

The Art of Choosing a Coach

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Coaching has quickly risen to become a significant way that we seek to improve the quality of our lives and our ability to produce results. While the roots of coaching may have begun in the world of high performance athletes seeking to constantly achieve more and performance artists seeking to raise their capabilities, coaching has burgeoned to serve many needs in post-Industrial society: personal growth and evolution; life mastery; executive performance; sales and customer service excellence; career transition, entrepreneurial evolution, spiritual growth; improved parenting and partnering, to name but a few.

Anyone who has searched the Web seeking a coach or browsed through a health and wellness magazine is sure to be overwhelmed by the feast of coaching approaches, methodologies and practitioners promising inspiration, transformation, and access to your full potential. This article is for those people and is offered as a way to help you sort through, for yourself, some important questions as you consider whether coaching is what you are seeking and, if so, who would be the best coach for you. Because selecting the right coach is truly much more of an art form than it is anything else!

Let's begin by making a distinction between coaching and two closely associated practices, namely counseling and therapy. It's been my experience that many people are confused by the differences and whether their needs would best be served by a coach, a therapist or a counselor.

In truth, the distinctions tend to be fairly murky, in part, because each of these disciplines is growing and evolving over time and because there is no consistent legal framework that defines them like there is for, say, doctors, nurses, or engineers. For example, throughout North America there is a fairly narrowly acceptable definition of what constitutes a medical doctor or a nurse; there are legal institutions which manage and govern the training, certification and on-going standards of practice associated with each of these professions; there are clearly defined legal sanctions for those who make false claims of their professional status.

This is not the case for coaches, therapists or counselors. Some jurisdictions have licensed and regulated the practice of therapy and counseling so that the only people who can use these designations have received specific training, must maintain a license and meet certain standards of practice. However, in many jurisdictions anyone can call themselves a therapist or counselor. To the best of my knowledge, at this time there is no jurisdiction in North America which governs coaching, although there are some industry created and monitored certification agencies.

So what, if any, differences are there among the three? As a generalization, there is an assumption in therapy that the client or patient is unwell, diseased and needs to be cured or healed. For example, a client may have an emotional or physical "problem" such as anxiety, substance abuse or lower back pain that the therapist is specialized in treating. In counseling, there is a general assumption that the client is seeking advice or guidance on a particular topic or issue such as career transition, family communication, or behavior problems. In coaching, the general presupposition is that the client is seeking some sort of *process* that will allow them to experience some aspect of their life, or their entire experience of living, differently. The coach is there less to provide answers or solutions and much more to offer processes that allow the client to think about their situation differently and create different solutions for themselves.

However, be aware that many people offering coaching services were previously trained as therapists or counselors, which undoubtedly impacts their approach to coaching.

As you can probably tell from this short paragraph, there is huge potential for overlap amongst all three of these disciplines. Part of your coach selection process, I believe, will be to sort out for yourself whether you believe a therapist, a counselor or a coach will best meet your needs. If you conclude that a coach is for you, this article will help you to match your needs and expectations to those of the right coach for you.

From my many years of experience as a coach, as well as an educator who trains other coaches, the following list constitutes some of the questions I love to be asked by potential clients and which I recommend people have thought through before searching for a coach.

Questions to Consider

Am I clear about the outcomes that I'm seeking to achieve through coaching?

Am I committed to moving beyond talking about change and actually making changes in how I engage my life in order to achieve different results?

Who do I consider to be responsible for the outcomes I achieve through a coaching engagement?

What is the world view of the coach I am considering? How does it map to what I am seeking to accomplish through coaching?

Do I believe that the credentials a coach has are important? If so, what credentials do I believe that a coach needs to have in order for me to engage with them?

Do I believe a coach needs to have experience in the life sphere I am seeking to explore (e.g. if I'm considering a career change, has this person personally experienced career transition?; if I'm seeking Executive Coaching has this person been an executive?) If yes, how can I assess that their experience is relevant to my situation?

What specific methods, approaches, models and frameworks will I encounter during the coaching process? How directive are they? If I am uncomfortable with any of them what happens?

Can this coach give me examples of how they have used their own philosophies, approaches and models to achieve changes in their life?

Does this coach actively receive coaching from someone else? What other ways does this coach use to grow and evolve as a human being as well as a professional providing growth services to others?

Can I interview the specific coach I will be working with before making a commitment? Is there a complementary consultation offered?

What kind of contractual commitment is expected from this coach? What are success markers I can anticipate? What is the process for stopping the coaching process if it isn't working for me? What are the financial implications of stopping the process prior to completion?

Will this coach provide me with references for recent clients they have worked with? Can I contact them directly?

Am I comfortable with the venue and the times when coaching will occur?

Do I feel a sense of connection and rapport with this coach? Can I imagine myself openly and freely expressing concerns or reservations about the process to this person? Is there anything about their approach, demeanor or personality that I feel uncomfortable with?

Do I think this coach is expansive enough to take me beyond what I currently hold as limitations for myself, yet do so in a way that is invitational and honors the human spirit?

After considering my needs and intentions, doing my homework and interviewing this coach, when I sit back and think about it, is that little place inside me that "knows things" saying go for it, or is it my practical, rational side talking me into selecting this coach?

You will surely have your own specific questions that you'd like to add to this list. Just remember that there are lots of us coaches for you to choose from. Keep on looking until you feel that "click" that says this is the right person and time for you.

My belief is that the best coaches are very aware of how deeply their own growth and evolution is tied to that of their clients. If you are interested in discovering more about the kinds of questions I recommend that coaches ask themselves, you might like to read my article "On Being Coach".

Best wishes to you in creating a coaching experience for yourself that will press the boundaries of who you are capable of becoming in a way that is both fun and life enhancing!

About Gwen McCauley: Coach, educator, writer and veteran of the 'employee to entrepreneur' transformation process. With wit, wisdom and worldly experience, Gwen invites her clients on a journey of self-discovery, gaining clarity of purpose and increasing self-awareness and resourcefulness. Gwen brings a strong background as a corporate executive with extensive management experience to her work. She founded Odysseys Unlimited Inc. (OUI) in 1997 and is a co-founder of the WEL-Systems® Institute. Gwen has an MA in Human Systems Intervention from Concordia University and a successful track record as a coach, program leader and businesswoman. In addition to being a WEL-Systems Educator™, CODE Model™ Coach and Quantum TLC™ Facilitator, Gwen has studied Open Space Technology, Myers Briggs, Appreciative Inquiry, Generative Leadership and Total Quality Management. Gwen published her first book "The Alchemy of Energy: Exploring The CODE Model" in 2004 and co-authored "Sekhmet Rising: the restlessness of women's genius" with 17 other women in 2006. She is currently working on her third book.

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