

What is coaching?

SUMMARY

- Origins of the term 'coaching'
- The principles of coaching
- Types of coaching

Origins of the term 'coaching'

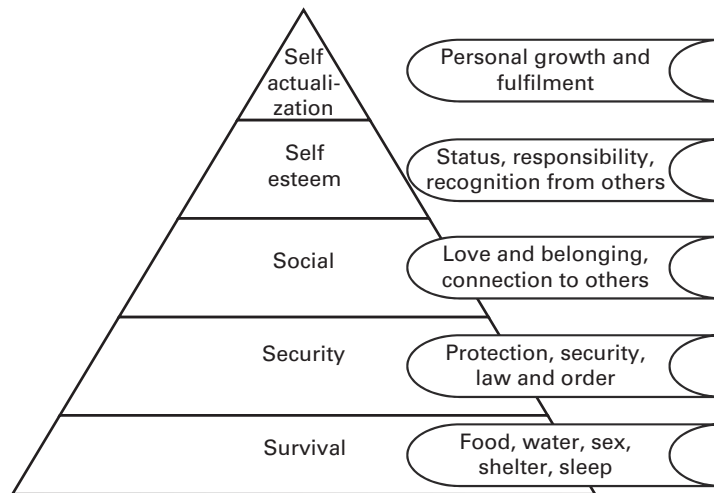
In the free Western world of the 1950s, a post-war zeitgeist embraced a new sense of optimism, self-responsibility and focus on the future. Over the next three decades, these trends showed up in psychology, business, sport, culture, politics and parenting.

The twentieth century saw rapid developments in the field of psychology. Until the 1940s, the focus was on identifying problems and fixing them, notably through the work of Freud and Jung. A major shift then occurred through the work of psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and Fritz Perls.

Maslow's widely publicized 'hierarchy of needs' (1968), shown on the next page, depicted the stages through which people have to pass in order to reach what Maslow called 'self-actualization', meaning the fulfilment of the best that a person could be in terms of their own unique potential (Maslow, 1998).

Maslow chose to study exemplary individuals such as Albert Einstein rather than mentally ill or neurotic people, writing that: 'The study of crippled, stunted, immature, and unhealthy specimens can yield only a cripple psychology and a cripple philosophy.'

FIGURE 1.1 Maslow's hierarchy of needs



The difference between this approach and what went before is that Maslow looked at what was right about human beings rather than what was wrong. In this lies one of the key principles of coaching: focus on the solution, not the problem.

Perls' Gestalt therapy (1951 Perls, 1973) focused on creating awareness in people. Its principles were:

- Live now, stay in the present
- Live here, be with the present
- Stop imagining, experience reality
- Stop unnecessary thinking
- Express, rather than manipulating, explaining, justifying, or judging
- Give in to unpleasantness; do not restrict your awareness
- Accept no 'should' or 'ought' other than your own
- Take full responsibility for your own actions, feelings and thoughts
- Surrender to being who you are right now.

Therein lie the two principles of 'awareness' and 'responsibility', later identified by Sir John Whitmore as the essence of good coaching (Whitmore, 2017).

During the 1980s, solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) (Shazer, 1988) was developed through the collaboration of several psychologists, including Steve de Shazer and Milton Erickson. As its name infers, SFBT encouraged people to look to the future and take action, rather than analyze and therefore

remain limited by the past. SFBT's methodology is illustrated by its 'miracle question', of which there exist many variations:

Suppose our meeting is over, you go home, do whatever you planned to do for the rest of the day. And then, sometime in the evening, you get tired and go to sleep. And in the middle of the night, when you are fast asleep, a miracle happens and all the problems that brought you here today are solved just like that. But since the miracle happened overnight nobody is telling you that the miracle happened. When you wake up the next morning, how are you going to start discovering that the miracle happened? ... What else are you going to notice? ... What else?

At the same time as these later developments in psychology, there were extraordinary changes taking place in the field of commerce. Ricardo Semler, for example, turned control of his multinational organization Semco over to its employees, even allowing people to set their own salaries (Semler, 2001). Andy Law practised a similar style of management when he formed St Luke's Advertising Agency (Law, 1999). In education, responsibility for learning started to be devolved on to the pupils, sometimes at the expense of a formal curriculum.

