



PART ONE: LEARNING THE BASICS



1

WHAT IS COACHING?

Introduction

In this chapter we shall consider a number of definitions of coaching, beginning with my own definition that is the basis of my practice and which we'll be using throughout the book. We also consider an equation that sits at the heart of coaching:

Awareness + Responsibility = Performance

My definition of coaching

There is no agreed definition of coaching. If you were to ask the ordinary person in the street what comes to mind when they think of a coach, many people will reply with some notion of a sports coach. Over the years, I have had tennis and golf lessons in which someone who understood textbook technique used a mix of instruction, feedback and encouragement to help me improve my game. I found this useful, and the lessons helped me to enjoy both games more fully.

However, that's not the view of coaching that we shall be exploring together. Here is my own definition that is the basis of my practice and which we'll refer to throughout the book. It regards coaching as primarily non-directive. I've refined this definition over the years as I've reflected upon my own practice as a coach, and each phrase in the definition has been carefully chosen.

Coaching is a relationship of rapport and trust in which the coach uses their ability to listen, to ask questions and to play back what the client has communicated in order to help the client to clarify what matters to them and to work out what to do to achieve their aspirations.

There are a number of points I'd like to highlight in this definition.

First and foremost, coaching is a relationship between two people. The definition offers a couple of pointers to the nature of an effective coaching relationship – one based on rapport and trust. The fact that the coach is operating non-directively will create a different relationship than if the coach were directive. We shall explore in some depth the nature of a coaching relationship in Chapter 12. (Strictly speaking, coaching is a process rather than a relationship. However, to emphasise the importance of the relationship, I begin my definition with the words '*Coaching is a relationship ...*'.)

Second, the definition states that the role of the coach is to help the client to articulate their goals and how they will set about achieving them. The words which follow '*in order to ...*' are those which make the definition non-directive. Non-directive coaching is about facilitating, not instructing, advising or guiding. It is working with someone, not doing something to them. In the next chapter we shall look in more detail at directive and non-directive approaches.

Third, the definition introduces three basic conversational skills in coaching that will be explored a little later in the book – listening, questioning and playing back. However, while these skills are important, the more fundamental ability that the coach needs is to establish rapport and trust in the relationship.

Coaching is an art not a science. The coach is continually drawing on their experience and their intuition to shape what they do next.

If you are already an experienced coach, you will probably be familiar with much of the material in this chapter and indeed in Part One of the book. Nevertheless, I hope you find some of the ideas a stimulating reminder of the basics of coaching and that some of the material in Parts Two and Three offers you some new perspectives. If you are on the early stages of your journey as a coach, then I hope that the ideas in Part One offer you a sound foundation for your future practice, and that you can go on to use the content of Parts Two and Three to make further progress on your journey. I also hope that the ideas throughout the book will encourage any line manager who is keen to support the performance and development of their staff in a way that goes beyond a traditional

command and control approach. Finally, I invite anyone in a teaching or development role to use freely any of the material that you think will facilitate the learning of your students or participants.

The Association for Coaching's definition

There are a number of professional bodies in the coaching world, and we'll draw on some material from their websites later in the book of the Association for Coaching. In answer to the prompt *What is Coaching?* the website of the Association for Coaching offers the following definition and comments on coaching:

Coaching is a facilitated, dialogic and reflective learning process that aims to grow the individual's (or team's) awareness, responsibility and choice (thinking and behavioural). The advancing popularity of the profession reflects a need arising in business and society for people to find solutions to the complexities they face in their life, career and profession.

When individuals, teams and business leaders first come to coaching it is often because their recent experiences have driven them to seek coaching support to aid them in finding enhanced ways of being and working. Something needs to change, improve or be enhanced. It might be that they have a hunch, a feeling or an intuition that something is troubling them and is causing them some form of disorientation.

The issues an individual may be experiencing could be feelings of being 'stuck', feelings of lack of progress, frustration, or feelings of going back and forth with no apparent resolution. When they come to coaching they are at a point of transition and by engaging a coach they work together to uncover and de-layer in order to identify the essence of the problem and implement change.

www.associationforcoaching.com/page/WhyCoaching

The opening words of the AC definition are important: *Coaching is a facilitated, dialogic and reflective learning process ...*. The role of the coach is to facilitate a conversation and to encourage the client to reflect and learn. The aims are to grow the client's awareness, responsibility and choice.

These comments from the AC website seem somewhat negative. While some people do come to coaching because they are stuck or troubled, others come to enhance performance that is already very good, or to take a further step on a successful career.

Coaching in context

The term *coach* in the sense that we are using it was first used around 1830 as a slang term at the University of Oxford for a tutor who could carry a student through an exam. Around 1860 it began to be used in a sporting context, and coaching is now well established in the sports world. Indeed if you ask the ordinary person about a coach they are likely to think first of a sports coach. In 1975 Tim Gallwey, who was both an educationalist and a tennis coach, wrote a very influential book called *The Inner Game of Tennis* which is fundamental to the type of coaching we are exploring in this book. His ideas were taken up by people such as Graham Alexander, John Whitmore (a champion motor racing driver) and Myles Downey. They found that the business world was more receptive than the sports world to Gallwey's ideas. The development of coaching also owes much to a wide range of fields, such as ideas in humanistic psychology from people such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow; the human potential movement with activities such as est training and encounter groups; a wide variety of ideas and approaches from the worlds of counselling and therapy; and perspectives from fields such as management and leadership, organisation studies and personal development.

