

Recently one of my past clients told me, “I’d like to refer you to other people, but I don’t know how to describe what you do.” I realized that lots of people might have questions about coaching, so I’ll try to answer them here.

What is coaching?

Coaching is a creative partnership with your client aimed to design and implement specific, meaningful changes in your client’s personal and professional life.

This is the definition on the Erickson International website, and it gives an idea of the intention of coaching. I think it’s important to also say what coaching is *not*. Despite popular thought, coaching is not: therapy, consulting, advice-giving, or mentoring. I sometimes end up doing those things for my clients throughout the course of our relationship, but that’s not the true intention of coaching.

The intention of my coaching process is to help my client find their own answers through what they already know. It’s also to shift their thinking, bring them to solutions that work for them, and let them realize the strengths and abilities they bring to their lives.

So what does coaching look like when it’s happening?

Before we meet, I ask the client to complete a questionnaire that guides them through some goal setting, and some reflection on the barriers they face in meeting their goals.

When we meet (virtually) I start by reviewing the questionnaire, asking questions, and building trust. One of the key parts of coaching is asking powerful questions. I will ask things like “Why is that meaningful to you?” “What will be different when you achieve that?” “How will you know if you’ve been successful?”

As our time together progresses, I may lead the client through exercises that are designed to help them see the situation from different angles, tap into their own knowledge, and let them create a compelling vision.

We’ll also focus on action steps. I don’t give homework, but I might ask my client to observe themselves in the situation they want to change, or try a different approach to a difficult person and see what happens. I might also help them set goals to make things happen. For example, I had a client who wanted to add volunteer work to her life. Her action steps were to contact the organization, talk to someone about possible opportunities, and eventually commit to a volunteer shift.

In that case, my client wanted me to be her accountability partner, and that approach helped her meet a goal. I don’t judge a client if they don’t meet the goal, but I might ask questions like “Why do you think that action step didn’t happen?” “What would need to change to make that happen?”

Sometimes my client needs a thinking partner. She has an issue or situation that seems tangled, and she needs to talk it out to separate the threads and understand what’s really happening, how she feels about it, and how it might change. Talking to an objective person can be a very powerful way to understand your own role in the situation, and that’s where change can occur. A thinking partner can also help you make a decision, move through a change, or find closure.

Coaching requires a lot of vulnerability! How can you reassure someone that there is no judgement involved?

One of the foundations of coaching is an absence of judgement. If I'm judging you, I can't be curious, and if I'm not curious, I won't think of powerful questions to ask you. There's no room in the process for judgement.

The principles of my coaching practice are:

- The client has positive intentions, no matter their actions.
- The client is ok – they don't need to be fixed.
- Change is inevitable.
- The client has all the resources they need.
- The client will make the best choices for them.

Who can benefit most from coaching?

The ideal coaching client is open to exploring options and solutions. They are growth-oriented, curious, and they have a little (or a lot) of courage. They can be patient with themselves and they have a positive outlook. The things that don't matter: their job, their education, their location, their history. None of that is important to being coached successfully.

I hope this sheds some light on the coaching process.