

The Acceleration Lane

Why Do I Need a Coach?
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I get this question a lot - particularly in early discussions with potential clients. Often the speaker treats the question as rhetorical. Turned around it comes out as a statement - "of course, you know, I don't really need a coach." For most conversations about coaching this is as far as the conversation gets. The exercise becomes one of justifying the 'I-can-do-it-on-my-own' strategy and avoiding any suggestion that experienced assistance might be necessary - or even an idea worthy of serious consideration.

One response is particularly interesting - "I don't seem to have time anymore." The first implication of this 'defense' is that life has become so crammed with other stuff that learning has been squeezed out. We have become too busy to learn - rather like saying that I am too busy driving to have the time to stop for gas. Life has become a desert in which an oasis is only to be dreamt of - as there is no time for an extended visit. I don't buy this no-time argument. The most successful people that I have known seem to have more hours in their days than 'normal folk'. They have time for coaching, learning and a rich range of other personal interests. Something else is at work here.

So what is the major block? What turn of mind causes well educated and experienced individuals to avoid seeking help in areas critical to defining the success that they are going to be able to achieve? Having given this question considerable thought, I believe that the answer can be found in the final verse of one of my favorite poems - "Advice" by Bill Holm

*If they dance together, something unexpected will happen
If they don't, the next world will be a lot like this one.¹*

For many, change has become a threat - the admission of adult incompleteness that, within a world-view strangely akin to the strong-silent-types of the 50's, brings shame and the suspicion of inadequacy. The impossibility of the admission of need is the deployed prophylactic against the unsettling nature of future possibilities. When you add in the amazing capability of well educated people to self-deceive, you have a recipe for inertia that is hard to overcome.

But there are others who respond quite differently to the question. "Why do I need a coach?" is only the beginning of a conversation in which the question of needing a coach quickly fades as the focus becomes "How can I derive even more value out of working with a coach?" These are truly the 'others' - those whose unquenchable thirst for learning, growth and new experiences drive them to continue the evolution of the person that they are becoming - and will probably still be becoming up to the very moment of their final breath - individuals who view life as a process of continually crafting and re-crafting what has become into what can be.

As with most important journeys in life, this one begins with an apparently small step. But once the question is reworked this way, the process becomes more rewarding and far more productive for both client and coach. This is when coaching kicks into high gear. Instead of me saying "here take this and think about it" - the client begins to insist "I want more - what else have you got?" Once through the early stages of pushing and prodding, I sometimes find myself running to keep up with a client who has discovered a whole new set of capabilities and possibilities - and is

¹ If you want to read the entire poem, send me an e-mail and I'll forward a copy.

anxious to explore them all ASAP. And it is then that the wonder of it all - the satisfaction, discovery, growth and tremendous empowerment that effective coaching can provide - comes into play.

Maybe the guide in this journey should be Robert Frost who, in a poem titled "The Road Not Taken" wrote -

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

In my experience, effective coaching can make "all the difference" between a career of mediocrity and one of excellence and undreamed-of accomplishments. Coaching is all about making a difference - all about tapping into the value of the knowledge and experience of others to open your own possibilities. In fact (and if you read the biographies of successful people) the willingness to learn through being coached is not just a habit of successful people - it is an obsession. Ah la Frost, the 'coached road' is "less traveled by" - but its travelers tend to be more successful people living lives closer to their potential.

The very idea that you don't have to 'go it alone' is central to this formulation - but the really important message is that you deserve (you are worth) the support of an experienced coach. Take this single step and a world of new opportunities appears - like the proverbial lotus flower, it will open before your eyes. The value of a supportive 'world-view not my own' becomes evident and empowering.

The argument supporting the value of effective coaching can be made in two ways. First there are the numbers - here are a few. A study by the International Coach Federation titled "Survey of Coaching Clients" found the following:

- - The outcomes that clients most often attribute to their coaching are:
 - Higher self-awareness (68%)
 - A more balanced life (61%)
 - Smarter goal-setting (62%)
 - Lower stress levels (57%)
 - Greater self-confidence (52%)
 - 70% of clients said their investment in a coach was VERY valuable.
- Executive Coaching yields a return on investment of almost six times the initial investment in a typical coaching assignment.
- Companies who have provided coaching to their executives and their teams have realized improvements of over 48% in productivity, quality and organizational strength.
- Executives who have received coaching have reported improvements of over 60% in working relationships with direct reports and peers, teamwork, job satisfaction and conflict resolution.

