

Coaching and NLP

by Jan Elflin, ICF, MCC

Coaching is one of the fastest growing new professions. What is the appeal? Recent issues of Newsweek, Money Magazine and the Wall Street Journal urge professionals to avail themselves of the services of a personal coach. Why?

Dedicated athletes use coaches to increase their focus and to provide support, structure, and ongoing accountability to prepare them for win/lose competitions. Organizations and individuals who hire coaches are interested in having, being, and doing their best, not settling for less. We humans have a deep need to grow and develop, to actualize our potential. We want to “go for the gold” in the game of life.

What Specifically is Coaching?

The Personal and Professional Coaches Association defines coaching as “an ongoing relationship which focuses on clients taking action toward the realization of their vision, goals or desires. Coaching uses a process of inquiry and personal discovery to build the client’s level of awareness and responsibility, and provides the client with structure, support and feedback.” How is that different from existing professions? Like counseling, it is client-centered and individual. Like consulting, it is outcome oriented, dealing in visions and actions.

The major difference between masterful training, counseling, therapy, consulting or mentoring and masterful coaching can be described quite simply. The coach does not have answers. The coach does not provide expertise. A coach operates from the presupposition that the client (player) has all the resources, including the ability to discover and utilize resources.

How Does Coaching Work?

Most coaching begins with an initial intake appointment of two to three hours in which the coach and player design an alliance. Momentum and focus are maintained with weekly half-hour appointments. The player determines the agenda for the weekly session. Many of the players I work with come to their weekly call with written notes that may include what they want to check in on, what they want to be held accountable for, and what they want to explore.

Most coaching is conducted over the telephone, so it is well suited to professionals’ busy lives. Some coaches also use e-mail or FAX, and some work in person. Often the coach doesn’t live in the same community or even the same part of the country as the player. To many, this is seen as an advantage. It puts the coach well outside the system within which the player lives and works, and provides a sense of distance, objectivity and perspective.

Designing the Alliance

The coach and player work together to design an alliance. They define structures that will support the player as he or she moves toward a goal. Players have the most up to date and complete information about how they operate. They know what structures or habits will encourage their movement.

They know from experience what on-the-spot decisions they have to make. The player is in the game, the coach is only on the sidelines. Only the player can take action.

Some of the questions addressed in the process of designing the alliance include: How do I want to be held accountable for moving toward my goals? What perspectives do I want my coach to remind me of? What is the best use of my coaching time? The alliance evolves as the player discovers more of what works best. The coach does not know. The player does.

The coach does not define how things should be, but is committed to helping the player clarify “what is” (the present state) and what he or she wants in the future. What is your game? What “gold” are you going for? The “how” pieces, how to get from here to there, present state to desired state, don’t come from the coach. The player has those answers. Players define the game and create the game plans; coaches help them stay on track. Do plans change? Often. Some players discover that they want to achieve “pro” status in a different game.

A coaching call may result in a major breakthrough. More often, the results come in the form of small changes in habits and patterns of thinking. Coaching sessions make use of meta-thinking, thinking about our thinking. Over time, a player becomes aware of his or her own process of personal change and of the transformative power of taking self-initiated steps.

Many beginning players start the process expecting the coach to have answers, the magic “tip.” Yet the coach, through not knowing, confers on the player a powerful sense of control and responsibility. The player operates according to his/her map. The player is familiar with the environment and knows the other players and the rules of the game. The skillful coach helps to articulate and perhaps challenge those rules and raises questions. In the process of outlining the game and the rules for the coach, the player gains clarity. Action steps emerge.

What, then, does the coach provide?

The coach holds a safe space within which the player can explore. That space allows the player a “time out” to evaluate how the game is going, to establish the evidence procedures for success, and to strategize future action steps. The coach does not judge results. There is no failure, only feedback. The coach does expect the player to take responsibility and to develop the flexibility to overcome barriers.

Coaches also provide structure. As coaches hear players express a desire for action, they make requests. Examples of requests are: “Will you make two calls about that this week?” “Will you spend ten minutes a day on this?” Requests are negotiable. The player might counter, “No, I won’t do it every morning, but I’ll do it three times this week.” The alliance evolves. Once requests are accepted, coaches hold players accountable for taking those actions.

