

Beware Coaches Bearing Gifts
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We read a lot about "life coaches" these days. God, what an unsavory job description. "Drop and give me twenty and you'll thank me for it in the morning!" I got news for you. Coaches drive performance. Therapists help patients deal with life issues. But, there is a reason why so many committed therapists are becoming coaches. The insurance companies are (wisely in many cases) legislating out all the really profitable pathologies.

Used to be us shrinks had a pretty good thing going. In the salad days an MFCC (an MS/MA licensed as a marriage, family and child counselor) could hang some non-stigmatizing emotional malady from the old diagnostic and statistical manual (DSM) -- "300.01 general anxiety disorder, not otherwise described"-- , on a twice a week high functioning neurotic for five or six years. Charge the insurance company 100 bucks a visit, \$25 from the patient, \$75 from the insurance company and you were in business. And some people used to rag on chiropractors! Brother, those days are long gone. I mean, geeze, you have to work with crazy people these days to get insurance companies to cough up, and it's only good for 12 sessions a year excluding prior existing conditions.

So some smart therapist said, "hey, I've got an idea! Lets call it life coaching. Have the corporation pay for it. Argue for work life balance and we're back, baby! Plus we don't have to worry about all those inconvenient boundary issues. Why shouldn't I go to clients cocktail parties? How am I supposed to build my business if I can't play golf with clients. And if I like her and she likes me... I mean, I'm not her shrink, I'm her coach...Didn't you see personal best with Mariel Hemingway?"

Scary thing is many coaches aren't even trained to be bad therapists. To be a coach you don't need to do all that tedious class work or an internship. You don't really need training. Good with people? Like to talk? Always wanted to be in the helping professions? You're in! And if your really craving credibility you can get certified over the phone! In just weeks!

Since coaches aren't consultants they don't even have to justify return on investment (ROI for all you investment professionals). How can you place value on someone's sense of personal well being? It is obvious that an executive with better work/life balance is a more productive employee, right?

Here's the rub. Sports coaches jobs are clear. They are charged with driving athletes to optimal performance. Therapists somewhat less clearly, are charged with helping people who aren't performing well in life -- love and work according to Freud. Sport Psychologists (to the best of my understanding) work to help athletes minimize the performance limiting effects of the intersection between internal psychological/emotional issues and physical execution. But nobody knows how to measure or define what life coaches do.

And by the way don't talk to elite performers about work/life balance. Having consulted with both elite athletes and wildly successful business executives I can tell you that most of the highest performing among them don't have "balance". Many of them don't want balance. Dirty little secret...elite performers are different from you and me. They are myopic in their passion for what they do. The most enlightened and self observing will tell you that the object of their passion and expertise; their business, their sport, is the most important thing in the world to them. Not family, not god, not country and not, lord knows, balance.

Now, don't get me wrong. I've got no beef with coaches. Heck, I love coaches. Coaches have been some of the most important people in my life. And, oh yeah, I'm a coach -- sort of ! But let's be reasonable about this. Not everyone who is "good with people" is qualified to counsel. Hanging out a shingle does not an industry make.

How does one get to be a coach? In sport, coaches most often start as athletes. Not always the best athletes, but almost always athletes who become passionate "students of the game".

With a very few exceptions (ask George Karl) elite coaches start by apprenticing themselves to more tenured coaches. They work as assistants, become head coaches at lower levels (high school, junior college, college...) , then assistants at the next level and so on until they reach the nirvana of coaching and end baby sitting a bunch of millionaires in the pros who have them traded because they didn't like running suicides, playing defense and boxing out.

How about therapists? Typically, licensed therapists are MD Psychiatrists, PhD. Clinical Psychologists or MA/MS Psychotherapists. Starting in undergraduate school, it takes MDs 12-15 years to become certified and let HMO's tell them what to do. PhDs 12, 13 or so. MS/MA 6 or seven years of school, another year of a clinical practicum and (at least in California when I went through it back in '92) 3000 hours of supervised, usually unpaid internships (some candidates pay to get these internships!). All of this training and experience guaranties that they get to have an actuaries at some insurance underwriter define what *can be wrong* with their patients in order to get paid for service.

The point is good sport coaches pay their dues. Mental health professionals pay their dues. But life coaches who are supposed to do a little of both just have to make money! But even with advanced degrees and experience in one world (psychotherapy, sports coaching) most of these folks don't have the business sense to balance their own check books never mind coach executives.

Successful life coaches need only be good at marketing.

Here's why.

