



Coaching Demystified

by **Eric Kaufmann**

Exactly what is coaching? Professional coaches do it, HR professionals do it, peers do it, managers do it. But what is it?

Since I began coaching leaders and professionals in 1998, I have consistently been asked to define coaching. However, because formal coaching is so new, the field does not yet have a universally agreed-upon definition, and this deficit limits its value and utilization.

While coaching is growing in demand, due to the results it produces, there is great latitude for interpreting what it is. In a Harvard Business Review article "The Wild West of Executive Coaching," the authors cited a lack of industry standards for coaching that makes this "wild west" challenging to tame and navigate.

My working definition, and the explanation that follows, has helped hundreds of leaders make coaching both more accessible and operational.

"Coaching is a collaborative and focused performance-improvement dialogue based on disclosure and feedback, and deepened by curiosity, courage, and commitment."

Coaching is distinct from disciplining, counseling, and delegating. While it offers a powerful problem-solving platform, it serves best for teaching, developing, and performance improvement. In the course of the ongoing coaching conversations, both parties are working together toward predetermined goals and performance improvement.

- **Collaborative:** The best coaching seems to arise when the relationship is one of equals. It can be challenging for managers and reports to set aside their power differential, but once they decide to work together, coaching becomes easier. Consultants and mentors are subject-matter experts; they are expected to be prescriptive and directive. Coaches, however expert they may be about the content, partner with the client for discovery, creativity, and execution.
- **Focused:** Effective coaches use restraint. It is important to focus on collaboratively agreed objectives. If the coaching sessions take on an exclusively coach-driven agenda, the trust and rapport will be weakened, or even destroyed. Additionally, the coach must fight the "rush to closure," an impulse to provide the fastest and simplest solution. The gift of coaching is developing others; allow time for the coachee to think, explore, and experiment.
- **Feedback dependant:** Fulfilling, effective, learning conversations require feedback. Both parties must agree to speak their minds, and not mind read. Assumptions, expectations, and rationalizations are the building blocks of failed relationships. Give and elicit information in order to reach clear goals, uncover blind spots and barriers, and design effective action plans.

- **Disclosure:** Exchanging opinions, beliefs, and feelings immediately lessens threats or fears. Disclosure increases the probability that the skills and resources of coach and coachee can be focused on the work at hand. Disclosure affords openness to information, opinions and new ideas about oneself as well as about specific processes. As less energy is tied up in being defensive there is greater likelihood of satisfaction with the work, and more involvement with improving performance.
- **Curiosity:** A good coach has experience, ideas, opinions, and processes. A great coach has all these and an open mind; a beginners mind. Curiosity is a mental orientation toward new ideas and creative solutions. Even when the coach knows what to do, intentionally suspending the knowledge in favor of curiosity can produce novel or unique ideas and solutions.
- **Courage:** Wherever coaching takes place, so does change. And wherever there is change there is discomfort, anxiety, and fear. A good coach has the courage to instigate change and the compassion to support a change-anxious person.
- **Commitment:** Commitment is ongoing. Coaching rarely happens in 20 minutes. Time and multiple points of contact make coaching come alive. A single conversation can be insightful, motivating, or educational. Coaching for performance and change takes as long as it takes to learn, and that means repetition, patient instruction, and regular review.

Coaching challenges people to reach beyond their comfort zone, and challenges coaches to be attentive and respect the pace, intelligence, and intuition of others. It produces great results not because it's easy, but because of the discipline and courage that the coach brings and the coachee develops.

Eric Kaufmann is president of Insight Consulting, an executive coaching and leadership development firm in San Diego, Calif. He can be reached at www.insightcoach.com or 619.668.8500