

The art of coaching

Seeing the potential

Linda Aspey

Back in the early 90s, as an independent counsellor, trainer and HR consultant, I was asked if I'd do some 'one-to-one training' with Michael, a sales director who had had some disastrous results and was, as the MD told me, stressed, burnt out and struggling to regain ground and credibility. Added to that he was going through a very messy divorce. When I asked if he'd considered offering Michael some counselling, he looked aghast: 'Of course not, Linda. He's not mentally ill, just out of his depth!'

My attempts at educating him about the merits of counselling only added to his resolve that it would be training or nothing – certainly not any kind of therapy. So, whilst Michael's own career was on a knife-edge, along with his confidence, marriage and six-figure salary, paradoxically, mine as an executive coach was born.

When we met, Michael was genuinely alarmed at the prospect of needing support yet was in a state of anxiety, determined to continue to work at all costs, lacking in coping strategies and in need of an understanding confidante. His GP had also suggested counselling ('No way!'), but he thought if we could work together on helping him to get back in control, regain perspective, learn some new skills and understand how he had got into this situation in the first place, that would be a good start. I agreed, and we consequently worked together, very productively, over several months. We didn't call it coaching then, but that's what it was.

Thankfully things have moved on since then (as did Michael, to a new, enlightened employer) and I believe that, in general, therapy is not as widely misunderstood as it

was. Yet still, in my experience, many people, particularly senior managers, would rather have a coach than a therapist, even when the going gets really tough, particularly when their working world is involved.

Naturally, not all coaching happens as the result of a crisis. In fact, it's often the opposite, when a top performer wants to go even higher. Or it may be a mum wanting to return to work. Or someone newly promoted seeking to develop their management skills. The reasons for coaching are as varied as the people we meet.

And there are plenty of definitions of coaching, often influenced by the context against which the coaching is set – personal, life, business, executive, sports, health, etc. The simplest overarching definition I have found is from the International Coach Federation, which defines coaching as 'partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential'.

'But we do that!' I hear some of you say. I agree. Which brings me to the wider debate about the differences between coaching and therapy. There are some fairly polarised opinions. Some assert that coaching is positive, future focused and for emotionally fit people, whilst therapy deals with problems, emotional distress or dysfunction and the past. Others, including myself, feel that at the end of the day, there is not that much difference. Whilst coaching can be quite different to counselling someone through

a traumatic bereavement or life-threatening condition, and the coaching offered by an internal manager can be quite different to that offered by an external coach, in essence they offer very similar processes.

'Why is this relevant to me?' you may ask. Well, I believe that a coach should have a solid foundation of training and experience comprised of more than a process-driven model, more than how to ask significant questions and create rapport, and more than a belief that one size fits all. They should know about inner worlds, defences and psychological and emotional development. Which is what we already have, as skilled therapists. I was then, when working with Michael – and still am – profoundly grateful for my therapeutic background. It helps me to work as a coach far better than I would if I hadn't had the years of training, experience and supervision as a counsellor. It's at the heart of what I do.

Therapists have cause to celebrate what we can offer to coaching, and for those who want to get involved, the opportunities are there. If you're not yet offering coaching, now could be a good time to expand your repertoire. Because, whilst the great debate about the similarities and differences between therapy and coaching continues, much like the debate over our label of counsellor or psychotherapist, or the one about the different therapeutic models, many of our members can and do work in many ways, fluidly, creatively and in the spirit of true service to the client. ■

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