

COACHING

What It Is and How It Works

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When people hear the word *coach*, they often associate it with sports coaches and acting coaches. Both of these professions presuppose the coach's expertise and the client's relative ignorance. In this article, the term *coaching* has a different meaning—one specifically oriented more toward a partnership than an expert/student dynamic. Coaching as discussed here covers life coaching, wellness coaching, business coaching, career coaching, and many related professions in the field of human development.

What Coaching Is

Coaching is a relatively new human service profession and one that continues to evolve. Because of the many different types of coaching, and because the field is changing and growing, different people may define and describe coaching in slightly different ways. The International Coaching Federation (ICF)—the leading worldwide organization for the profession of coaching—defines professional coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.” Coaching is a co-creative collaboration between a coach and a client in a stimulating inquiry designed to access the client's inherent wisdom. The aim is to expand possibilities in the direction of the client's dreams and goals.

Coaching is about both process and product. The *process* of coaching supports clients to engage creatively in working toward goals such that “thinking outside the box” becomes more habitual. Over time, the session-to-session practice of learning to approach goals and obstacles from new angles takes root, and

clients discover a wellspring of inner and outer resources they were previously unaware of. As these resources become increasingly integrated into clients' tool kits, their sense of their own capabilities is

expanded, and they're able to draw on these resources in an increasingly wide range of situations.

The *product* of coaching is the component most widely publicized—the results that emerge from the process, such as an exercise plan, a decluttered home, or the launch of a new business. Whether process or product, the focus is always on supporting the client to

design a life consistent with their deepest self and highest vision—and then to implement the design.

What Coaching Isn't

Coaching is different from psychotherapy, which frequently focuses on the past and on what *isn't* working that needs fixing. In contrast, coaching focuses on what *is* working and how to create more of it. According to the ICF, “Coaching concentrates on where clients are now and what they are willing to do to get where they want to be in the future.”

Coaches recognize that delving deeply into the past is sometimes a necessary step in a person's personal growth journey. Persistent obstacles to moving forward, such as chronic depression or deep-seated self-esteem issues, are best addressed in therapy. It's not the appropriate role of a professional coach to analyze and prescribe, nor to tread into the realm of serious emotional disturbance.

Coaching is also different from consulting. It's not the job of a professionally trained coach to offer

“Professional coaching is an ongoing professional relationship that helps people produce extraordinary results in their lives, careers, businesses or organizations. Through the process of coaching, clients deepen their learning, improve their performance, and enhance their quality of life.”

—International Coach Federation

Major Differences Between Coaching, Therapy, and Consulting

	Coaching	Therapy	Consulting
Focus	Learning through doing; exploring the interface between self-discovery and sustainable action; creating a fulfilling life	Understanding patterns of emotion and behavior; healing from difficult experiences in the past	Problem-solving; accomplishing specific goals
The Expert	The client is the expert; the coaching process supports the client in accessing inner wisdom. The coach asks the questions, and the client looks inside to discover the answers.	The therapist is often seen as the expert; the client often leaves therapy when ready to guide their own life.	The consultant is the expert.
Goal	Identifying the client's vision for their life, which energizes the client to experiment with creative approaches to actualize it	Freeing the client from limitations originating in the past	Solving present-day problems in order to achieve desired goals; acquiring new skills and expertise
Childhood Issues	Does not involve deep work on childhood issues	Often focuses on early childhood experiences	Does not involve deep work on childhood issues

prescriptions or advice. A coach is a partner and co-collaborator—not an expert. The client is the expert on his or her life, and sessions are designed to tap into that expertise in service of the client's focus for each session. A coach contributes observations, thought-provoking questions, and a variety of tools to support the client in moving forward and not be stopped by old patterns. A coach's input, while valuable, is never meant to trump the client's self-knowledge or inner sense of the best path to follow. One of the pillars of professional coaching is a deep belief that the client has the answers within. From the ICF Code of Ethics: "The coach's responsibility is to . . . encourage self-discovery and elicit client-generated solutions and strategies."

