

New Kid on the block

Counsellors have suddenly become aware of the new kid on the block – coaching. He or she or it crept up imperceptibly. 10 years ago the only coaches were sports coaches affordable exclusively by the wealthy. Now we have life coaches, executive coaches and business coaches flooding the market. And flooding is not an understatement. It is reckoned that coaches have increased 500% in USA in the past 7 years and the number of British companies and individuals offering various forms of coaching has been doubling every year. A summary literature search on coaching turns up literally hundreds of recent books on the subject (Hudson, 1999).

It was not difficult for counsellors, in the beginning, to dismiss coaches and coaching as of little relevance to their work and world. Coaching was no threat to the well-established counselling profession. The two sat easily side by side as I found out. My swimming coach was not the least interested in anything but the external. He watched me swim a length of the pool and instructed me clearly and with focus on how I needed to improve my breathing techniques and my coordination of arms and legs. Off I went again, again there was feedback. Within 40 minutes I had come on immeasurably (this is a true example, by the way). I now swim 14 lengths of the pool where before I was struggling to swim two lengths. Looking back, I would have been surprised had he sat me down before our lesson, took my family, medical, psychological or psychiatric history, talked to me about how I felt about swimming, what supports and networks I had in my life or told me a bit about himself. He did not get to know me, nor me him, did not set out to work with any kind of relationship (other than a presumed collaborative endeavour) and we set no ground rules about confidentiality or time keeping or what would happen if we met outside the swimming pool. All that was irrelevant to what he and I were doing which was building up my skills in swimming.

Things have moved on. Today it is more difficult for counsellors to either dismiss or not to connect to coaching. We are being forced to ask: What is the difference between a life-coach, an executive coach and a counsellor? Given a choice will punters head for the coaching stable rather than the counselling one? Why should they?

To date most coaches have emerged from the business communities. In fact, it was almost as if every HR Director looking for a change of scene, every redundant manager who was caught up in the most recent downsizing (or de-cruiting, as it has been renamed) and every company director heading towards early retirement, decided to become an executive coach. When asked about qualifications for doing the job of coach, the summary reply was simple: I have been there, I can help you get there too. A bit like my swimming coach who had been there and helped me get there too (well, a bit of the way!). Built on the expert model (I am an expert, I can teach you, train you, instruct you, advise you, guide you, model it for you, point you in the right direction, articulate the pitfalls etc), coaching was a simple transfer of competencies from one who had them and lived them to one who was hoping to acquire them. These coaches had the correct business-speak and jargon, knew the company cultures and personnel and had lots of inside knowledge.

While coaching was making its imperceptible journey into the sacred areas of counselling life, what we failed to notice was how much counselling was becoming like coaching. Three important influences were background to that but not always connected directly to coaching:

1. The first was Egan (he of the famous “Skilled Helper” which became the early bible of counselling training). One of Egan’s main contributions to the counselling field was his three-stage model of Explore, Understand and Act. Stage 3, Act or Acting, is what coaching is all about. He did not use the term coach or coaching but what he outlines (even though he saw the three stages as connected) can easily stand on its own. Counsellors, quite readily, accepted that there was an action stage to their work.
2. Secondly, as early as 1974, Tim Gallwey (the Inner Game of Tennis and more recently, The Inner Game of Work) was questioning the expert model of coaching outlined above. Even with tennis (or what we can call routine knowledge or learning) he moved away from the “right way to do things” to, in his words, “I had to learn to give the choices back to the student. Why? Because the learning takes place within the student. The student makes the choices that ultimately control whether learning takes place or doesn’t. In the end, I realized that the student was responsible for their learning choices and I was responsible for the quality of the external learning environment” (2000: 13-14). Gallwey wants to move from outside-in learning to inside-out learning.
3. Thirdly, the new brands of counselling e.g., solution focused counselling, narrative approaches and some forms of brief therapy have been moving away from the “why?” question and focusing not on the past but on the present and future which is more the domain of coaching. To some degree behaviourism had done this already. Coaches build on strengths not deficiencies (Buckingham and Clifton, 2001), on positive and optimistic approaches (Seligman, 2002) on competencies, on the future. They make no apologies (like some modern counselling approaches) for not linking past and present, for not looking at the roots of the problem and where it comes from in the past and for not trying to deal with what went wrong rather than what goes right.

As a result, counsellors, psychotherapists and psychologists are wondering how they could become part of the coaching scene and whether or not it is appropriate for them to do so. That discussion and dialogue is beginning in earnest in a number of areas. The Coaching Psychology Forum has been set up as part of BPS (See, *The Occupational Psychologist*, Special Issue on Coaching Psychology, 49, August 2003) and more and more counsellors are beginning the journey to become counselling coaches or coaches (see Neenan and Dryden, 2002; McMahon, 2001; Williams and Davis, 2001; Greene and Grant, 2003). There has been little from the other counselling orientations (Person-Centred Coach, the Existential Coach, the Psychodynamic Coach) though Peltier (2001) covers a number of psychological/counselling theories in his book on the psychology of coaching.

