

Association of American Law Schools

The Pluralism of Roles: Adding Coaching to Your Toolkit;  
How Coaching Skills Can Augment Counseling,  
Consulting and Mentoring Roles

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### **What is coaching?**

According to the International Coach Federation (ICF), coaching is “an ongoing partnership designed to help clients produce fulfilling results in their personal and professional lives. Coaches help people improve performance and enhance the quality of their lives. Coaches are trained to listen, to observe and to customize their approach to individual client needs. They seek to elicit solutions and strategies from the client; they believe the client is naturally creative and resourceful.” A coach provides the necessary support to enhance the client’s inherent skills, resources, and creativity.

### **What is the difference between coaching and consulting?**

While coaches are experts at the art and science of coaching, they do not need to be subject matter experts. They draw out the innate wisdom of their clients by asking targeted questions and facilitating directed thinking. Coaches help clients achieve change and results by serving as confidential, neutral partners who are objective and non-judgmental. Coaches have specialized training to learn specific competencies including becoming experts at listening contextually for what is said and done and what is NOT being said and done. Consultants have experience and expertise in a specific area. They are hired to analyze and address a particular issue and to give advice about what needs to be done to remedy a problem or change a situation. They may use coaching skills in their work but only as a tool to complement their other professional skills.

### **What is the difference between coaching and counseling?**

Coaching differs from counseling or therapy in a number of ways. Generally, the therapist-client relationship is based upon the medical model which assumes that the client needs to be diagnosed, treated and/or cured. Coaching operates from the premise that each client is whole and may desire guidance but does not need to be fixed. Therapy also tends to address the current issue by reviewing past factors. Coaching begins with the present and helps the client move forward toward a more fulfilling life consistent with his or her values and vision. The coaching relationship more closely resembles that of a client and personal trainer. In each case, the client wants to receive guidance and accountability to move toward particular, identified goals.

### **What is the difference between coaching and mentoring?**

According to Merriam-Webster, a mentor is a trusted counselor or guide. A mentor is typically someone who advises and guides based on her own knowledge and experience. Because the mentor has already traveled down a certain path, she can advise on what to expect from that path including the benefits and pitfalls. A mentor will frequently provide advice or will teach the person she mentors about a certain subject matter or course of action. And, while a mentor may ask open ended questions (a hallmark skill of coaching), the mentor will generally not be trained as a coach and will feel that her primary role is to give advice. Typically, mentors receive little or no training on how to fulfill their roles. They are simply expected to advise and teach from their personal experience and to create relationships with the people they mentor. True coaching, on the other hand, requires training. There are certain core skills such as asking open-ended, powerful questions, practicing directed listening, and providing structure for accountability that are intrinsic to a coaching relationship.

# Core Coaching Skills

## I. Powerful Questions:

- Come from Curiosity
- Open-ended
- Non-leading
- Simple and brief
- Unexpected

## Sample Powerful Questions:

### **General:**

- What's happening now?
- What's missing?
- What's working?
- What is stopping you?
- What are the opportunities here?

### **Future/Vision:**

- What's your long-term goal related to this?
- How do you want it to look/feel/be?
- If you could do anything you wanted, what would that be?
- What is the best case scenario?

### **Brainstorming/Action:**

- What other options are there?
- What else?
- Who can help you with this?
- What is your game plan?
- What will you do?
- By when will you do it?
- What's next?

### **Learning:**

- If you could wipe the slate clean, what would you do?
- What are you learning from this?
- How can you find out more?

- What are you taking away from this experience?

## **II. Levels of Listening**

### **Level one – internal listening**

- Attention is on ourselves and the sound of own inner voice
- Listening to our own thoughts, opinions, judgments, feelings and conclusions
- This is how we listen most of the time; it's our default
- Examples of what our internal voice might say –
  - I had an experience just like that
  - I really need to get out of this class so I can go to lunch – I'm starving
  - I am getting bored with this conversation
  - What do I want to say next
- Useful in certain situations such as a job interview when the interviewer is asking you what you want in an ideal job – it's all about you, so you need to listen to him at Level 1.

### **Level two – focused listening**

- Attention is sharply focused on the other person
- Listen for words, expression, emotion, what they don't say, values, what makes them energetic
- Examples: (i) a mother fully focused on her sick baby and his needs, (ii) lovers on a park bench so engrossed in each other they are oblivious to the world around them
- Useful when coaching, mentoring, or interviewing someone else for a position or role.

### **Level three – global listening**

- Soft focus listening
- Your awareness includes the environment and all your senses – what you see, hear, smell and feel
- Gives greater access to intuition
  - Sixth sense
  - Gut reaction
- Examples: comedians and performer must listen at level three
- Useful when in the courtroom, when mentoring/coaching and when interviewing someone.

## When is Coaching Really Coaching?

By Debby Stone, JD, CPCC, PCC with Laura Biering, MM, CPCC, PCC

Coaching has become a buzzword in the second half of this decade. Lawyers hire coaches to help with everything from business development and leadership to time management and life balance. Many law firms have jumped on the bandwagon as well, forming coaching committees designed to provide internal “coaches” for their lawyers. However, as coaching has become more popular and widely accepted, the lines between coaching and other disciplines have become blurred. When is a relationship between two individuals coaching, and when is it something else entirely, such as mentoring, consulting or counseling?