How Coaching Developed

Dr. Patrick Williams, EdD and Master Certified Coach, who is considered by many to be the "ambassador of coaching," has written extensively on the origins of coaching. He describes the field as "a derivative of the best thinking in self-improvement since the turn of the twentieth century" and states that it evolved from three main threads:

- The helping professions, including psychotherapy and counseling

- Business consulting and organizational development
- Trainings in personal development such as those offered by Covey, Landmark, and Tony Robbins

At one point in the evolution of psychotherapy, it took a turn and adopted the medical model, "conceiving of clients as 'patients' with 'illnesses' that required diagnosis and treatment." According to Williams, "Of course, serious mental illnesses do exist, and clinical psychology or psychotherapy is appropriate treatment for them. However, in the past, many people were treated and labeled for what were more accurately challenges in living and bumps along the road of self-actualization." For those people, coaching may be a better fit.

Trainings and Certifications

While an abundance of educational programs for coaching exists, the most comprehensive and professional ones have been awarded the International Coaching Federation's stamp of approval by being classified as Accredited Coach Training Programs (ACTPs). These programs offer instruction in all the ICF's "core coaching competencies," a breadth of key skills and knowledge deemed crucial to competently work as a professional coach.

The ICF offers three tiers of certification for coaches—Associate, Professional, and Master Certified Coach—based on successful completion of an accredited training program as well as increasing levels of coaching experience and mastery.

A newer professional certification available to coaches since 2011 is the designation Board Certified Coach (BCC). This certification is available to coaches who have completed an approved coach training program who already hold an advanced degree in counseling or another behavioral or social science. Like the ICF, the BCC's governing body—the Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE), which is an affiliate of the National Board of Certified Counselors—has a code of ethics and holds its coaches to the highest professional standards.

Accredited or approved coach training programs also offer their own certifications equivalent to the ICF's Associate Certified Coach (ACC). These certifications go by various names, such as Certified Life Coach, Certified Wellness Coach, Certified Business Coach, and so on, depending on the area of focus. The exact name of the certification is less important than the quality of education and experience obtained. An accredited (ICF) or approved (CCE) classification is the most trustworthy indicator of the caliber of a coach training program.

Finding a Coach (and the Right Coach)

Choosing to work with a certified coach guarantees that the practitioner is using the term *coach* in the sense of the profession of coaching. It also guarantees that the practitioner has advanced training and a solid foundation in coaching-specific experience. Some therapists call themselves coaches to avoid having to meet rigorous licensing requirements for psychotherapists that exist in many states. These people aren't necessarily trained in coaching, nor do they necessarily follow guidelines set by the ICF or another professional coaching organization as to what constitutes coaching. They may engage with clients in more directive ways than would be acceptable for professionally trained coaches. It's important to keep in mind that coaching and therapy are different professions that use different approaches and require different types of education. However, it's also important not to confuse a non-licensed therapist claiming to be a coach with a practitioner qualified and credentialed to practice in both fields. The way to tell the difference is to inquire about training and certification.

ICF membership is another criterion to consider when seeking out a professional coach. ICF membership guarantees that the practitioner is governed by guidelines for professional practice and ethical conduct. (Other certifying bodies, such as the CCE, may as well.) Length of experience working as a coach as well as testimonials are additional indicators of coaching mastery.

When seeking a coach, it's important to find one who specializes in the desired focus area. Life (personal) coaches work with a wide variety of topics and issues related to values, direction, life choices, and life balance. They may also (but not necessarily) have training and experience that qualify them to work in additional areas. Other professional coaches may focus on a particular specialty, such as business coaching, career coaching, wellness coaching, relationship coaching, executive coaching, or spiritual coaching. In addition to general training in the profession of coaching, these coaches should have a background that qualifies them to work in their specialty area(s).

