



## Coaching Articles

### **The Similarities and Differences between Coaching and Therapy** **An article by Peter Bluckert**

#### **Introduction**

Given that coaching and mentoring<sup>1</sup> is still in its early stages of development as a profession it is hardly surprising that there is a lack of clarity and agreement around definitions, approaches, core competencies and several key issues. One of those issues is the difference between coaching and therapy<sup>2</sup>, and it is a subject often discussed by coaches in training and by more experienced practitioners. It is one of those thorny topics which defies simple, reductionist thinking and doesn't fit neatly into two by two box system models or bullet point lists.

#### **Common features**

Part of the reason for this is that coaching and therapy share certain common features.

Both may bring about behavioural change and help people understand how their cognitive and emotional reactions can interfere with personal effectiveness, performance, and well-being. Both are conducted by skilled practitioners who establish strong relationships of trust with their clients. Some of the core skills are the same such as deep listening and questions which raise awareness.

Further overlaps can be found in some of the underlying philosophies behind coaching and therapy. Like coaching, a variety of therapy practices embrace a client centred, collaborative partnership that encourages clients to acknowledge their creativity and find their own unique solutions.

#### **Coaching, consulting, training and development**

Coaching also shares similarities with other disciplines such as organisational consulting, management development and training. Differentiating these can be difficult, for whilst some consultants and management trainers play the expert role, many others adopt a primarily facilitative role not unlike that of the coach. It would be simpler to say that management consultants tend to come up with models of change, suggest solutions and deal with information, processes and procedures. We could then position coaching on the other side of a boundary where the focus of the work is with individuals, relationships and interpersonal skills. Unfortunately it's not as clear-cut as that.

#### **Convergence of approaches and thinking**

Part of the reason for this is that many of these disciplines have been around for a very long

time. As a result there are many different sub-groups with distinctive approaches under the broad umbrellas of therapy, consulting and development. Professional people learn from each other and are curious about what can be discovered from similar but different theoretical practices. Many therapists, clinical psychologists and management trainers have gone into consulting and coaching taking with them their understandings, skill-sets and professional norms. New models of coaching have been constructed on the proposition that coaching is an amalgam of these different disciplines. In Greene and Grants' 'Solution Focused Coaching' 2003<sup>3</sup> we find a model which incorporates counselling, consulting, training and mentoring:

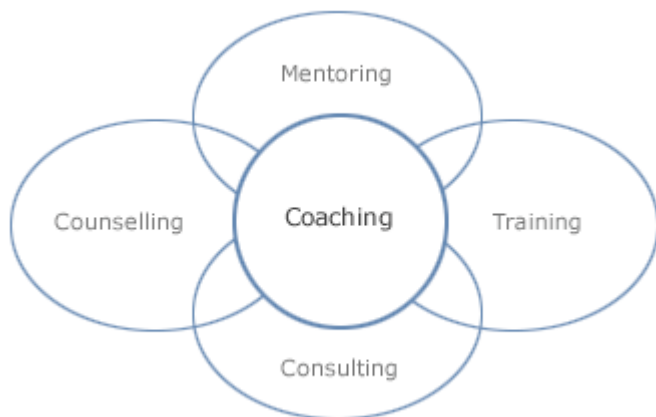


Figure 1

Another recent book on leadership development coaching by West and Milan, 2001<sup>4</sup>, is premised on the view that the development coach draws primarily on two related disciplines - consulting and counselling - and synthesises these into his or her practice. Their model, which they refer to as a 'marriage of two disciplines,' looks like this:

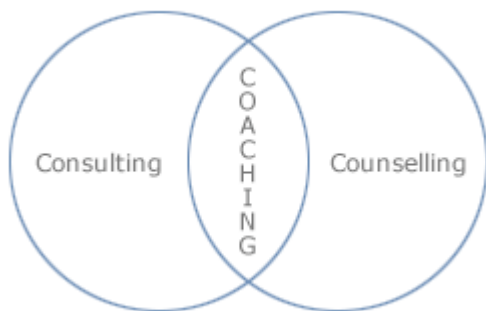


Figure 2

They view the coach's role as 'personal management consultant', understanding both business/strategy and psychology/human behaviour in order to facilitate content improvement via process improvement. They quote the influential organisation development thinker Edgar Schein when he says:

"the coach should have the ability to move easily among the roles of process consultant, content expert and diagnostician/prescriber. The ultimate skill of the coach, then, is to assess the moment-to-moment reality that will enable him to be in the appropriate role."<sup>5</sup>

## Differentiating coaching and therapy

Despite the blurring of boundaries between coaching and therapy the demarcation issue concerns many coaches, especially those without a psychological background. Some of the offerings in coaching literature nevertheless leave something to be desired. They make the case that coaching focuses on the present, is goal oriented and geared to highly functioning successful people who want to do even better. Therapy is characterised as past-focused, designed to address painful, unresolved issues and is geared to troubled people or those with pathology. Whilst these descriptions hold some truth they also contain inaccuracies which are potentially misleading and over-simplistic.