But for me and many of my clients the numbers are not the heart of the story - the clients' experiences are. Recently one of my clients observed that it felt like she had finally started "feeding my soul on growth food after years of subsisting on a junk-food diet - I feel alive to the possibilities." For one person to be able to help another to that rarified place - now that is the heart and soul of an effective coaching engagement! Maybe a couple of other examples will help you understand what I mean.

One barrier that trumped them all: I had just begun working with a client when it became apparent that there was one behavior that was recurringly sabotaging his professional future. This individual is highly skilled in his area of expertise. Each job would start out full of promise. His work was very high quality and he was respected by his contemporaries and supervisors.

But there was a problem and it didn't relate directly to his professional skill set. You see this person had a tendency to loose focus when it came to social interactions - particularly when it came to interactions with his immediate supervisors. He would get into a defensive and overly aggressive frame of mind and discussions would go badly enough to damage (and sometimes destroy) his future with the company.

The most interesting things about this behavior were 1) it only occurred after he had built a reputation for good teamwork and valuable contributions and 2) even though he believed that the issues which brought about the conflicts were important at the time, he always found that they seemed rather insubstantial in hindsight. Early in our engagement he found himself dealing with the after-effects of one of these lapses. My immediate response after sitting through the telling was "What the hell were you thinking?"

But as we talked about it something became clear. He needed to actually accept that he was entitled to - that he deserved - the success that he was fully capable of achieving. The roots of this self-destructive behavior were in his self-image. His unconscious behavior was sabotaging his future because he felt he did not deserve the future that he kept opening up.

We concentrated our work on developing ways for him to monitor and counteract the emergence of this behavior. At first it was slow going and personally embarrassing to him - but, to his great credit, he persevered with a growing determination to make a real change. As I often observe "real change requires real change!"

Things are very different now. Now he can keep what he earns - he can build on the reputation and confidences that he has created - without having them destroyed by his own self-sabotaging behavior. Such a small realization has created such a very large effect and put a life on a far more enjoyable footing.

You cannot awaken someone who is pretending to be asleep:² When I started working with a founder and CEO of an internet-based company his central observation was that "I and my staff seem to have fallen asleep". The early, high-energy days of the company seemed to be a thing of the past. As we burrowed down to find the reasons something quite extraordinary occurred. The CEO came to the realization that his vision for the Company had become stale - had not changed in a long time. It was also clear that the company needed to be re-envisioned as it had 'rooted the pot' in its current configuration.

We started our work in a rather illogical place - the evolution of a new vision statement for the CEO's life. "Forget the Company - just tell me what you want for your future." It was slow going for almost a month. He hadn't thought about the vision for his own life in a long time. But eventually there came a breakthrough - an epiphany - and it related to the direction that his vision for the Company needed to take.

Once we had a breakthrough on the personal-vision front, we focused on reenergizing the staff and evolving a vision for the company. The first we did by taking a different approach to staff meetings - involving the senior team in a rethinking of the Company's value proposition. Initial

² From an old Buddhist proverb

steps were small ones - but the team began to awaken to the possibility that something was in the air.

The CEO turned his energies to developing a new vision for the Company. It wasn't as hard as either of us had expected - the pieces were there all the time; we just had to see the new pattern. As a result of our work and the leadership of the CEO, his company is facing a new future with additional revenue sources and an expanding and energized team. As William Stafford wrote:

*For it is important that awake people be awake
Or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
The signals we give - yes or no, maybe - should be clear:
The darkness around us is deep!*

Coda: When you die there will be an eternity for being what you have become with more than enough time left over to be no more forever. But while you are here and alive take the life that is there for you to take - and take the guidance of those who can help you find the upward path.

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