

COUNSELING TODAY

Counseling vs. Life Coaching

By Jim Paterson - December 15, 2008

The relationship between professional counselors and life coaches is sometimes akin to that of stepsiblings. They are loosely connected because they share the same family name – “helping professional.” And because of that name, those outside the “family” sometimes link the two (like it or not).

However, like stereotypical stepsiblings, although counselors and life coaches are familiar with each other and even share some similar traits, they are sometimes prone to less positive feelings of competition and, at times, distrust.

According to interviews conducted for this article, many professional counselors and life coaches agree that they can coexist – even flourish – and that clients will be better off if both services are available from well-trained practitioners. They generally agree that coaches should be certified through a strong, formal process that requires ample amounts of study and experience. And it is broadly believed that there are limits to what life coaches can and should do with clients, with both sides agreeing that coaches should refer clients to a therapist if a significant psychological problem is discovered.

There is, however, often a larger divide when the discussion turns to how coaching and counseling are defined and what each profession offers.

Coaching advocates say they provide a distinct service that helps clients work on their goals for the future and create a new life path. They say counselors spend more time examining the past, looking for solutions to emotional concerns and seeking a diagnosis required by insurance companies. Coaches suggest that the relationships they establish with clients are also more collegial in nature. Coaches and clients work in a less structured environment as a team rather than setting up a “doctor-patient” relationship.

Lynn Mitchell, a business executive and management consultant for nearly 20 years, is working on a master’s degree in counseling in Chicago but wants to be a life coach. She compares coaching with services provided by personal trainers, nutritionists or massage therapists, who help people with health concerns. “There are a lot of people trying to cope with life adjustments, anxieties and personal challenges,” says Mitchell, a member of the American Counseling Association. “Coaching can help, and there is something positive and preventative about it. Wellness is a trend, and coaching is part of it.”

Not all professional counselors, however, necessarily see the distinction. Although acknowledging the value of what properly trained life coaches offer to clients, many counselors maintain that coaches are simply utilizing theories and techniques taught to every counselor as a matter of course.

“We can do anything a coach can do. It is part of our training, and it is part of how we work with clients,” says Sue Pressman, president-elect of the National Employment Counseling Association, president of Pressman Consulting in Arlington, Va., and a longtime member of ACA. “There are coaches who go through good training programs. I’m sure they are skilled and effective, but that is not to say that counselors aren’t, nor that we don’t offer these services.”

Pressman believes professional counselors need to better market the services they are already qualified to provide that allow them to help individuals in the same way as coaches. “Good coaches should come out and make it clear they are not counselors and refer people for the proper services,” she says. “And it is also only fair that good counselors be encouraged to say that they do coaching.”

Larry Pfaff, an ACA member and associate professor at Spring Arbor University in Spring Arbor, Mich., was in private practice as a counselor for 20 years. He has been vigorous in raising concerns about the coaching profession, particularly when he served on the Michigan Board of Counseling. Based on his study of different websites for coach training and services, Pfaff believes many coaches are not adequately trained and might essentially be practicing counseling without a license.

“There are some good training programs out there, and coaches are often doing some good stuff and meeting important needs,” he says. “But there are also a lot of programs that don’t require much more than a few weeks of training.” Pfaff adds that he is also often cynical about the success some life coaches proclaim to have. “I think a lot of it is a placebo effect,” he says. “Clients pay money – and often a lot of money – to coaches, so they think they must be better.”

Despite these differences of opinion, most of the individuals contacted by Counseling Today agreed on one thing: A future in which life coaches and professional counselors can learn to coexist and collaborate is best for both professions – and their clients.

What is coaching?

The International Coach Federation (ICF), which claims to be the largest coaching credentialing and support organization in the world, defines coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.

Professional coaches provide an ongoing partnership designed to help clients produce fulfilling results in their personal and professional lives. Coaches help people improve their performances 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. The coach's job is to provide support to enhance the skills, resources and creativity that the client already has."