Views of some other writers on coaching

Julie Starr offers this view:

Put simply, coaching is a conversation, or series of conversations, that one person has with another. The person who is the coach intends to produce a conversation that will benefit the other person (the coachee) in a way that relates to the coachee's learning and progress. (Starr, 2011)

Jenny Rogers proposes this definition of coaching, which she says is 'a simple one that conceals complexity':

The coach works with clients to achieve speedy, increased and sustainable effectiveness in their lives and careers through focused learning. The coach's sole aim is to work with the client to achieve all of the client's potential – as defined by the client. (Rogers, 2008)

She goes on to list six principles that distinguish coaching from other disciplines:

1. The client is resourceful
2. The coach's role is to develop the client's resourcefulness through skilful questioning, challenge and support
3. Coaching addresses the whole person – past, present and future
4. The client sets the agenda
5. The coach and the client are equals
6. Coaching is about change and action

Maria Iliffe-Wood (2014) offers a number of guiding beliefs that underpin her approach to coaching and which fit well with a primarily non-directive stance. These include:

1. I am not here to supply answers
2. It's ok for me not to know
3. Clients learn best when they work things out for themselves
4. It is a collaborative experience

Geoff Pelham draws on the metaphor of coaching as a journey in setting out his view:

It is about assisting someone to gain a sense of direction and purpose, which is often lost in the absorption with everyday life, and then set out on their self-chosen path. Coaching is about enabling someone to find their own next step, and to take this step in a skilful and effective way. (Pelham, 2016)

He goes on to emphasise the fundamental principle of coaching that is the bedrock of his approach: 'people have the capability to take responsibility for, and make decisions about, their own lives, rather than someone else doing this for them'.

Personal reflection

I myself began to learn how to coach by taking a programme at the School of Coaching in London. When I applied to the programme I already had some experience working as a voluntary counsellor. We'll see later in the book that the ideas of Carl Rogers and his person-centred approach provide a foundation for my own views on coaching and facilitation. At the selection interview, Myles Downey – someone else whose ideas we shall visit throughout the book – asked me what I thought the difference was between coaching and counselling.

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The answer I gave at the time – and it strikes me years later as quite a good answer given on the spur of the moment – was that coaching is counselling with a purpose. I don't mean to suggest that counselling doesn't have a purpose – it certainly does. What I meant was that coaching uses many of the skills of counselling but with a focus on performance. Its focus is results rather than problems.

Another way of thinking about the difference between counselling and coaching is that counselling explores the present and the past, and may at times consider the future. Coaching is focused on the present and the future, though it may at times look at the past.

You might like to spend a few minutes noting what you yourself see as the differences between coaching and counselling.

In the next chapter we'll discuss the difference between coaching and mentoring.

Incidentally, Myles Downey's definition of coaching is:

Coaching is the art of facilitating the performance, learning and development of another. (Downey, 2003)

Awareness and responsibility

John Whitmore's book *Coaching for Performance*, first published in 1992, was very influential in shaping the approach to coaching which we are exploring. When I worked in the early 2000s in management development for the gas pipeline company Transco, I had the privilege of working alongside John and his colleagues as together we ran workshops to help Transco managers develop their coaching skills.

In his book (Whitmore, 2002) he writes that, 'Building AWARENESS and RESPONSIBILITY is the essence of good coaching'. You can translate this into the following equation:

Awareness + Responsibility = Performance

Whitmore notes that:

The first key element of coaching is AWARENESS. ... It is the gathering and the clear perception of the relevant facts and information, and the ability to determine what is relevant. ... Awareness also encompasses self-awareness, in particular recognizing when and how emotions or desires distort one's own perception.

He suggests that:

- Awareness is knowing what is happening around you.
- Self-awareness is knowing what you are experiencing.

He goes on to say that:

RESPONSIBILITY is the other key concept or goal of coaching. ... When we truly accept, choose or take responsibility for our thoughts and our actions, our commitment to them rises and so does our performance. (Whitmore, 2002)

As a coach, your questions are designed either to raise your client's awareness – of their hopes and fears, of how they feel about their current situation, of what they might do to change things, and so on – or to encourage them to take responsibility – what are they going to do, and by when, for instance. The premise is that someone who is aware of what they need to do and how to do it, and who also takes responsibility for acting, will perform. What performance means depends on their situation – it might be hitting a golf ball well, managing a team, completing an essay, or playing the flute.

You will see as you read through the book that we continually refer back to the importance in coaching conversations and relationships of raising your client's awareness and encouraging them to take responsibility for action.

I remember John Whitmore saying during some of the workshops that we ran together that *Awareness without Responsibility is just Whingeing*.

EXERCISE 1.1

WHAT IS YOUR DEFINITION OF COACHING?

You might be content to work with one of the definitions offered above. However, you may wish to browse through some books or search the internet for definitions used by other writers.

- Crystallise your thoughts by writing your own definition of coaching that you will use in your own practice.

It will be interesting to see if your definition evolves as you work through this book or in the light of your experience of practising coaching.

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Here is another definition of coaching that is somewhat different from mine. Peter Hawkins and Nick Smith offer this definition as their ‘working hypothesis’:

Coaching is the focused application of skills that deliver performance improvement to the individual’s work in their organization, through robust support and challenge. The coaching process should yield learning and personal development for the executive, and help them contribute more of their potential. This collaborative relationship will be short-term and practically focused, and will be marked by clear, strong feedback. (Hawkins and Smith, 2006)

In this definition Hawkins and Smith have in mind executive coaching, but their definition could be modified to include, for instance, coaching someone who isn’t currently working.

You might like to summarise what you see as the different emphases in my definition and Hawkins and Smith’s definition, and consider which feels most appropriate to you at this point in your development as a coach.