



The Development of Professional Standards in Coaching

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Abstract. The author argues that we have reached a point where in order to protect the discipline of coaching, the reputation of good coaches and the interests of the clients where some common understanding needs to be created. And with that professional standards. In “professional standards” two areas are involved: the professionalism that any practitioner should bring to their craft and the standards specific to the craft. The first are easier to gain consensus on than the second. There are two things specifically that give rise to the need. The first is the lack of a commonly held definition of coaching and the second is the quality of coaching. As for the definition there are numerous, different approaches, some psychologically based, others practically or experientially based, still others philosophically or spiritually based and worst of those born of some kind of homespun “wisdom”. And there is the vast divergence in the quality of the coaching, from the truly excellent to the truly awful. And the mediocre in between. How can it be that it is still possible to act as a coach with no formal training or, as is the case for so many, to be operating on the basis of a training program attended ten years ago? The author explores the controversy that, to date, the drive for professional standards has been driven by independent self-appointed organisations. While there are many well-intentioned people behind these organisations who give considerable time and energy to promoting the cause of coaching, the nature of these organisations is such that there is an inherent problem that is difficult to get past. In order to have a voice such an organisation must have large numbers of members so they are inevitably inclusive, anyone can join. Inclusivity and excellence do not make easy bedfellows. Suggested part of the solution is to have on-going accreditation, that each coach should have a renewable license to coach, valid for a maximum of two years. The assessment would be made by a peer group who would speak with clients and player/coaches and either attend sessions or review recordings. The assessment would need to be carried out against an agreed framework of standards. I think of no simpler means that would, in a very short period of time transform the experience of coaching for players and clients.

Keywords: standards in coaching, innovations in coaching, discipline of coaching.

There is a very strong part of me that is thoroughly against the idea of standards in coaching. I was involved in coaching almost from the very beginning and then as it emerged as a legitimate professional discipline. What drove many of the colleagues in those early days was desire and intent for each individual we touched to express themselves in their own unique fashion. That is a position in life which is about as far away from compliance as you can possibly get. And standards, if they are to be meaningful, require compliance.

However we have reached a point where in order to protect the discipline of coaching, the reputation of good coaches and the interests of the clients where some common understanding needs to be created. And with that professional standards. And in “professional standards” I am reading two things: the professionalism that any practitioner should bring to their craft and the standards specific to the craft. The first are easier to gain consensus on than the second.

There are two things specifically that give rise to the need. The first is the lack of a commonly held definition of coaching and the second is the quality of coaching. As for the definition you don't have to read many books or talk to many coached to find out that there are numerous, different approaches, some psychologically based, others practically or experientially based, still others philosophically or spiritually based and worst of those born of some kind of homespun “wisdom”. And then there is the vast divergence in the quality of the coaching, from the truly excellent to the truly awful. And the mediocre in between. How can it be that it is still possible to act as a coach with no formal training or, as is the case for so many, to be operating on the basis of a training program attended ten years ago?

This scenario is compounded by the fact that, to date, the drive for professional standards has been driven by independent self-appointed organisations. While I know that there are many well-intentioned people behind these organisations who give considerable time and energy to promoting the cause of coaching, the nature of these organisations is such that there is an inherent problem that is difficult to get past. In order to have a voice such an organisation must have large numbers of members so they are inevitably inclusive, anyone can join. Inclusivity and excellence do not make easy bedfellows.

Putting all that together there is a real need to do something creative that will promote and protect the profession. But before I write a few words about that let me sound a note of caution. Coaching is in danger too of becoming very conservative – there is not much innovation going on. In the UK the standard is something like six to eight coaching sessions of an hours duration over about six months. It is most unlikely that this format really meets the needs of every player/coachee. I have a colleague in the UK, (Glen McCoy author of Guerilla Coaching) who frequently coaches people for seven minutes at the beginning of each day. I would add that few coaches have really found new ways of using the web as part of coaching. So any standards must not inhibit innovation and would ideally promote it.

My next point is slightly different. I think too many coaches believe that they can coach anyone in any situation. To some degree this is true – if the coach has a strong non-directive' coaching approach. But if we really want to bring excellence to coaching then I am increasingly of the mind that we should have a particular area of expertise. I was asked recently to coach someone on their public speaking skills. This is something I can do quite well. I also happen to have two colleagues in my network who are brilliant in this area so I referred the client to my colleagues.

It is not my task here to define professional standards for coaches – my intention is to support the initiative. However I do have a suggestion. I am convinced that part of the solution is to have on-going accreditation, that each coach should have a renewable license to coach, valid for a maximum of two years. The assessment would be made by a peer group who would speak with clients and player/coaches and either attend sessions or review recordings. Of course the assessment would need to be carried out against an agreed framework of standards. I think of no simpler means that would, in a very short period of time transform the experience of coaching for players and clients.