First let’s explore what coaching is. According to the International Coach Federation (ICF), coaching involves “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential. Coaches help people improve their performances and enhance the quality of their lives.” In addition, professional coaches are “trained to listen, to observe and to customize their approach to individual client needs. They seek to elicit solutions and strategies from the client; they believe the client is naturally creative and resourceful.” At the core, a coach provides support to “to enhance the skills, resources, and creativity that the client already has.” In other words, true coaches don’t provide the answers; they provide the questions and the framework to elicit the answers from the client.

Let’s contrast the definition of coaching with common definitions of mentoring. According to Merriam-Webster, a mentor is a trusted counselor or guide. YourDictionary.com defines “mentor” as a wise, loyal advisor and lists as an alternate definition, a teacher or coach. Given these definitions, it is easy to see why confusion exists between mentoring and coaching.

Traditionally, in the law firm environment, a mentor has been someone who advises and guides based on her own knowledge and experience. Because the mentor has already traveled down a certain path, she can advise you on what to expect from that path including its benefits and pitfalls. A mentor will frequently provide advice or will teach the person he mentors about a certain subject matter or course of action. And, while a mentor may ask open ended questions (a hallmark skill of coaching), the mentor will generally not be trained as a coach and will feel that her primary role is to give advice.

There is no question that mentoring can be extremely valuable, particularly to younger associates in a law firm. However, the danger lies in calling a mentoring relationship a coaching relationship. Not only does this diminish the value of true coaching, but it also creates false expectations for the mentor’s skills and perspective.

Calling a mentoring relationship a coaching relationship suggests that the mentor is able to be objective and take an unattached perspective. These are key aspects of

coaching. In fact, while a mentor may have the best interests of the person he is mentoring at heart, he is speaking from the perspective of his own experience. As a member or employee of the same law firm, it is actually impossible for the mentor to be truly objective or unattached.

Typically, mentors receive little or no training on how to fulfill their roles. They are simply expected to advise and teach from their personal experience and to create relationships with the people they mentor. True coaching, on the other hand, requires training. There are certain core skills such as asking open-ended, powerful questions, practicing directed listening, and providing structure for accountability that are intrinsic to a coaching relationship. These skills must be learned and practiced before an individual can claim to be a coach.

It is equally important to make a distinction between coaching and two other disciplines – consulting and counseling.

First, let's look at consulting. Many lawyers are more comfortable working with a coach who has practiced law. While often a coach with a JD and some legal experience can more quickly understand the environment in which the lawyer works and can provide some consultative insights based upon her experience, coaches are experts in the art and science of coaching, and a trained coach can coach anyone in any field.

It is important to remember that coaches draw out the innate wisdom of their clients by asking targeted questions and facilitating directed thinking not by relating the situation to their own experience. Coaches help clients achieve change and results by serving as confidential, neutral partners who are objective and non-judgmental. Coaches have specialized training to learn specific competencies including becoming experts at listening contextually for what is said and done and what is not being said and done.

Contrast this approach with the approach of a consultant. Consultants have experience and expertise in a specific subject area. They are hired to analyze and address a particular issue and to give advice about what needs to be done to remedy a problem or change a situation. They may use coaching skills in their work but only as a tool to complement their other professional skills.

Coaching is also quite different from counseling or therapy. Generally, the therapist-client relationship is based upon the medical model which assumes that the client/patient needs to be diagnosed, treated and/or cured. Coaching operates from the premise that each client is whole and may desire guidance but does not need to be fixed. Therapy also tends to address the current issue by reviewing past factors. Coaching begins with the present and helps the client move forward toward a more fulfilling life consistent with his or her values and vision.

These are very different approaches and paradigms, so let's now take a real life example and run it through each of the four disciplines we have been discussing – coaching, mentoring, consulting and counseling. Suppose Jane is a third year

associate who has been having a difficult time communicating with Mike, the partner she works with most closely. How might each of the four disciplines approach this type of dilemma?

First, let's suppose Jane has a trained and credentialed coach. Jane's coach might ask questions such as: What comprises good communication? Whose communication style do you admire? What are the key components of that person's style? What do you want Mike to hear? What works in your communication with Mike? What doesn't? Through the power of the relationship between Jane and her coach and a series of directed questions coupled with accountability, Jane's coach would help her develop a personalized roadmap to better communication with Mike.

Now, let's suppose that Jane consults Sherry, a junior level partner in her firm who has been assigned to her as a mentor. Sherry advises Jane that very direct, to-the-point email communication works best with Mike. She also suggests that Jane invite Mike to lunch and ask him questions about some of the clients she serves. Sherry tells Jane that based on her experience this type of conversation will help boost Mike's confidence in Jane and create a stronger relationship between the two. Sherry provides advice and counsel to Jane based on her experience with Mike.

Now, what if Jane hired a communication consultant to help her with Mike? The consultant would draw on her expertise in the field of communication and would likely first teach Jane some of the fundamentals of good communication. Then, based on her knowledge and experience, the consultant would advise Jane about how to use those skills in her particular situation with Mike.

Finally, let's assume that Jane visits a counselor or therapist to help her deal with her communication issues with Mike. Her counselor would likely explore with Jane when she has previously had communication issues. The counselor might ask Jane questions about previous relationships Jane has had with male authority figures, and he might provide input on how Jane can change her future behavior so that it does not mirror her past.

Clearly from this example, the various disciplines would treat the same dilemma very differently. Coaches, mentors, consultants and counselors all have unique and valuable approaches. Each may use coaching skills as a tool but only the trained coach will fully embody the coaching perspective. It is important for the integrity of each of these roles and professions that coaching be called coaching only when it truly meets the definition.

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