



# Coaching: It's Not What You Think

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**N**o matter what your human resource specialty, you probably spend a portion of your time advising, guiding, supporting and helping others. If you're an HR leader, an employee relations specialist, a learning and development professional or an HR generalist, you might use the word "coaching" to describe some of the work that you do with others in your organization. But is what you do, in fact, really "coaching"? Or is coaching just another word for HR support? The potentially surprising answer to both questions is most likely "no."

Coaching is more than just a hot business buzz term. Well-known organizations including Google, Bristol-Myers, Glaxo Smith Kline, PwC and others are embracing coaching as a powerful and proven way to develop talent within the organization.

Organizations can be transformed through coaching by creating a culture that focuses on customized development and personalized strategies for success. In a 2015 study<sup>1</sup>, the Human Capital Institute found that organizations where coaching is prevalent enjoy 25 percent higher levels of employee engagement and 40 percent greater revenue growth than other companies. Yet, as popular as the process is, coaching is widely misunderstood.

### What is coaching?

According to the International Coach Federation, the world's largest association for professional coaches, coaching involves "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential... Coaches honor the client as the expert..."<sup>2</sup>

Notice what's missing from this definition. There's no mention of advice, assessment feedback or any form of corrective critique. Why? Because a professional coach does not sit in the role of expert. In a coaching relationship, all of the expertise lies within the person being coached.

You may ask, "If coaches don't give advice or tell me what to do, then where's the value in coaching?" Herein lies the magic: With deep training in listening and expertise in powerful questioning, a professional coach creates deep insight in a client. That insight, in turn, is the springboard from which the client can craft his or her customized actions and strategies for sustained success.

### Coaching in action

Very often, the words that a client initially uses to express a need or a goal won't reveal his or her core issue. This isn't intentional — humans routinely adopt compensating behaviors to adjust to certain circumstances, especially when we convince ourselves that we cannot change a situation. It is the compensating behavior that we identify to be the issue, when, in fact, it's something deeper.

Here's an example:

**Client:** "I really need some help with time management."

**[Typical response:** *I know what you mean! We have an excellent online time management class. Lots of our leaders have found it beneficial. Give it a try!]*

**Professional coach response:** "What does 'time management' mean to you?"

**Client:** "There's just so much to do here at work — and when I think I have things under control, more comes my way. I must do my best, but my family is at their wit's end."

The professional coach is immediately curious about the terms "control," "do my best" and about the introduction of "family" into the discussion. As it turns out, addressing time management won't solve this client's issue. The coaching process uncovers that the client is struggling with a strong desire to make a radical career change. Enrolling in a time management class wouldn't have resulted in success — in fact, it probably would have caused greater stress.

Coaching, therefore, isn't about what *you* (the coach) may think, it's about what *the client* is thinking.

### Coaching Is:

A partnership between coach and coachee.

A process or the Coachee to discover what's best for him or her.

A forward-looking, positively focused way to explore options and opportunities.

### Coaching Is Not:

A method to get an expert's advice on what to do.

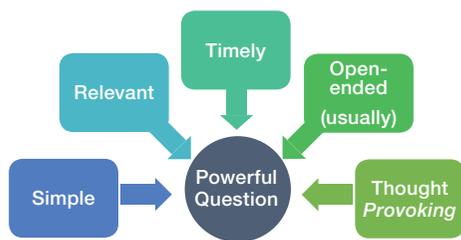
- (That's "consulting")

Observing and learning from a seasoned professional.

- (That's "mentoring.")

A way to "fix" problems.

- (That's performance management - the leader's job.)



### Leveraging coaching skills

Without question, HR professionals typically have strong listening skills and know how to partner with others. However, serving as a professional coach requires us to set aside much of what we've mastered in our HR roles. We're often the experts, interpreting policy or regulation, and we are frequently the connectors who guide individuals to useful resources.

While these skills have tremendous value within the scope of our HR functions, they get in the way of effective coaching. When we have all the answers, we take the power from the client. As that power shift occurs, the client won't create his or her own action steps — we'll do it for them, and most times, they'll happily agree, because we are, after all, the expert. A coach-as-expert scenario is a sure way to derail a client's accomplishments. By

nature, people are most invested in the success of strategies and accountability measures that they have personally created, versus ones that have been handed to them.

Fortunately, there are numerous coach-specific training programs that impart the foundational knowledge and specialized skills needed to become an effective coach. The aforementioned International Coach Federation has a Training Program Search Service<sup>3</sup> offering a range of criteria including geographic location, content delivery model and more.

Nearly all coach-specific training programs offer a strong practice component. Knowing what to listen for, operating from a position of curiosity and asking questions that evoke insight are foundational coaching skills that can be sharpened through frequent practice with a range of clients.

### The power of coaching

Coaching has incredible impact, not only on organizations but also on individuals. In a recent study by PwC,<sup>4</sup> coaching clients indicated a 99 percent overall satisfaction rate and

attributed coaching with a 72 percent improvement in communication skills and a 73 percent improvement in interpersonal skills. Few, if any, other forms of development for leaders and staff can boast those kinds of numbers.

True professional coaching is much different from consulting, mentoring, training or advising. Coaching isn't what you think — it's something much more powerful.

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