

The Basics of Coaching

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With the rapid growth of coaching over the last several decades, many more professionals are finding themselves up close and personal with a professional coach. Given the varied domains of professional coaching practice, it's no wonder that leaders, entrepreneurs, and health professionals will be increasingly likely either to engage in a working relationship with a coach or to utilize coaching skills in their own approach to change and growth. This brief primer unpacks the coaching process and shares some of the most common tools a coach uses.

Definitions of Coaching

According to the International Coach Federation (ICF), the largest professional coaching organization in the world, coaching is defined as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential, which is particularly important in today's uncertain and complex environment” (www.coachfederation.org). A significant benefit of coaching is increased productivity, including improved work performance, business management, time management and team effectiveness. As well, coaching also supports positive change in individuals, including improved self-confidence, improved relationships, improved communication skills and improved life/work balance.

While coaching originated with executive coaching, life coaching and health and wellness coaching are successfully emerging as viable professions. In 2017 a National Board Certified Health and Wellness Coach certification will launch, developed by the International Consortium of Health and Wellness Coaches (ICHWC.org) in partnership with the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME.org). According to the ICHWC, “Health and Wellness Coaches partner with clients seeking self-directed, lasting changes, aligned with their values, which promote health and wellness and, thereby, enhance well-being. In the course of their work health and wellness coaches display unconditional positive regard for their clients and a belief in their capacity for change, and honoring that each client is an expert on his or her life, while ensuring that all interactions are respectful and non-judgmental.”

Coaching Competencies

The competencies and tools of an executive coach and a health coach overlap considerably, although health coaches relies on several areas* that are specific to health care (see below). The overall coaching process can be described in three basic steps. First, *explore and build self-awareness*, which includes awareness of strengths and weaknesses, plus hopes and dreams for positive outcomes. Second, *take action steps* – the ongoing coaching process in which the coach facilitates the client's regular cycles of learning to strengthen resources, increase internal motivation, and overcome obstacles to change. The final element, *monitor and evaluate*, includes setting an appropriate scale for maximizing change, keeping the program on track, identifying next steps for sustaining growth and development, and recognizing and acknowledging success and with the client.

A useful means for understanding how coaching works is to briefly consider the core competencies for coaching as defined by the ICF. Divided into four basic areas, the following list shows the eleven core competencies of coaching. Quotations are from the ICF website: www.coachfederation.org.

Setting the Foundation

1. Meeting Ethical Guidelines and Professional Standards
2. Establishing the Coaching Agreement

Co-creating the Relationship

3. Establishing Trust and Intimacy with the Client
4. Coaching Presence

Communicating Effectively

5. Active Listening
6. Powerful Questioning
7. Direct Communication

Facilitating Learning and Results

8. Creating Awareness
9. Designing Actions
10. Planning and Goal Setting
11. Managing Progress and Accountability

Setting the Foundation is basic to many service professionals and coaching is no different. Professional standards are essential. Establishing the expectations for the client from the beginning is essential, and the ability to describe services and to establish a contractual agreement between client and coach is a requisite.

Co-creating the Relationship distinguishes coaching from many other professional endeavors. The two competencies here are *Establishing Trust and Intimacy* and *Coaching Presence*. “The ability to create a safe, supportive environment that produces ongoing mutual respect and trust,” is a competency that crosses over into most professional encounters. Trust occurs when a coach is genuinely concerned for the client’s welfare, which includes respect for the client’s perceptions, learning style and personal way of being. The coach provides ongoing support, championing new behaviors and actions, and always asks permission to delve into sensitive areas. How the coach is prepared and shows up for the client is essential for trust and intimacy. *Coaching Presence* is the “ability to be fully conscious and create spontaneous relationship with the client, employing a style that is open, flexible and confident.” Developing one’s presence impacts all domains. Being present and flexible, accessing intuition, trusting inner knowing, opening to not knowing, seeing opportunities, taking risks and working with strong emotions, are among the skills that comprise a coach’s presence.

Many professions require *Communicating Effectively*, and again, coaching is no different. Three areas of communication are essential – *Active Listening*, *Powerful Questions*, and *Direct Communication*. Active listening, which refers to “the ability to

focus completely on what the client is saying and is not saying, to understand the meaning of what is said in the context of the client's desires, and to support client self-expression," embodies an important distinction between coaching and many other helping or service professions. Unlike medicine, which defines the context for the patient, coaching stays close to the client's self-identified goals and values. Success outcomes are subjective. Active listening requires that the coach not interject his or her priorities and values, but rather seek to encourage self-expression. This does not imply *accepting* what the client says at face value; the coach's actively listening allows the client to deepen self-understanding. Using *Powerful Questions*, "questions that reveal the information needed for maximum benefit to the coaching relationship and the client," is a skill coaches continuously develop. Notice the emphasis is on the benefit of the coaching relationship. Coaching continuously reinforces the active discovery, insight and learning that occurs when listening, questioning and directed attention are engaged. Effective coaching "uses language that has the greatest positive impact on the client."