As individuals, most of us prefer self-generated action steps, yet we often fail to take them because no outside force holds us to them. We rarely have deadlines for the things we want to do for ourselves, so they go to the bottom of the “to do” list. By holding a player accountable, the coach sets up an expectation. The call provides a deadline.

In my own experience working with a coach, I have often done things on my list in the half hour before my coaching call. Without the structure of coaching, I would let those things slide. Players choose the steps they want to be held accountable for. The coach provides an external expectation that those steps will be taken.

Feedback from the coach takes many forms. The objective is to help the player evaluate the current reality without judgment or condemnation. Such nonjudgmental directness requires deep rapport. An experienced coach does not “gloss over” an obvious truth, however uncomfortable it might be. It is part of what is. Being unspoken does not make it go away. The coach might reframe the “hard truth” as a discovery, or as a challenge, an opportunity to forward the action.

The Coaching State—Not Knowing

The finest coaches seem to live in a place of not knowing so completely, in fact, that the “as if” frame of “player is capable” settles like an atmosphere over the coaching interaction. At the perfect moment for offering solutions, the coach asks a simple question like “How will you do that?” or “What’s next?” Simple, unembellished. Over time, players notice that they have the best answers to their own questions. In the deep structure of their experience, they know what actions to take and what choices to make.

As a coach, the ability to not know is one of those “simple but not easy” skills. It takes considerable practice. We are so easily drawn into giving advice. It is flattering to have someone want it. We want to help; we could shorten the player’s journey with just the right tip; how fair is it to hold it back? But the coach must trust that a player’s instincts are sound.

Accomplished coaches discover this over and over. The solution the player comes up with works infinitely better for him or her than a solution suggested by the coach. Players know themselves better than the coach ever will. They know what motivates them and what won’t last more than three days, or might result in disappointment and self recrimination.

How Long Does a Coaching Relationship Last?

Most coaches require an initial commitment of three to six months from players; individuals often remain in a coaching relationship for a year or more. One objective of coaching is to help the player establish habits of personal inquiry and accountability that make the coach unnecessary. Then they complete their work with a coach or cut back to monthly or quarterly focus sessions.

Often after an initial month or two, players learn to make powerful use of the relationship and have changed their expectations about what coaching is. They may begin with the assumption that the coach will have the answers, will get the player on “the program” that will lead to personal success. After several weeks, understanding shifts and players begin taking responsibility for the changes they create in their lives. Some individuals find as they get involved with a coach that they do not want to take that responsibility. This may not be the right time for them to work with a coach.

NLP and Coaching

NLP presuppositions, skills, and models serve the coach in many ways. Several of the presuppositions of NLP are particularly useful in establishing the coaching frame. In reading this article, I'm sure you have noticed many of them. Everyone has the resources he or she needs. The worth of an individual is constant, while the behavior can change. The map is not the territory. We respond to our maps, not to any "objective" reality. It is better to have choices than not to have choices. Behavioral flexibility is more useful than having limited behavioral choices. Every behavior has a positive intent. There are no mistakes, only feedback. These presuppositions balance responsibility with non-judgment, and allow the player to evaluate without being self-deprecating.

By living these presuppositions, experienced NLP practitioners naturally embody the attitudes of great coaches... Both assume that the player is capable. Both have experience exploring underlying mental frameworks that either support or inhibit growth. They are less likely to get distracted by "the story," the surface structure. They assist players in finding the deep structure of their experience, where profound change takes place.

NLP skills assist the coach in every session. Since much of coaching takes place on the phone, an NLP coach uses sensory acuity to listen to the player's voice tone and tempo. In addition, the coach knows how to listen at different levels, to the player's message and to the meta-message. The NLP coach listens for familiar language patterns that indicate a player's self-imposed limits, and he/she knows how to generate powerful questions in response to those patterns. The NLP coach can introduce the idea of multiple perspectives through skillful questioning. "What might your future self suggest?" "Is this the critic? What does the dreamer have to say?"

An understanding of NLP models enriches the abilities of a coach. I often begin coaching with outcome specification questions. Eliciting a well-formed outcome helps players define their vague dreams and set up evidence procedures. In many cases, just specifying an outcome generates movement toward it.

I also use a belief audit with players. The belief audit provides questions that help the player examine blocks or challenges. These questions often facilitate breakthroughs. Exploring underlying beliefs is an important aspect of coaching. Beliefs change naturally and organically as people align with their goals and values.

