

How is Coaching Distinct From Therapy?

by James Flaherty

Someone asks me this question every time I do a public talk about coaching. To continue the dialogue, I'm writing this piece. As will quickly be grasped, I cannot resolve the question once and for all. That's partly because there's not common ground as to what would constitute a satisfactory response and also because both therapists and coaches have much at stake in the answer.

Therapists have spent, in many cases, a decade or more of study and practice before working with clients on their own. They often are reluctant to welcome coaches, with much less training, into what they consider to be a client-space carved out of the shared social world of our culture, with great effort, by their profession, over the last hundred-plus years. They also have other reasons, which will be addressed in what follows.

Coaches contend that they are launching a new profession that, like others, is built upon what has gone before, but is nonetheless distinct. It's similar they say to the moment when psychotherapy was separating itself from medicine. Practitioners of the new method (psychotherapy) claimed that they were addressing things outside the normal purview of the existing established methods (of medicine), while medical professionals questioned the credentials and competence of the newcomers. Coaches see history repeating itself and ask therapists to extend the understanding and acceptance that they never received themselves from the medical establishment at the turn of the 20th century.

There are other reasons why this is a difficult question to answer. Here are some of them:

- Neither therapy nor coaching is a single unified expression. In practice, this means that many therapists (certainly the ones I've spoken to on this topic) cannot succinctly say what therapy is, either as a theoretical foundation or as the specific actions taken based upon the theory. For its part, coaching is also divided by schools of practice, both in terms of fundamental understanding and subsequent actions. So what is being compared is far from clear.
- Clients, the people who arrive for therapy or coaching, are complex beings immersed in profoundly changing social, ecological and technological contexts. To make their way in that contemporary world requires a high level of skill, resilience, support. Consequently what could theoretically be distinguished as a "coaching issue" or as a "psychotherapy issue" takes a high level of discernment. Should we look at the source of the client's topic? Is it a client difficulty based upon early familial, attachment or object-relations problems as distinct from its source being current pressure arising from financial, relational or health issues? (What response or problem is context specific and what is longer lasting than that?) Can anyone really tell the origins of a troubling experience or a lack in ability to cope /thrive? And does this really matter if we could? Coaches and therapists may have different answers to these questions.
- Besides the understandable turf wars and business interests involved (for both sides these can show up as survival issues for one's identity and profession), therapists and coaches both see limitations in each other's methodologies. Therapists say that coaches are always getting in over their heads, do not see the big picture, and oversimplify constantly. Coaches say that therapists too easily go round and round and round with clients and never really resolving anything. They

criticize clients being diagnosed into pre-existing categories (e.g. DSM IV) and having basic human experiences and emotions pathologized.

The list of difficulties could continue for many pages. What would you add?

Some people would claim that the issues are resolvable by clarifying what each discipline has been trained to accomplish. But I haven't been able to find a therapist who can say clearly what the boundaries of their profession are. For example, are therapists still working towards what Freud laid out, the ability to love and work? Or are they functioning within Maslow's context of unleashing human potential, which goes far beyond what Freud proposed?

When I've asked therapists these questions they've said it depends, which I think is a totally fair and sensible response.

Coaches can similarly be all over the map. Some say they are working towards clients fulfilling their goals. Others say their task is to build the competence or deepen the developmental level of their clients.

These different schools of therapy and different schools of coaching have different starting points as well as different ends in mind. It would take a long and detailed book to present the depth and variety of the foundational principles of different therapeutic modalities and coaching methodologies fairly. So I won't be doing that just now.

With all this as background, here's my current thinking. Therapists and coaches could have overlapping populations of clients that they work with. These folks function at a fairly high level. They support themselves financially, can form and maintain relationships and attend to their self-care. Unless these people show behaviors that would indicate otherwise, I consider them to be candidates to work with coaches or therapists, depending upon the fit of relationship and the skill of the practitioner.

When any of these conditions are missing, not as a result of temporary conditions but in a lasting way across significant periods of time, then the person is not a good candidate for coaching. Therapists naturally might have other criteria for determining who should work with them instead of a coach. Perhaps they would cite the underlying conditions for seemingly simple problems or the elaborate and frequently successful defense and denial systems that people put in place. And there may be a lot of truth in these proposals. A counter-claim though that holds equal power is that being in therapy does not assure that these conditions will be recognized or worked through.

My strong recommendation is that all coaches get trained to recognize who is and who is not a good candidate for their way of working and have a network of people to whom they can make referrals when necessary.

I also urge therapists to understand who is a good candidate for their work and to refer clients out, not only when a therapeutic specialist seems necessary, but also when the client could use a different approach, coming from a different understanding of people (coaching).

As I said in the beginning, this short article will not resolve the controversy but is intended to be a move in an ongoing conversation.