The fourth area, *Facilitating Learning and Results* encompasses four key competencies – *Creating Awareness, Designing Actions, Planning and Goal Setting, and Managing Progress and Accountability*. "The ability to integrate and accurately evaluate multiple sources of information and to make interpretations that help the client to gain awareness and thereby achieve agreed-upon results," *Creating Awareness*, is an essential feature of successful coaching. Not all too different from psychotherapy, coaching involves increased understanding and awareness of the more typical ways we perceive ourselves and the world. This includes the difference between facts and interpretations, as well as disparities between thoughts, feelings and actions. In this way, coaches help clients discover for themselves new thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, and feelings, such that clients strengthen their ability to take action and achieve their desired goals. This increased awareness may include an increased understanding of both external factors and the internal attitudes that influence external circumstances.

Coaches often suggest practices for clients to practice between coaching sessions. The "ability to create with the client opportunities for ongoing learning, during coaching and in work/life situations, and for taking new actions that will most effectively lead to agreed-upon coaching results," fits the rubric *Designing Actions*. These actions support the client's experimentation and self-discovery. Clients apply their new awareness in real-time applications. Coaching exercises or practices can be designed to increase awareness, improve actions, influence circumstances or advocate for new ways of feeling, thinking or doing. These exercises allow the coaching process to extend between sessions as well as reinforce lessons learned in session.

Not unique to coaching, *Planning and Goal Setting* consolidates the process, establishing a coaching plan with clear goals and outcomes. The results are to be attainable, measurable, and specific. With the coaching plan, *Managing Progress and Accountability*, occurs. The "ability to hold attention on what is important for the client, and to leave responsibility with the client to take action," again distinguishes coaching.

Rather than more typical external motivators, coaching relies on the coach continuously reflecting back to the client enough of the process so that the client is able to keep on track with the program. This is not the coach's telling the client what to do, but rather, the coach is promoting the client's self-discipline. The role of keeping the client accountable is agreed upon early in the coaching relationship. Through positive confrontation, coaching supports ongoing self-development and growth for the client.

The Coaching Process

While there is no "one way" to coach, there are some common mileposts for most coaching. The initial session with a coach is often referred to as the discovery or intake session, during which the client shares his or her reason for seeking coaching. The coach focuses on deeply understanding the client's needs and desires. Commonly, this initial session completes with the coach and the client agreeing upon the general goals of the program.

The ongoing coaching sessions are characterized by the coach's facilitating the client's identified goals in an organized manner such that the coaching program is maximizing positive impact on the client. The final session is devoted to acknowledging the results of the coaching work, and preparing the client to self-sustain the overall progress made during the coaching. Cycles of coaching often occur in weekly or biweekly sessions lasting 30-60 minutes depending on circumstances.

What Distinguishes Health Coaching

Health and Wellness Coaching shares similar competencies, called domains by the ICHWC, which requires additional knowledge that is unique to healthcare. The knowledge health and wellness coaches must be familiar with is commonly called lifestyle medicine or healthy lifestyle basics. These include:

The definition of health, health promotion, disease prevention and the applications of whole- person perspectives

The five major risk factors and their proximal causes of the six more common chronic conditions

Understanding the basic biometric measures of health

Understanding the evidence for promotion of healthy weight, nutrition, physical activity, sleep, and emotional wellness

Narrative Health Coaching

Narrative health coaching offers a unique blend of health and wellness coaching with developmental coaching. Narrative health coaching promotes healing and wellness first by growing the coach's own healing capacity. Narrative health coaches address factors that support health and resilience. Through their own growth process and increased

capacity for healing, coaches become better able to support healing in others. As a result, narrative health coaches relate to experience in a healthier way.

Narrative Health Coaching is based on four core principles:

Story Matters: It's not just getting rid of old behavior and old patterns; it's about understanding our own story and learning to tell a new one – one that includes increased awareness and insight.

Relationships Engage: Community is essential, providing an environment for deep listening and deep learning. Narrative health coaching provides a healthy interpersonal container for professionals committed to lifelong learning.

Learning Transforms: We use learning cycles – set-see-apply-assess and re-set – increasing our skills and awareness. Growth through learning cycles allows us to reframe challenges, fostering healing.

Growth Heals: Achieving outstanding results occurs through broad-based learning across diverse disciplines providing growth and mastery in an array of healing capacities.

These four principles, when practiced within the context of the ICF's competencies and the ICHWC's domains, allow narrative health coaches to honor and develop their own healing capacities – staying attuned to what it feels like to be a client, while they guide their clients through increasingly healthy and healing ways of being.

References

Core Competencies, International Coaching Federation, accessed March 28, 2017

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About the Authors:

Dr. Joel Kreisberg, DC, PCC, is the founder and Executive Director of the Teleosis Institute, www.teleosis.org, a not-for-profit institution devoted to *narrative health coaching*. Dr. Kreisberg brings 29 years of leadership to his work as an integrative physician, teacher, coach and change agent. After becoming an Integral Master Coach™, Dr. Kreisberg integrated this coaching into his clinical practice in homeopathy, nutritional medicine and narrative health coaching.

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Teleosis Institute, www.teleosis.org, offers the Certificate Program in Narrative Health Coaching and continuing education classes for health professionals. Narrative health coaching is a comprehensive framework that identifies and nourishes the healing capacity of those seeking to reduce pain and illness as well as those seeking to increase overall health and vitality. Kreisberg and Marra, *et al.* recently co-authored *Coaching and Healing: Transforming the Illness Narrative* (Integral Publishers, 2016).