So what are the key differences between coaching and therapy? We will start with some of the earlier statements made in this section and then add some further differentiating factors. Finally we will address some commonly asked questions about coaching and therapy.

### Key differences explored

**1. Coaching focuses on the present and future whilst therapy deals with the past.**

As a general statement this holds some water but will not always be the case. Some therapy does focus on the future and a competent coach may well focus on the past when their client has a particular need to do so. It is more a question of degree and the type of therapy being discussed. Short term solution-focused counselling has much in common with coaching whereas long term psychoanalysis is fundamentally different.

**2. Coaching is geared to highly functioning people whilst therapy exists for troubled people with painful, unresolved issues or who have some form of pathology.**

Again there is an element of truth here but in the main this is the most misleading of all the common characterisations. The truth is that there are some very well functioning and successful people who take on coaching. Similarly there are distressed people in therapy some of whom will be diagnosed as having some form of pathological condition. However, people enter therapy for many reasons including self exploration, self knowledge, professional development and better self management. The other problem with polarising coaching and therapy in this way is that it suggests that successful managers don't have psychological problems and clearly this is not always the case. Issues of stress, addiction and depression are increasingly surfacing in corporate life as well as cases where complex psychology is present. The business coach will be ill-prepared if they are not aware and attuned to this.

**3. The intentions of coaching and therapy are different.**

This is where there is clear daylight between the two disciplines. The primary goal of coaching is to improve a person's effectiveness at work in ways linked to overall business strategy. To this end, a coach will sometimes guide individuals toward increased awareness of how their thoughts and emotional reactions lead to problematic behaviours in the workplace. Therapy may share coaching's goals of improved personal effectiveness and increased awareness of problematic thoughts and emotional reactions that may impede work effectiveness. But therapy also addresses non-work aspects of an individual's life and may involve in-depth explorations of the client's history, and their key relationships with parents and other family members - issues that may be only tangentially related to business effectiveness. Therapy may also lead to deep and sometimes intense emotional experiences that demand skilful guidance from

an experienced practitioner. Due to the differences in these two approaches, what is acceptable for one intervention may be inappropriate for the other. For example, while a therapist may legitimately explore the early-childhood and familial roots of difficult behaviours, it is less appropriate for an executive coach to do so. If a coach feels there is important unfinished emotional business hampering an executive's performance in the workplace, he or she should refer the executive to a competent therapist.

4. **The training, skill-sets and experience of coaches and therapists are quite different.**

In order to take on the deeper self exploration common to the therapeutic situation counsellors and therapists require an extensive training typically far in excess of coach training. Psychotherapy and counselling training can last many years and involve weekly or twice weekly personal therapy. This is far more demanding than current coach training offerings which typically vary from a few days to a full year. Executive and other business coaches may bring a great deal of other training along with extensive corporate experience, but will rarely have undertaken the sort of lengthy training required of a therapist.

### **Other differences**

There is no doubt that coaching is more results and action-focused than therapy. This is because most corporate coaching exists within a three way contract involving the manager (coachee), the organisation and the coach. The company is footing the bill and there is an expectation that certain outcomes will be achieved. These are often discussed at the beginning.

The delivery of coaching may also involve processes very rarely used in therapy such as structured feedback from bosses, peers and subordinates. Therapy typically takes place behind a curtain of greater privacy with two-way confidentiality. It is not uncommon in coaching for a three-way confidentiality agreement to exist whereby the coachee's line manager or HR manager is also in the feedback loop.

Practical differences also exist in terms of how long sessions last, where they take place and with what boundaries. Therapy is often conducted within the hour or 50 minute frame. Coaching sessions tend to last longer and be spaced at longer intervals. Therapy tends to take place in the therapist's consulting rooms whereas coaching can occur in the manager's office, a hotel syndicate room or by telephone. Therapists do not have contact with clients socially and are very careful about boundary issues. Coaches regularly accept invitations by clients to attend corporate hospitality and may invite clients to their own events.