Meanwhile, whole new areas of personal self-development emerged, encouraging people to create their own solutions for their physical, mental and spiritual health. This trend occurred both in the field of fitness, with the proliferation of gyms and the spread of practices such as yoga, Tai Chi and aerobics, and in personal wellbeing, which spawned a multitude of books starting with Dale Carnegie's 1956 bestseller, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, and including *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, *The Female Eunuch*, *Games People Play*, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* and numerous guides on how to be happy, including one by the Dalai Lama.

The principles now identified as coaching (which are explored later in this chapter) were evident to some extent in many of these areas and have been particularly identified in the writings of psychologists, especially organizational, over the last 40 years. However, the only direct link between these principles and the word 'coaching' that I have been able to find came from the sports arena, and offers an answer to the question of why the term, with its inappropriate implication of instruction, has been applied at all.

Tim Gallwey was a Harvard graduate of the 1970s who became captain of the tennis team while on sabbatical. Gallwey noticed that when he left the court, his students tended to improve their game more quickly than when he was there to instruct them. Already a disciple of spirituality and psychology, Gallwey explored this paradox and developed a series of

questions, statements and exercises to support the self-teaching process. One of his key actions was to apply ‘directionality’ – identifying one’s goal before starting out (Gallwey, 1986).

During the 1980s, Gallwey’s work was embraced by English baronet, Sir John Whitmore (1937–2017), who in 1992 published *Coaching for Performance*, a book now regarded as the ‘bible’ of coaching and available in 19 languages. Whitmore came of age in the 1960s both as a member of the elite British aristocracy and as a racing driver who moved in international circles, counting the Hollywood actor Steve McQueen among his friends. Then he discovered the Esalen Institute in California and his life changed profoundly and acquired a deeper direction. Esalen was founded in 1962 as a series of encounter groups and an extraordinary number of influential thinkers, psychotherapists, spiritual leaders and writers became involved, including Fritz Perls, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Virginia Satir, Aldous Huxley, Tim Leary, Arnold Toynbee, Deepak Chopra, R.D. Laing, Susan Sontag, Joan Baez and Ken Kesey (Wildflower, 2013). Whitmore is quoted as recently saying that Esalen was vital to the development of coaching: ‘That time and Esalen were crucial [to the coaching profession] and that is where, in a way, it all started’ (Wildflower, 2013).

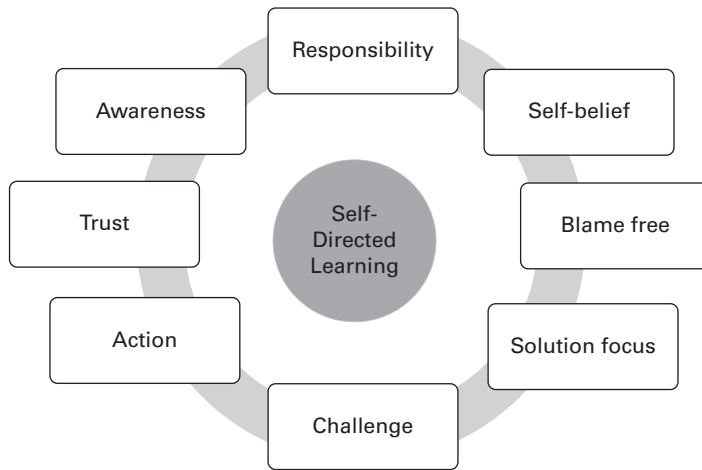
Whitmore combined this personal development journey with Gallwey’s techniques and brought the package to Europe, by founding schools for skiing and tennis that used the new approach of self-directed learning. At one point, his team was asked to provide a day of tennis coaching by a large organization that wanted its managers to incorporate the ‘Inner Game’ approach into their leadership styles. Whitmore termed this ‘performance coaching’ to differentiate it from conventional sports coaching, and gave his book a similar title.

And this, it seems, is how the term ‘performance coaching’, to which the fields of psychology, business and self-development have all contributed so much, originated.

The principles of coaching

It is unsurprising that there has been some confusion over the application of a word that conventionally means ‘instructing’ to an area whose guiding principle has been described as ‘self-directed learning’. The overall principles of coaching may be summed up as shown in the diagram below.