In 2002, in the prestigious Harvard Business Review published an article by Steven Berglas entitled, The Very Real Dangers of Executive Coaching. His thoughts are music to the ears of psychologists and counsellors. "I believe" he writes, "that in an alarming number of situations, executive coaches who lack rigorous psychological training do more harm than good....to best help their executives, companies need to draw on the expertise of both psychotherapists and executive coaches with legitimate skills". As I state below, I think these "legitimate skills" depend on the level of coaching agreed and needed.

So what is coaching? Flaherty (1999) puts it well when he asks: "How can I contribute to someone's competence in a respectful, dignified and effective way" (p. xvii). He interprets the term "competence" very widely. Terms used to describe coaching nearly always use words like "improving performance, maximising potential, promoting personal and professional development, enabling and supporting learning, unleashing people's potential to reach meaningful objectives". Coaching is connected to results, objectives, goals, future, competencies, even more so when it is paid for by organisations that often have little time for what does not result in visible change.

The best people, in my view, to become life and executive coaches are counsellors, psychologists and psychotherapists. I think the array of splendid knowledge and deep skills they have allows them to have the background needed to allay fear about "the very real dangers of executive coaching". The competencies, knowledge, insights and arrangements counsellors and psychologists often bring with them include:

- ❖ Setting up and maintaining healthy professional relationships
- ❖ Recognising and managing process issues
- ❖ Dealing with feelings and deep emotions
- ❖ Making effective connections
- ❖ Working with the agendas of other people and being able to leave aside their own issues when needed
- ❖ Staying with pain and not being frightened by it
- ❖ Facilitating change at a number of levels
- ❖ Self-awareness, self-insight and self-understanding
- ❖ Being in regular supervision
- ❖ A large and impressive set of interventions from which they can choose to help clients

Coaching is like counselling in that it is:

- ❖ A talking intervention
- ❖ Built on a trusting relationship
- ❖ The agenda of the client that becomes the focus
- ❖ Chosen by the client
- ❖ Focused on the whole person
- ❖ Painful at times

Coaching is different from counselling in that it

- ❖ Focuses on the present and the future (goals)
- ❖ Emphasises performance and visible results
- ❖ Builds on strengths (there is no remedial coaching)
- ❖ Developmental – maximising potential
- ❖ Connects to work (unless it is life coaching)
- ❖ Uses the practice and feedback format
- ❖ Uses experience as the main focus of learning (coaches are facilitators of experiential learning)
- ❖ Only uses the “Why?” question when it has to.

Combined with their ability to provide a learning environment where the person being coached is able to reflect on their experience and allow their experience to be their teacher (sitting at the feet of our own experience), counsellors can have the kinds of conversations (which is what coaching is) in a number of areas:

Level 1 Coaching

This level of coaching is based on routine learning or Specific Problem Solving. It is usually about an area when there is one way of doing something or a specific set of skills. Using the apprenticeship model (expert and beginner) it oversees the beginner build up their skills. The end result is starting or increase in a competency (me and my swimming coach worked at Level 1 Coaching). This is a valid form of coaching and can range in skills from writing a report to dealing with difficult people at work.

Level 2 Coaching

This is moving to Gallwey’s internal idea of coaching i.e., that we help the client learn how to learn? The movement is from the skill itself to how we manage our own learning from experience. Here I coach someone in reflection, in articulating, in understanding his or her learning style. The knowledge here is not the knowledge of specific skills but self-awareness, insight. The nearest understanding of coaching at this level (Level 2) is clinical or reflective supervision where coaching becomes a forum for facilitated learning from practice.

Level 3 Coaching

Level 3 coaching moves deeper inside and begins to look at how the individual being coached makes sense and meaning of events in their lives, personal or professional. The focus here is on deep not surface change, on looking at worldview rather than individual behaviours. Two of the people who represent this focus very clearly are Quinn (1996) and Zohar (1997). Level three looks at how perception takes place and how the way we see and view reality results in the way we act (e.g., gender, race, culture, religious backgrounds influence the way we interpret events). It aims to change perceptions, not just behaviours. The methods used here by coaches are

critical reflection, reviewing cognitive schemas, naming the filter through which we make sense of life events and learning how to engage in dialogue rather than monologue (Narrative approaches and NLP specialise in this focus).

Dinah Zohar (1997) captures these levels of learning (and coaching) well in a telling image; “Most transformation programs satisfy themselves with shifting the same old furniture about in the same old room (*Level 1 Coaching*). Some seek to throw some of the old furniture away. But real transformation occurs when we redesign the room itself (*Level 2 Coaching*). Perhaps even blow up the old room (*Level 3 Coaching*). It requires that we change the thinking behind our thinking”. (I have added the italics to connect her ideas to the three levels of coaching)

The profession of coaching (because I am in no doubt that it will soon be a profession) is just beginning to get its act together. Whether this is good or bad will be hotly debated (as is the professionalisation of counselling and psychotherapy). Talk is about research into coaching, professional bodies for coaches, ethical codes and professional practice bodies, training for coaches and supervision for coaches (at least three coaching companies I know demand that all their coaches be in formal supervision). I believe that counsellors are already 65% of the way across the bridge towards becoming effective life and executive coaches. Counsellors, psychotherapists and psychologists who are also trainers and supervisors are 75 – 80% of the way over. Both simply need extra coaching to get safely to the other side.

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Words: 2476

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