Corporate culture also plays an important part in coaching and the executive coach must learn how to handle the complexities of organisational life. Coaches from a therapy background often comment on the faster pace and find that they have to quicken their own game. They are also more likely to find their personal values in conflict within a world which is primarily money and profit-oriented and where highly competitive and driven individuals are the norm.

Even down to appearance things are different. Corporate coaches generally dress similarly to their clients and wear suits, whereas therapists tend to dress more for comfort. Judgements are often made very quickly by executives of their potential helpers and the coach typically has little time to impress and make their mark. Misjudging the dress code can be enough to create a bad start.

Fee rates are also a significant point of difference and can vary enormously between coaching and therapy. Typically, coaching rates can be as much as quadruple those of therapy.

Finally, a more subtle difference between coaching and therapy lies in the presence brought to each. The therapist presence tends to be more still, composed, thoughtful and enigmatic. The coach uses their energy differently to create a more action and results focused milieu.

In his book 'Organisational Consulting - a Gestalt Approach' (1987)<sup>6</sup> Ed Nevis refers to the position of the therapist with the metaphor "working by sitting down". By contrast he describes the consultant role as more active and calls it "working by standing up". This nicely captures the different presence brought by therapists and coaches.

### **Commonly asked questions about coaching and therapy**

In the recent offering by Skiffington and Zeus, 'Behavioural Coaching' (2003)<sup>7</sup>, the authors outline a number of commonly asked questions about this subject. They include:

- 'How long should a coach allow the coachee to talk about or ventilate negative emotions?'
- 'How does the coach know when a coachee should be referred to therapy?'

In my experience these and similar questions occupy the thoughts of many novice and experienced coaches. We will finish with a brief look at these though I recommend the reader to research these further and discuss them with colleagues as they are some of the most pertinent yet difficult questions for those in professional coaching.

**How long should the coach allow a coachee to talk about and ventilate negative emotions** ..... this may be very important for the client especially if he or she is experiencing a critical period in their work or career. However, it is about degree. If sessions are always heavily dominated by distress and this is not giving way to clearer thought, improved sense of well-being, greater energy and commitment to new actions then this **may** be an indication of deeper therapeutic issues or that the individual is 'stuck' and requires a different kind of help.

**How does the coach know when a coachee should be referred for therapy** ..... this is one of the most difficult of all practitioners' questions not least because clients may not welcome this suggestion nor take it up even if you offer it. There may be deep-seated patterns from the past affecting current behaviour or conditions such as depression, severe anxiety, and addiction which require help from clinically-trained professionals.

Most coaches are not trained to diagnose these conditions and this is one of the reasons why coaches need to be in professional supervision; to discuss their concerns with another senior colleague, get support, reassurance, and guidance. Fortunately these issues are the exception, but the professional coach does need to recognise that there may be occasions when referral is the soundest thing to do.

### **Concluding remarks**

Coaching and therapy share some similarities but in significant ways are also quite different. Typically the intention is different with coaching strongly grounded in work effectiveness and performance rather than wider life issues.

Certain skill-sets are similar but the therapist is trained to work at a deeper level particularly where psychological and emotional issues exist. Experienced executive coaches will often have a higher level of competence in corporate issues.

Ways of operating as coaches and therapists also vary in terms of contracting - the issue of who is the client in the coaching situation - and practical considerations such as venue, length of sessions, pricing and boundaries.

Professional supervision is stressed as a vital aspect of good practice for coaches just as it has been for many years in therapy.

### Notes

1. Coaching and mentoring are activities which have their own similarities and differences. Rather than use both terms throughout this article, which would be unwieldy, I am simply using the term coaching to encompass both.
2. Again, we could focus an entire article on the differences between psychotherapy and counselling. Instead I am using the generic term 'therapy' to describe both.
3. J. Greene and A. Grant, '[Solution-Focused Coaching](#)', 2003.
4. L. West and M. Milan, '[The Reflecting Glass - Professional Coaching for Leadership](#)', 2001.
5. E. Schein, 'Coaching and Consultancy', in M. Goldsmith [ed] *Coaching for Leadership*, 2000.
6. E. Nevis, 'Organisational Consulting - A Gestalt Approach', 1987.
7. S. Skiffington and P. Zeus, 'Behavioural Coaching,' 2003.

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