Patrick Williams, a psychologist for 28 years who moved into the coaching profession in 1990, helped to found ICF in 1995. He sees coaching as an "evolutionary step" among the helping professions and believes coaching's definition and boundaries will become clearer with time. He further says that coaching is "the hottest trend to hit the self-improvement business" and regards coaching as being clearly rooted in well-accepted theory.

"Adler and Jung saw individuals as the creators and artists of their lives and frequently involved their clients in goal setting, life planning and inventing their future – all tenets and approaches in today's coaching," says Williams, who also points to Carl Rogers' work with client-centered therapy as a "significant precursor to coaching." He says coaching was born of advances in the helping professions that were then blended with consulting practices and organizational and personal development training trends. Coaching takes the best of all those approaches, he contends, to provide a new type of assistance.

An ACA member, Williams is likewise a strong supporter of counseling and does not believe that the emergence of coaching poses a threat. "Traditional therapy will not become extinct but will increasingly offer help primarily to those who need clinical services," he says. "Therapy is about uncovering and recovering, while coaching is about discovering."

Edward Colozzi, a career development expert and author of the book *Creating Careers With Confidence*, says although coaching has its limitations, its practice harkens back to times in many cultures when spiritual leaders, shamans, mentors or others in the community offered informal guidance. "It is, in a way, a back-to-the-future paradigm shift," Colozzi says. "A life coach is like a mentor – a person who joins us on a journey. Many people have performed that role in the past. But in a society such as ours that starts to have rules and regulations ... that may be where counseling was born. Now, perhaps, we are seeing a return to something more basic.

In the early 1970s, Colozzi says that he, along with others, pioneered “career life” counseling, which may have been the precursor to coaching. Today, the distinction between the two is often described as a difference in thinking about the significance of the past.

“Coaching is more focused on the present and the future,” says Paula Padgett Baylor, a graduate student adviser in Eastern University’s Counseling and Psychology Department in St. Davids, Pa. A trained counselor and coach who works in both areas and trains professional counselors to use their coaching skills, Baylor is an ACA member who has been in private practice for 10 years.

She explains that coaches generally work on four areas with clients:

- Defining goals
- Formulating a plan that will use the client’s skills
- Holding the client accountable for progress
- Providing structure, encouragement and support

Through coaching, clients can learn how to use healthy and helpful ways of navigating through life,” she says.

What’s the difference?

Both professional counselors and coaches see similarities between the two fields, but also draw sharp distinctions. “There is a spectrum of need,” Mitchell says. “Currently, counseling focuses on moving people from a state of dysfunction to one of being functional. But there are many people who are very functional, yet maybe not highly functional or achieving their full potential. The only place they could turn is the self-help section of the bookstore. Coaching provides an alternative.”

“Coaching has a role, a narrower focus than counseling,” says ACA member April Summers, a counselor at a maximum-security prison in McLoud, Okla. Summers has herself used a coach and believes coaching is an important helping profession, although one with a limited reach. “It helps clients set manageable goals and reach them, especially someone who doesn’t know where to start or how to tackle a big change in their life,” she says.

Most counselors who contacted Counseling Today for this article said they see some similarities between coaching and popular counseling theory. Coaching’s emphasis on setting goals and focusing on the future reminds some of solution-focused counseling. Others see the work of Carl Rogers in coaching’s suggestion that clients themselves have the capability to find solutions to the issues that confront them.

But other counselors, such as Summers, are concerned by the prospect of coaches overreaching. “I think good coaching should start with the disclaimer that coaching is limited and that more serious, deeper issues may need therapy,” she says.

Peter Moskowitz, an ACA member who coaches health care professionals and is the executive director of the Center for Professional and Personal Renewal in Palo Alto, Calif., concurs that coaches need to understand the difference between the services they provide and counseling. “I do not take on clients who, in my judgment, have serious mental/emotional problems – problems such as substance abuse, major depression and personality disorders,” he says. “When I suspect any of those issues, I refer the client to an appropriate mental health professional for a thorough evaluation and resume work once the client is emotionally stable.”

Stephanie Baffone, an ACA member and Licensed Mental Health Counselor with her own practice in Newark, Del., has worked with a coach personally and says she found the process helpful “but only in regard to setting life goals and working on some of the more superficial challenges I run into while working on those goals. From my limited experience, the opportunity for psychological exploration is not inherent in the life coaching process.”