I don't use these models in formal exercises with players. In fact, I may not ask more than one or two of the questions in an entire session. Still, these and other NLP models provide coaches with Cadillac versions of the coach's basic tool, the powerful question. NLP models that generate powerful questions include: timelines, reframing, perceptual positions, the meta-model and logical levels.

NLP coaches might be tempted to use all the tools at their disposal in each call. But while coaching, it is important to take off the NLP expert hat and enter into a state of not knowing. The

NLP coach needs to hold back from trying to figure out which “pattern” would work well for this or that. Our awareness can be our downfall, as we try to push the river in terms of another person’s growth. We know that significant changes can take place in 5 minutes, so let’s just do it. Now!

Many of us became interested in NLP in the first place because we are highly motivated to help others—help them resolve old wounds, realize their dreams, have better lives. In coaching, that desire to help can get in the way as we begin to prescribe, to solve problems for our players. It is also easy to think that we must provide some expertise to be of value to the player, but, paradoxically, the player advances most dramatically when the coach does not provide solutions.

Not knowing where the call is going to go at the onset, letting go of prescriptions and not having an answer is easier said than done. At the same time, the NLP practitioner has been trained in how to access a particular state of mind. The coach can anchor a “not knowing state” with past memories of trustful “not knowing” experiences. The coach can enhance the anchor by creating a personal metaphor for the ideal coaching state. I think of a feather held aloft in the breeze. It is light and responsive. The coaching state can then be accessed with the anchor or metaphor, and utilized to hold a space from which great coaching interactions emerge.

NLP practitioners often develop an unconscious sensitivity to the use of language that informs their intuition. Frequently, the most powerful questions in a coaching session come spontaneously from the coach’s intuition.

The Paradox

There is a paradox inherent in coaching. I often come away from a call with my coach sensing that the coach was unnecessary; I had all the answers; (Precisely) I did all the work. (Yes, you did.) I have had the privilege of working with masterful coaches.

During the past 12 months, I’ve learned to ask for what I want. I’ve taken actions and changed beliefs. It feels like it has been my own doing. It has been. My coaches have not created change for me; rather, they have been confident in my ability to create it for myself. They’ve urged me to trust my own process. And they have held the expectation that I will fulfill my own dreams.

The Roots of Coaching

The roots of professional coaching can be traced back to the Inner Game books of the mid-1970’s. In these books, W. Timothy Gallwey suggested a paradigm shift in sports coaching. He had noticed that players self-corrected when he coached with open questions, instead of catching errors and offering suggestions. In fact, when a player listened to a suggestion and tried, performance diminished. When a player relaxed and held a picture and feeling of the end result, and allowed the body to create that result, the player improved. The system had corrected, without knowing it had ever been in error, unselfconsciously.

The message in *The Inner Game of Golf*, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, and *Inner Skiing* is the same, “...neither mastery nor satisfaction can be found in the playing of any game without

giving some attention to the relatively neglected skills of the inner game. This is the game that takes place in the mind of the player, and it is played against such obstacles as lapses in concentration, nervousness, self-doubt and self-condemnation. In short, it is played to overcome all habits of mind which inhibit excellence in performance.” (The Inner Game of Tennis, Introduction)

As the Inner Game books topped best-seller lists and Gallwey's reputation grew, he found himself speaking more often to business leaders in the U.S. and Europe than to sports audiences. As the principles of the Inner Game were applied to professional development, the value of individual coaching became apparent. Sports coaches took the Inner Game skills into the business environment. Coaching for Performance, by John Whitmore, was one of the first books devoted to the practice of professional coaching.

Whitmore describes the essence of coaching in this way, “Coaching is unlocking a person's potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them.” (p. 5)

Whitmore uses the metaphor of an acorn “...which contains within it all the potential to be a magnificent oak tree. We need nourishment, encouragement and the light to reach towards, but the oakreeness is already within.

About the Author

Jan Elfline began coaching in 1993 and has been a full-time coach since 1995. She is a Certified Professional/Personal Coach (CPPC) and an NLP Master Practitioner and Trainer. In 1998 she was recognized as a Master Certified Coach (MCC) by the International Coach Federation, a designation that is reserved for acknowledged leaders in the field. In addition, she is an experienced educator. She holds a doctorate in Education and she taught at the university level for over ten years. She loves teaching and infuses the training environment with a dynamic blend of insight and humor. In addition, she maintains an active private coaching practice.

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