

The Three Levels of Coaching

by Pamela Weiss, MCC

Introduction

If you ask a dozen coaches what they do and how they do it, you will probably get a dozen different answers. These days you can hire a coach for just about anything—from finding a job to finding your voice; from balancing your checkbook to creating balance in your life; from losing weight or finding a mate to finding your purpose or deepening your relationship with God.

The rapid growth of the coaching field over the past ten years reflects a hunger and yearning for new ways to address the deep, perplexing issues inherent in human life. How can we respond with kindness and skill to the constant, rapidly changing flux of circumstances in our lives? How can we reduce rather than contribute to harm and suffering? How can we live in ways that are not just productive and efficient, but are also meaningful and fulfilling?

Our hunger can never be satisfied by better, faster, and increasingly efficient ways of doing more of what we've been doing all along. It can only be fed by addressing its source: the deep human longing to be fully who we are.

The Coaching Field

As a coach and trainer of coaches for the past nine years, I see two major camps within the coaching field: the "I'm-the-expert-let-me-fix-you" camp and the "you-are-perfect-and-whole-and-have-all-the-answers-within-yourself" camp. Each approach attracts certain types of people and is grounded in an assumption about the relationship between coach and client. Each has something to offer yet is limited in significant ways. Each contains a truth, yet it is only a partial truth.

The “I’m-the-expert-let-me-fix-you” camp is largely populated by consultants accustomed to getting paid for their expertise. The guiding assumption is that I know and you don’t. The “you-are-perfect-and-whole-and-have-all-the-answers-within-yourself” camp attracts people who find inspiration in the new-age, self-help, and human-potential movements. The assumption is that if I ask the right questions, I will awaken the infinite wisdom within you, allowing you to create the life you desire.

There is nothing wrong with either offering expertise or evoking the wisdom of clients. Each has value. Yet as a full description of what it means to coach, each falls short. Consider, first, the role of expertise. We need experts to inform and advise us. But coaching is not about providing expertise. It is about developing human beings. It is about helping the *person* learn and grow. As coaches, our job is to leave our clients better off without us. If we merely give advice or work in ways that create dependence, we may get results, but we fail to develop the person. Or worse, we may develop a person who becomes less competent through his or her dependence on us.

The “you have all the answers within yourself” assumption is partially true. Clients do have wisdom within them, and an important job of the coach is to evoke it. Yet there are three limitations to the approach. These don’t make the approach wrong, just partial. First, people do contain answers within them, but not *all* the answers. People also have blind spots, and skillful coaching can illuminate these blind spots. Second, it is a stretch to suggest that we can have or create anything we want. Developmental psychologists call this magical thinking. We have a role in determining what happens in our lives, but we don’t control it. We are participants, not dictators. Third, the belief that I can create whatever I want has a dangerous flip side: if things don’t turn out, it must be my fault. I wasn’t trying hard enough or thinking enough positive thoughts. In other words, the dark underbelly of control is blame. It is the logical extension of the assumption that I am in charge. If I control my happiness, it must follow that I am to blame for my unhappiness.

Both approaches—expert and new age—represent horizontal styles of intervention. They assist people in maintaining the lives that they currently have. The expert approach does this by helping people to get better, faster and more efficient at doing what they are already doing or getting what they (think they) want. The New Age approach

does this by withholding from people one of the greatest gifts a coach can give: their unique insight into others' blind spots.