Williams wholeheartedly agrees that coaches should steer clear of certain areas and be quick to refer clients to the appropriate mental health professional. And he doesn’t view the client bases for coaching and counseling as being interchangeable. Coaches work with healthy clients who are striving to improve their circumstances, he says, and counselors work with persons needing help and hoping to identify dysfunction or trauma to heal and resolve old pain.

“Counselors assume emotions are a symptom of something wrong; coaches assume they are natural and can be normalized,” Williams contends. “Therapists diagnose and provide professional expertise and guidelines, and coaches help clients identify the challenges, then work in partnership with clients to obtain their goals.”

Another difference? Progress is often slow and painful in counseling, but it is typically “rapid and usually enjoyable” in coaching, according to Williams. Again, he attributes this to the differences between the client base of each profession. “(Clients who seek coaching) aren’t usually coming with a dysfunction or because they are in pain,” he says.

That distinction is what drew Mitchell to coaching, where she hopes to provide “wellness counseling and personal coaching.” She draws the boundary line as such: “If you are ill, see a counselor. If you are focused on prevention and maximizing your emotional health, see a coach.”

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Michael Walsh, president of the Counseling Association for Humanistic Education and Development, a division of ACA, says the boundaries may not be that clear. “Like many things in life, rarely are things so simple. Clearly, there are counselors who focus on prevention, maximizing emotional health and achieving peak performance,” he says. “The difference is that counselors also have the additional training to help clients when things are not going so well.”

“I think that both coaching and counseling can be an incredibly beneficial process for folks,” Walsh continues. “The key here is the training of the counselor or coach and the personal fit between the client and the counselor or coach. I would encourage folks to first be sure that any professional has the requisite training and credentials in order to ensure the quality of the services provided. This is especially important in fields in which there is limited regulation and oversight, such as coaching. Then, I would encourage folks to look for a good personal fit with the style, approach and training of the provider. We know, based on the literature in both peak performance work and in counseling, that personal connections often foster the greatest motivation toward success.”

Straddling the line

Not every counselor would say they are focused on “dysfunction.” Many ACA members take a “wellness” perspective with clients and see their main purpose as helping individuals to reach their full potential. But as Williams points out, many people are reluctant to see professional counselors for any reason because there is still a prevailing notion that only individuals with serious problems seek out counseling or “therapy.” Young people, in particular, are much more likely to want to see a coach, he says.

Diane Bast, who received her counseling degree after 22 years in human resources and now practices coaching in Elm Grove, Wis., says professional counselors are often faced with a “mental health” label and an insurance reimbursement process that requires assignment of a diagnosis. “I see a lot of people in my practice who really want coaching and more direction, and they balk at having to fill out all kinds of paperwork implying mental problems,” says Bast, a member of ACA. “They want to talk about their careers and what is holding them back or causing them problems on the job.”

Joey Harman was a teacher before getting her master’s in counseling. She was working in a community mental health agency and in private practice when she decided to get her coaching certification through the MentorCoach program based in Bethesda, Md. Like Williams, she believes coaches have a unique role to play as helping professionals, primarily working with people who are generally healthy but still need support. Harman, an ACA member, says her understanding of basic counseling techniques makes her a better coach, and she still practices in both fields, although she keeps them entirely separate.

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Pfaff believes most professional counselors are already qualified to also coach clients without additional training. “Counselors can use parts of what they had in training – some cognitive therapy and solution-focused work and a little Carl Rogers. Most counselors with very little other work can do (coaching). Eighty percent already are.” He says counselors simply need to do a better job of defining their expertise, highlighting their coachlike services and marketing themselves to the public.

But professional counselors who offer coaching services should understand that, legally, they are still practicing counselors. “Be aware that licensing boards do not necessarily differentiate between counseling and coaching activities,” says ACA Chief Professional Officer David Kaplan. “Your licensing board may well view your coaching as falling under their scope of practice. Therefore, you should fulfill all mandated state licensing requirements – for example, obtaining informed consent, reporting child or elder abuse, etc. – with your coaching clients just as you do with your counseling clients.”