Having someone to talk to on a regular basis **feels good**. Having someone listen feels even better. In fact it feels so good it can become addictive. This is one reason we depend on our closest, most intimate friends and put up with so much from them. But we don't pay them. Interesting thing about our friends is that for many of us, no matter how much we talk, argue, agree, plead and commit we are still pretty slow to change. Our friends only care about how we feel. We like that and we hang on to them!

Sports coaches only care about how we perform. Sometimes we hate them but if they help us **win** (and if winning is everything) we keep them around and pay them a lot. I think the smartest ones win with a sensitivity to the individuality and individual needs of the athletes but I am a California kind of performance coach. It is a win -- win for sport coaches to win.

Psychotherapists do care about how we feel but good ones don't let immediate gratification drive treatment. Therapists use how we feel as grist for the mill to help us **function better** – love and work. If therapists care too much about how we feel they don't move us forward (it is part of that long arduous low paid training I just wrote about). If therapists try to move us to far to fast they lose the connection and the patient flees. The best therapists *get* the patient someplace; change in behavior, better working relationship, more comfortable adjustment to professional/social circumstances, what ever, and then cut the cord. But still, therapists should be working themselves out of a job. You get sick, you go to the doctor, you get better, you stop going to the doctor.

"Life coaches" on the other hand have it in their vested interest to **create dependencies** -- for life. Since Coaching is a business not a profession, the underlying driver for the coach is the bottom line. The more a client uses his coach, the more he pays the coach, the more successful that coach becomes. Common sense argues that if there is no perception of value, i.e. things aren't getting better, for the client then the coach should be fired. But we don't fire our friends, do we? And we like being listened to, don't we?

So what is a person to do? How do you know what kind of help is right for you and where do you get it? First look at yourself and as objectively as possible try to assess what is causing you discomfort:

- Trouble sustaining meaningful relationships? Depressed? Anxious?
Shop for a good shrink (MD., PhD., MFCC.). Make a commitment to the treatment and that unique relationship.
- Under performing at work/not making enough money/not getting promoted?
You may still need a shrink or you may need skills. Find out about your behavior and the impact of that behavior on others and develop new skills. There are countless resources for doing simple, accurate, fast and usually relatively inexpensive behavior and values assessments; Myers Briggs, DISC, Colby, etc. Sometimes owning how you are with others and committing to learning the skills of empathy can go a long way towards greater success in the professional world.
You may also need nuts and bolts business skills. Sales, management, leadership, etc. There are consultants who "coach" people around a skill set. The metrics for success are clear and measurable.
- Lonely?
This is a tough one and I am not minimizing how real and painful isolation can be. Take calculated personal risks. Use a dating service (I know, I know, but you will meet people). Join a singles club. Train for a triathlon with charity team (Team in Training, Race for the Cure, etc.). Take up golf. Get out there. You won't get un-lonely talking to your mother. And if, emotionally, you just can't get out there you may, again, want to talk to a qualified therapist.

Once you have a clearer idea of what is causing you trouble, look for a trained, experienced professional to help you solve the problem. But for god's sake, don't pay someone (or even have your company pay someone) to talk to you twice a month if you aren't clear what you are trying to fix.

Now, all of that being said, there must be some truly great "life coaches" out there. Those who have helped and can help high functioning people get something going at the intersection of life a work. If you have looked at yourself closely and you are convinced that this is the relationship you need right now, be an informed shopper. Look for a coach who has a background that makes sense for the job description. Being a laid off HR manager from a failed .com doesn't necessarily qualify one for "life coaching". Look for a mature professional who has committed him/herself to learning about human development. A professional background in counseling is not a must but it often gives individuals insight into the process and pace of real behavioral change. Look for someone with an understanding of performance enhancement. You don't need to hire Jackson from the Lakers but you do want a results orientated coach. Unless you need specific expertise in a particular business context (and if you do go get a good consultant for a project, not a coach) make sure the coach you hire understand process facilitation. Of critical importance, as you interview potential coaches, make sure they are in business to help you get somewhere. Look for a coach who has a plan for the end of the relationship and works within a set of clear, explicit relationship boundaries.

Sound like a unique combination? My guess is they are scarce as hen's teeth, but this is your life we are talking about here! In *The Last Gentleman* Walker Percy said "The possibility of the search is to be on to something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair". I agree, so by all means get the help you need when you need it and "search" for happiness and productivity. Finding the right "guides" along the way is always an important part of success and happiness. I learned the hard way, a long time ago, that healthy dependency not independence is the goal. But choose your *dependencies* carefully.

My mothers favorite prayer for me was that the right people would come into my life at the right time. To the extent that I have hope and satisfaction they have. I hope her prayer comes true for you too.