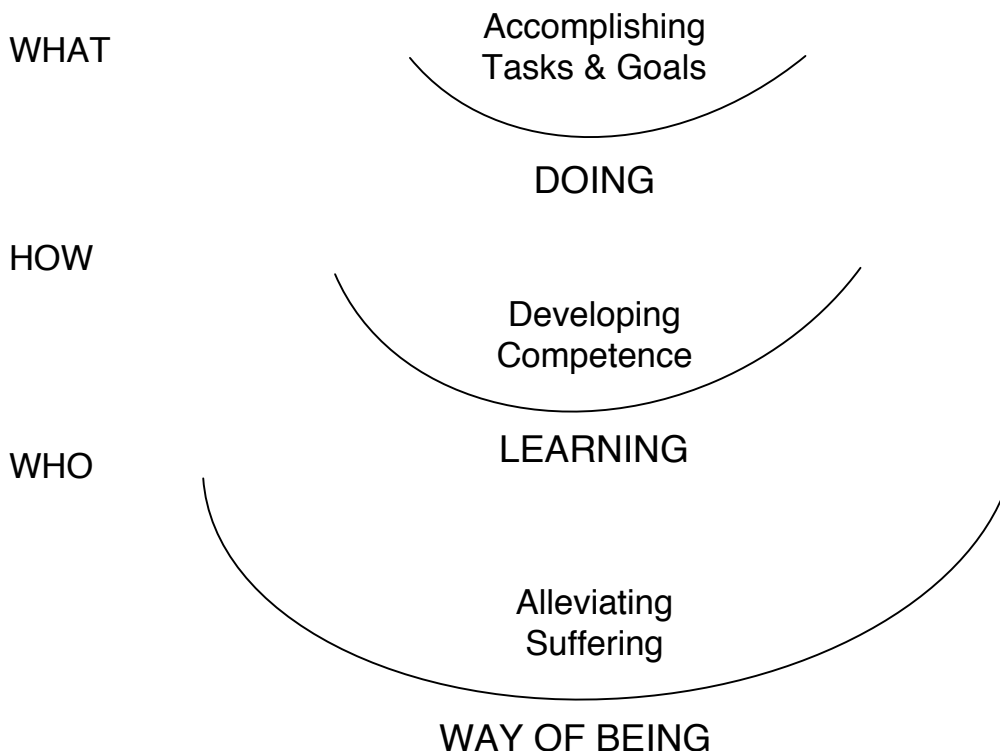
Again, my point is not to suggest that these approaches are wrong, just limited. If our intent as coaches is to support our clients in developing as human beings, horizontal life maintenance is not sufficient. We need to ask ourselves, "What approach to coaching facilitates vertical transformation?"

One approach to consider is a model I use while training coaches at New Ventures West and coaching individuals. I call it the "three levels of coaching."

Three Levels of Coaching

The diagram below depicts levels or styles of coaching intervention. The levels are nested. This means that the lower levels include the levels above them, but the higher levels do not include the levels below them. Moving down, from doing to learning to being, represents vertical transformation.

LEVELS OF COACHING



Level One: Accomplishing Tasks and Goals

At the first level, we work with our clients to help them accomplish tasks and goals. This is the level of assisting people in getting things done—and is by far the most pervasive. When we do this, we may assist people in the short term, but our assistance is always limited. We all know how our “to-do” lists go: you work down the list, checking off items, getting things done, accomplishing tasks and goals. But by the time you get to the bottom of the list, new tasks have been added to the top. It’s endless.

Coaching at this level is coaching as accountability partnership—helping our clients to clarify their goals, laying out a set of action steps to move them toward those goals, and then setting up structures to ensure that they stay on track. Maybe we call them once a week or once a day or once an hour to keep them accountable. As coaches, we do whatever it takes to make sure they stick with the program.

This approach is based on behaviorism. Remember Pavlov and Skinner? They were early behaviorists who ran experiments with dogs, demonstrating that an external stimulus (the sound of a bell) caused behavior (salivation). The basic premise of behaviorism is that, like dogs, human beings take action (behave) based on an external stimulus. Behaviorism runs deep in our psyches. We treat ourselves this way. We treat other people this way. A significant amount of management theory is based on this.

If you want to get your staff to “perform,” you can stimulate the desired behavior through incentives (more money or prestige, a pizza party, an office with windows, a promotion) or threats (less money or humiliation, a negative evaluation, a smaller cubicle, a demotion). In organizations where I have worked, I have listened to dozens of managers vehemently defend this approach. “If you don’t give people incentives, they won’t work hard.” Or, “if you don’t punish people for being late, lazy, inefficient, (fill in the blank...), they will just take advantage of you.”

Many child-raising methods are based on this as well: “If you eat all of your broccoli, you can have dessert.” Or, “If you don’t stop whining, you’ll have to go to your room.” It’s everywhere. Think about the last time you tried to “motivate” yourself to do

something—quit smoking or clean out your closets or lose weight. Most of our strategies involve behaviorism—creating a set of threats and promises to move us toward the desired behaviors. “If I go to the gym, then I can have a piece of cake.” “If I don’t finish this paper, then I can’t go out with my friends.” “If I lose five pounds, then I can buy a new dress.”

The obvious problem with this approach is that it is short term. When you remove the stimulus, the behavior snaps right back to the “norm.” It may work for a while, but it rarely sticks. Think about how many people lose and gain, lose and gain, thousands of pounds every year... Yet we keep insisting that *this* time it will work.