Because of the lack of differentiation, professional counselors who conduct “coaching” can have complaints lodged against them by their coaching clients with state counseling licensing boards. In addition, coaching clients can sue counselors for malpractice and attempt to hold them to the standards of Licensed Professional Counselors, even if the counselor was providing services as a “coach.” The bottom line, Kaplan says, is that counselors who identify themselves as “coaches” to clients must still maintain the same standards as professional counselors.

Coach training

Some professional counselors are using their high level of training and skill to also dip their toes in the coaching pool; others are concerned that too many unqualified or underqualified “coaches” are diluting the professionalism and true value of the helping professions. Pfaff, for one, complains that coaches charge considerably more than most counselors – \$200 to \$300 an hour – even though they don’t necessarily have the same level of training or experience. He suggests strict certification laws should be established for the coaching profession and that some coaches should be investigated for practicing without a counseling license.

Jason Newsome, director of clinical services for Family Counseling Connection in Charleston, W.Va., agrees. He claims there are no repercussions for ethical breaches in the coaching profession, no standards of practice and no guarantee of competence. “Life coaches are permitted to practice without a license,” says Newsome, a member of ACA and president of the West Virginia Association for Spiritual, Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling.

Newsome also believes that counselors have allowed “too many ad hoc services to be provided under the guise of counseling, diluting the value of the services we provide. As a profession, we have to be able and willing to stand up for ourselves.”

In the past, ACA has not addressed the issue of coaching, but President Colleen Logan says she believes it is now an issue to which the association should pay attention. “We’ll need to study it,” she says. “Certainly, coaching is a valuable service when offered by well-trained, caring people, but the public should be protected from those who aren’t qualified or those who offer counseling services they aren’t trained for.”

Williams and other coaches say the coaching phenomenon is market driven – that the public wants and needs this type of service. Coaching proponents also say that most legitimate training programs describe the boundaries of the coaching profession and make it clear that coaches should not offer counseling services. The ICF has three levels of accreditation:

- Associate Certified Coach – Requires 60 hours of coach-specific training and 100 hours of coaching experience with at least eight clients
- Professional Certified Coach – Requires 120 hours of coach-specific training and 750 hours of coaching experience with at least 25 clients
- Master Certified Coach – Requires 200 hours of coach-specific training and 2,500 hours of coaching experience with at least 35 clients

The ICF also sets objectives for ethical and professional behavior.

One program whose requirements for certification meet those set by ICF is Martha Beck’s Life Coach Training, which takes 39 weeks and costs about \$6,000 for those wishing to be certified. Beck’s training for life coaches includes a prework homework packet that must first be completed, followed by six 90-minute classes, nine 60-minute classes and 15 75-minute classes, all taught by Beck, who holds a doctorate in sociology from Harvard University, has written and lectured broadly on coaching and is a contributor to Oprah Winfrey’s O magazine.

All classes require completion of homework and include 25 students. Certification requires completion of 20 paid hours of coaching and passing a written test, in addition to being interviewed by Beck.

Williams’ program, the Institute for Life Coach Training, requires students to pass a 40-hour foundational course as well as a written exam. Other requirements include 50 hours of coaching, along with two 20-hour practicums with coaching sessions, an ethics class and 42 hours of elective courses.

Other coaching programs, however, require far less training. Pfaff and other professional counselors urge that something be implemented to ensure that coaches receive a set amount of minimum training. “My bigger concern here is that the next step might be a state legislature passing a coaching license law,” Pfaff says. “What’s to stop them from getting a 10-hour training program that would qualify them for a license? Then we will wish we had done something about it.”

Some counselors contacted for this article also said that, given some of the overlapping characteristics of coaching and counseling, they would like to see ACA play a guiding role in coaching’s future development, perhaps by stepping in to offer certification to coaches or by giving its blessing to some set of minimum standards. The main concern expressed by professional counselors, however, was that coaches need to be more closely regulated so they will not be tempted to cross the line and offer counseling services unless properly trained and certified.

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