? We each are a juicy, unique, and non-reproducible creation unlike anyone else, past, present or future. It is our "rough edges" that attest to our humanness, makes us lovable, and is the source of our life power.

As part of our desired change and growth, we may want to change who we *think* we are, or we may want to change some self-limiting behavior or how we deal with conflict, or how we deal with feelings of rejection. The list of possible perspective and attitudinal changes is limitless. Anything is possible because we are naturally creative, resourceful, and whole. Our coach is our guide and champion on this journey of growth and change.

When we look at "growth" more closely, what we see is that we have become more intimate - less alienated - with our Essential Core. We have become more of who we truly are. We have shed parts of our façade, exposing more of our Authentic Self. Coaching is about getting to know our true selves; recognizing our latent potential, our energizing power, and our personal magnificence.

We become more confident and comfortable with ourself. We are more honest with and trusting of ourself. We have greater access to our intuition and deepest wisdom. In the end, all personal growth is nothing more, *and nothing less*, than developing an intimate, loving relationship with our true self - our Essential Core. This means *always* treating ourselves with loving kindness and gentle good humor. Consider this:

If we love the person we are now as much as we love the person we wish to become, our wish will be fulfilled.

How Coaching Works

A successful coaching relationship is totally confidential. It is founded upon mutual openness, trust, and honesty. The coaching relationship is a unique peer relationship; it is a “peer relationship with an edge.” At times, a good coach is fierce, provocative, and challenging. And, at times, even infuriating. When we are called forth to own all of our power and magnificence, we may (for a fleeting moment) decide to fire our coach.

Our coach’s focus is on Our Agenda and guiding us in accessing our wisdom and intuition. Coaching is far more than setting goals and dealing with the stress, time management and success issues we all have. Our coach guides us in deeply exploring our beliefs, thoughts and feelings, all of the elements that make up our life experiences. It is in this realm that self-awareness expands and the self-confidence to handle whatever arises is born.

From self-awareness, we transform chaos into order, our life “flows”, what needs to happen comes naturally without hesitation or doubt. We have full access to our intuition; our “quiet knowing without conscious thought.”

Our coach helps us see our blind spots and nudges us to get out of our own way. We all have blind spots because we simply can’t watch ourselves do something while we are in the middle of doing it! Our coach “watches” us perform and then engages us in a provocative conversation where we uncover things of which we were not (consciously) aware, thus dramatically improving both performance and self-confidence.

Regardless of the field, any of us involved in a demanding leadership role must contend with three killer emotions: Overwhelm, Isolation, and Frustration. Ignored and left unattended, the stress created by any of these three killers is life threatening, together, they are lethal. Dealt with inadequately, the stress created by these three killers erodes self-confidence, happiness and health, leading to burnout and a sense of failure.

In expanding our awareness, our coach has us examining what is going on around us: in our world and our environments (of which we have many). Our coach has us examining what is going on inside: our energy, our intentions, desires, emotions, values, beliefs, and inner conflicts.

Our coach guides us in facing an easily deniable reality: the overwhelm, isolation and frustrations we experience are entirely all of our own creation! This reality must be faced without blame, shame, guilt, anger or self-denigration. It is just what is; it is just our reality.

More precisely, our reality is created from our relationships. We all have three kinds of relationships. First is the “me-you” relationships of our life. Then come the “me-environment” relationships. These are our relationships with all of the institutions that influence our life, family, church, school, community, government, etc. Finally, we have *potentially* the most intimate of all relationships, the “me-self” relationship. The key word is *potentially*, for when we examine it with the guidance of a masterful coach, we often discover how little intimacy we do have with ourself. All too often, we discover we really don’t know ourself very well, nor do we treat ourself very well. This is often a literal “life saving” discovery!

In the coaching process, we discover just how much our “me-self” relationship controls our “me-environment” and our “me-you” relationships. As our self-awareness of our “me-self” relationship expands, we become more skilled in creating the reality we desire - and deserve!

When working with a masterful coach:

We successfully create a low stress, fulfilling life adventure of our own design.

Some Tangible, Pragmatic Benefits of Coaching

The specific benefits of engaging a coach are entirely dependent upon the client's specific situation, goals, and agenda. They are dependent upon the client's willingness to do the work involved in a successful, productive coaching engagement. At least 90% of the benefits of coaching happen *between* coaching sessions!

The following list is a representative of the range of benefits most often mentioned by clients when asked "In what ways do you benefit from coaching?"