When I ask potential coaching clients what they are looking for from me as a coach, the most common replies are: “I want you to help keep me on track,” or, “I need someone to help me be more disciplined,” or even, “I want you to give me a kick in the butt.” They want me to become the external stimulus they think they need. I never agree to work with people this way because it dehumanizes them. It turns them into stimulus-response machines. Instead, I invite them to consider another type of relationship, as I will describe.

Human beings are complex and mysterious. When we treat our clients (or ourselves) like lab rats, we can’t simultaneously support them in becoming fully human. Although we may get short-term results or “payoff,” we don’t develop the person. Instead we develop well-trained rats. This is damaging to the human beings. It also interferes with our capacity to create long-term results.

The other, more insidious problem of working at this level is that it never addresses *why* a person wants to accomplish a particular task. It just creates a structure to ensure that whatever it is the person wants to get done gets done. This may be helpful, but it may not. Helping someone make more money or lose more weight may actually be harmful.

Level Two: Developing New Competence

If we want to work with people in a more humane and effective way, we need to shift down to working at the level of developing competence. At this level, we help our clients learn something new. We work with the person so that they can not only accomplish a goal

or task one time, but also learn to continuously do it on their own. We help open new possibilities, so the client is able to take new action. Our aim here is to teach them *how* to do something, rather than just telling them *what* to do. This requires more skill on our part, and it takes more time, more patience, and a deeper relationship with the client.

For example, let's say we have a client who comes to us wanting to lose weight. If we were to work with them at the first level, we would determine the goal (the target weight) and set up a diet and exercise plan. Our job as a coach would then be to keep checking in with the client to make sure they stay on track—perhaps cheering them on or admonishing them along the way.

If we were to work with this same client at the second level, we would teach them about nutrition—clarifying the difference between fats, proteins and carbohydrates—and explaining the role of exercise in weight loss and so on. We would introduce new terms so the client could make new choices and engage in new behaviors. By facilitating new learning, we leave the client with new competence—able to navigate on their own, without creating dependence on the coach.

Level Three: Alleviating Suffering

At the third level, we work with our clients at the level of changing their “Way of Being.” Coaching here, our focus shifts from addressing the *issue* or improving a competence to developing the *person*. Our aim is to shift their limited sense of who they are, so that they can engage in and interact with the world in entirely new ways.

To continue the nutrition example, at levels one and two, we may address a client's relationship with food, calories, and exercise. In contrast, at level three we focus on shifting their relationship with themselves—perhaps reorienting how they relate to their body or their sources of nurturance—intentionally looking beyond food, calories and exercise to include a more holistic perspective.

At this level, we might introduce distinctions and set up exercises for them to learn to differentiate between eating to feed biological hunger and eating to feed emotional hunger. We would introduce new practices to feed their emotional, relational and spiritual lives. At this level, we address the issue systemically—shifting how they

relate to themselves, others and the world. As old lines of understanding are revised and redrawn, the tight container the person has inhabited cracks open and new possibilities arise. This new perspective offers an increased sense of freedom and spaciousness. The result is an alleviation of suffering.

Conclusion: Our Task as Coaches

Sometimes it takes bumping up against the edges of our circle to notice how uncomfortable and claustrophobic it has become. Maybe we get promoted and are faced with new challenges we don't know how to address. Maybe we get downsized or criticized or find the same "old" issues coming back to haunt us. Or maybe we've reached the peak of our professional success, only to discover we're still not satisfied. At some point we inevitably encounter the pinch of the tight little world we inhabit. We may have a vague sense that there must be another way—there must be a broader horizon out there somewhere, but we don't know how to find it.

Our task as coaches is to help widen the circle—opening our clients to new possibilities and potential; inviting them to see and inhabit more of the sky. A coaching relationship is a place where the coach sheds light on the client's "blind spots," challenging and stretching their fixed views of themselves, others and the world. This is work which none of us can do alone. It's only together that we can expand our sky.

About the Author

Pamela Weiss, MCC, is founder of An Appropriate Response, senior teacher at New Ventures West, and senior coach for Integral Leadership. Pam leads the *Professional Coaching Course* for New Ventures West and coaching programs nationwide. She has worked with a wide variety of corporate and non-profit organizations including Pacific Bell, Kaiser Permanente, Turner Construction, Women's Initiative for Self-Employment, and Spirit Rock Meditation Center. She has coached dozens of leaders and managers, and has created custom-designed programs inside organizations to facilitate culture change, enhance productivity and increase employee retention and satisfaction.

Pam is a popular public speaker at professional organizations and conferences. She is a certified Integral Coach through New Ventures West. Her web site is www.appropriateresponse.com