Interviewing Potential Coaches

These questions may be useful when looking for a coach:

- What kinds of coach-specific training do you have?
- Are you certified as a coach?
- Are you a member of the International Coach Federation?
- How long have you been a certified coach?
- What services do you provide?
- Can you share with me one of your coaching success stories?
- What are your fees?
- Do you ask for a commitment to work together for a certain period of time or a certain frequency of sessions?
- Do you have a coaching contract?
- How do you deal with intense or difficult emotions that may arise in a client during a session?

While interviewing coaches, it's useful to pay attention to the following:

- Does the coach listen well?
- Do they clearly understand your coaching goals?
- Is the coach both bright and compassionate?
- Does the coach try to provide you with answers, or do they elicit your own wisdom?

If a particular coach's specialty isn't evident from their advertising (such as "integrative coaching"), it's wise to ask for more information about their approach, professional training, and experience.

Finding a practitioner who intuitively feels like a good match is of great value as well. No training, credential, or list of glowing testimonials takes the place of a strong sense of having found the right person to work with. It's also important to trust one's instincts if a gut-level hesitation or discomfort arises when interviewing a coach, even in the absence of a rational reason for that response.

Different coaches—and training programs—have different comfort levels with regard to a client's inner world. Some programs are focused fairly exclusively on getting results, while others allow more room for emotions and inner exploration as part of the coaching process. It's important to find a coach whose approach resonates with your inclinations. A client who wants to focus exclusively on results may feel distracted by a coach whose orientation is more psychological, and a client who is intrigued with their inner world is likely to feel constrained by a coach whose style is geared exclusively toward results and accountability.

Telephone sessions are common in the world of coaching. Many potential clients appreciate the convenience of not having to drive to and from sessions as well as the freedom to choose a coach who lives anywhere in the world. Potential clients who at first may be skeptical about telephone coaching often give it a try and find it to be remarkably effective. (2023 update: Zoom is another option offered by many coaches.) For those who have a strong preference for in-person sessions, coaches can be found in virtually all metropolitan areas. As the profession grows, the likelihood of finding coaches in less populated areas increases as well.

How Coaching Works

The agenda of each coaching session is set by the client, who comes to the session with a focus and a sense of what they want to take away. The coaching process involves asking powerful questions that reach deep inside the client, spark insight, and evoke new possibilities. Powerful questions draw out the client's untapped potential, spark the creative power to generate new options, and focus on areas where shifts can have the most significant positive impact. Because coaching is always geared toward eliciting the client's

wisdom, it's standard practice to ask open-ended questions instead of yes/no questions. Throughout a session, the coach remains in a state of inquiry rather than analyzing, judging, or giving advice. Focusing on questions rather than answers fosters an environment in which new possibilities can continue to show up and supports the process of this creative mindset taking root in the client.

Coaches often say that they "coach to the gap," which refers to the gap between where a client is now and where they would like to be. Sessions are individually tailored and are often experienced by both coach and client as a synergistic dance. A coach and client often feel as if they're in a creative field together in which the coach intuitively senses the questions that will spark powerful insights, and the client has an expanded mindset in which habitual limiting beliefs and blind spots are no longer operating.

By the end of a coaching session, the client ideally has new insights and an action plan for taking those insights for a "test drive." The client then comes to the next session with information about the results of the test drive, including what worked, what didn't work, and any insights and surprises. The coach and client then explore those results, make any needed course corrections, and design a new plan to take for a test drive. They keep their focus on the client's goals while also allowing that the coaching process itself might reshape the goals.

Is Coaching Right for You?

Self-help author and coach Tony Robbins is often quoted as saying: "If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always gotten." Coaching challenges clients to get outside their habitual ways of living and engage in their lives from new angles. Not everyone has the mindset, goals, and life circumstances to do that. But for those who do, coaching is a precious opportunity to think outside the box and collaborate in a partnership that can be a creative, powerful catalyst for positive change.

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