In one's business life:

- Lower turnover
- Improved communications
- Higher productivity
- Expanded creativity
- Less conflict
- Better teamwork

In one's personal life:

- Lower stress, more energy, less fatigue
- Less procrastination
- Improved relationships, both personal and professional
- Higher clarity and focus
- Greater self-confidence

This is only a general list to give some idea of the scope of issues that can be addressed in a coaching engagement. It just depends upon what the clients want to do with their life.

Selecting a Coach

The first step in selecting a coach is to determine four things. What in your life do you want 1) more of? 2) less of? 3) to stop? and 4) to continue? What are all of the things, if modified in some way, would bring more passion, prosperity, joy, and ease to your life? What will increase your happiness, fun, and adventure?

Once you get clear about what you want to accomplish by working with a coach, then consider: do you prefer a male or a female? Is age and general life experience important to you? Then what specific life experiences would you like your coach to have had? For example, do you want a coach with executive business experience or familiarity with your type of business? Or do you want a coach with experience in raising teenagers? Or do you want a coach trained in some behavioral specialty such as ADD (Attention Deficient Disorder).

Develop a general profile of the person you perceive will be a good coach for you. However, as you interview various candidates, do not be dogmatic about finding someone who exactly meets your profile. You may unexpectedly connect with exactly the "right" person who is totally different than you expected.

You can find an infinite number of people who offer "coaching" very quickly by "googleing" the word. You can get lists of graduates from anyone of 150 different coaching schools, all available on the internet. You may find coaches listed in your local Yellow Pages. You may have colleagues and friends who can recommend a coach.

In addition to any other criteria you consider important, you will be better served by making your selection from ICF Credentialed Coaches. This is the only way you can be certain that your coach has acquired the Professional Skills that distinguish a coach from a consultant or advisor or mentor or a "wannabe" coach.

The Cost of Coaching

Coaching is entirely a value proposition. You are not purchasing “coaching”, you are purchasing the high value, Intangible Benefits of engaging a coach. Unless your coach delivers value: unless your coach has the Coaching Qualities that inspire you (or your organization) to enthusiastically pursue the growth and change for which the coach is engaged (i.e. your agenda), you are not getting value. You are wasting your time, money, and energy.

The supply of people offering coaching services far exceeds the demand. Individuals and businesses can purchase coaching services for as little as \$50 per hour to over \$1000 per hour! Be wary of those who have much “experience”, only modest formal training, and “competitive” prices. Their prices reflect the competition of services of similar quality. They know what their services are worth!

International Coach Federation (ICF) credentialed coaches have passed rigorous examinations, and demonstrated mastery of the coaching core competencies. Their real-time coaching performance has been peer-reviewed by established Master Coaches and they have accumulated considerable (i.e. years) of coaching experience. Prior to entering the coaching field, they have acquired university degrees and years of life and business experience relevant to their coaching specialties.

The ICF has a very effective program to certify every coach who meets its very demanding standards. As of the first quarter in 2005, there are only about 1500 ICF Coaches who hold either the Associate Certified Coach (ACC), or the Professional Certified Coach (PCC), or the Master Certified Coach (MCC) Credential. These coaches are not inclined to charge “competitive” fees. Their fees reflect their established and proven competence.

Concluding Comments:

Whether we are looking at our business or professional life or our personal life, we all want Success and Happiness. Even when we are successful and happy, we want to sustain this condition in our evolving universe. Regardless of how we each define these elusive terms, our Success and Happiness are determined by our skill in managing our most limiting resources: our time and energy. Sometimes we can use another resource, money, to purchase help that, in effect, conserves or increases our time and energy. However, at best, money has only a marginal impact on our Success and Happiness. At the end of the day, our Success and Happiness are determined by how skillful we deploy our time and energy in our rapidly changing, chaotic world.

We are continually discovering - with much pain and frustration -- that our systems, behaviors and concepts that produced success yesterday are obsolete today. “Change” - as in our Changing Environment - is predestined; it is the undeniable reality of life, both business and personal. Conversely, “Growth” - as in what is required to sustain our Success and Happiness - is optional; it is a choice we each make moment by moment. We can choose to be fully engaged in a low stress, fulfilling life adventure of our own design, or not!

If we choose to make it so, our life can be a journey, a daring adventure of our own design:

"Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing." -- Hellen Keller

Your coach is a guide, a fierce companion on your daring adventure:

“A Coach is someone who tells you what you don’t want to hear, who has you see what you don’t want to see, so you can be who you have always known you could be.” ---Tom Landry