FIGURE 1.2 The principles of coaching



Awareness: Awareness of self and others is a key aspect of coaching and gives rise to many other benefits. The coach provides a space where clients can uncover knowledge that already lies within, but that may have been obscured by the turmoil of fear, confusion or limitations imposed by other people's agendas.

Responsibility: A core principle of coaching is self-responsibility, meaning being in charge of one's own decisions – most people prefer this to being told what to do. In terms of leadership, it means treating people with respect and providing opportunities for their development wherever possible.

Self-belief: There are two components involved in building confidence in people: firstly, allowing them the space to practise, stretch themselves and make mistakes; secondly, giving them recognition for their achievements. Confidence that we can do something is a key factor in achieving it. Giving people praise builds their belief that they can achieve more and raises the energy required to do that. It is important to remember that all praise must be authentic, specific and deserved, and this will be covered in Chapter 24, 'Coaching feedback'.

Blame free: Children cannot learn to walk without falling over. Imagine what would happen if a child was scolded every time it fell – it would stop trying, and all the potential that might have grown out of that ability

to walk (or run or play sport) would be lost. Now apply this to the workplace, schoolroom or family: imagine the potential that might be sacrificed if people were feeling too discouraged to take risks. When mistakes are treated as opportunities for learning, individuals are motivated to try again and profit from experience.

Solution focus: When we dwell on a problem, it seems to get bigger and drains our energy. When we focus on the solution, the problem shrinks and we find we have more energy to deal with it. This is why solution focus works in coaching – as well as in other areas of life.

Challenge: Most people enjoy being challenged and stretched within a supportive and encouraging environment. When they overcome a frightening hurdle like public speaking, or winning a new job, they walk away from the experience with renewed energy and an urge to take action. Coaches and coaching managers know how to provide exactly such an environment.

Action: Coaching uncovers new perspectives and insights for its clients. Coachees who were previously stuck start to see a way forward and are able to map out a plan of action that they could not see clearly before.

Trust: Without trust between coach and coachee, no real coaching can take place. Trust is pivotal to the coaching relationship and is one of the most common reasons why some managers can successfully coach their reports and others cannot. While techniques exist that can enhance a sense of rapport in the moment, there are no quick fixes in an ongoing relationship – managers have to earn the trust of their reports over a period of time. However, if the intention is there, coaching skills can enable this to happen quite quickly.

Self-directed learning: This is the core principle of coaching and behaving in a coaching style. Coaches believe that people already have the answers they need, but these answers may be hidden, as described in ‘Awareness’ above. The coach’s function is to provide a space where people can think more clearly, look at situations from new perspectives, and uncover inner resources that may have become obscured over time.

Types of coaching

Adding to the confusion around the term ‘coaching’ is a proliferation of categories, such as executive, business, career or personal coaching. However, these are all based on the same principles. The term ‘life coaching’ is less in

favour now, as it has been used to describe forms of personal help (not necessarily any less valuable than coaching) which do not apply these principles.

The process of coaching remains the same regardless of the context. Some coaches come from a psychology background and others through business or education; all benefit by being on a continual learning path, during which they can learn new models, skills and tools from other disciplines that will enhance their practices.

Happily, coaching is no longer limited to the types of senior managers and middle-class professionals who can afford to pay for it. Many charities are now hosting coaching programmes, having realized how effective the process can be in helping people to save themselves, and I share our experiences in this sector in Chapter 15 ‘Coaching in charities for social transformation’, and a new type of ‘social’ business is appearing where profits are made for the owners while the business is also benefiting others.

Coaching programmes are becoming widespread in education, with many teachers being trained in how to use the skills not only in the classroom but for interpersonal relationships and leadership issues as well. Some accounts of this are given in Chapter 14: ‘Coaching in schools’.

Other specialities have grown from the movements and zeitgeist I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, including positive psychology, Appreciative Inquiry (Chapter 45), Clean Language (Chapter 28), Systemic Coaching (Chapter 31), Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Mindfulness (Chapter 47), which draws on ancient spiritual practices but is especially relevant today in terms of relieving stress.

Confusion continues to arise in terms of the semantics used to describe coaching, counselling, mentoring and some similar fields, so I am exploring these in depth in the next chapter.