

# The psychology of COACHING

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Over the past 10 years, Australia's corporate landscape has slowly been changing. These days, when an executive is faced with a particularly confronting challenge, or feels he or she is 'not up to the job' at hand, a therapeutic beer or two at the pub with friends is not the option of choice. Instead, the stressed executive picks up the phone and calls in the services of their 'secret weapon'—the coach.

Business and Lite Coaching is not exactly new, but it is becoming the new 'buzz' word in Australian businesses and general society. Coaching clinics are popping up on street corners across the country as the executive and the average Australian individual realises the benefits of having their own coach at hand. In Australia alone, there are hundreds of coaches who specialise in business and life coaching and some psychologists have been quick to realise that as specialists in human behaviour, they are the ideal candidates for the new wave of clientele who want their own special breed of personal trainer.

Coaching originated in the United States in the late 1980s when a group of psychologists began to see more and more clients who didn't have a particular problem or issue—they just wanted to get more out of their lives, but didn't know how to achieve it. Instead of simply providing these clients with solutions, the psychologists began to

teach the clients how to find their own answers—and so coaching was born.

These days, coaches are everywhere. They're in multi-national companies shoring up executives and they're in middle management—in fact at every rung of the ladder—helping workers learn to cope with feelings of under-performance and guiding their charges in how to improve performance, budgets and decision making skills. They teach time management skills, how to balance work and personal issues, how to deal with conflict, how to identify personal stumbling blocks, and how to develop proven methods of strategic thinking. They're even on the streets advising how best to manage life at the most basic levels, like child rearing, marriage and other personal relationships.

According to psychologist Tony Grant, Director of the Coaching Psychology Unit within the Department of Psychology at Sydney University, a coach is part personal consultant, part parent, part sounding board, part manager and part friend — not to mention part therapist. The coach's job is to encourage, praise, direct, motivate and train. A session usually involves a telephone consultation, although increasingly 'sessions' are conducted via email, in keeping with the clients' ever-busy lifestyle. Similar to the notion of a sports coach who works with athletes to maximise their chances of winning, so too does a 'business' or 'life' coach work with a client to foster change

and transformation in areas of life with which they are unhappy.

**“A coach will help the client alter dysfunctional thoughts and behaviours and develop successful means of achieving goals,” Tony says. “The key role of the coaching psychologist is to facilitate the learning process and instruct the client in how to facilitate change.”**

“Essentially, coaching psychology is concerned with the research and practice of coaching. Coaching psychology is basically a cross between counselling and organisational psychology. Where clinical psychologists tend to work with clients who are distressed or dysfunctional, coaching psychologists work with well-functioning clients, also using theoretically grounded and scientifically validated techniques to help them reach their goals in the personal and business lives,” he says.

Naturally, Tony is a staunch advocate of coaching psychology and could arguably be labelled Australia's foremost coaching psychology expert. The coaching psychology unit at the University of Sydney is the only one of its kind in the world and has been the recipient of praise from all corners of the globe. He is currently being touted by several international training institutions for licensing rights to the Unit's program and sees the university's commitment to coaching psychology as the best thing to happen to psychology in a great many years.

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## The psychology of COACHING ... continued

"We offer postgraduate degree programs in coaching and coaching psychology which are designed to align with the guidelines established by the International Coaching Federation (ICF)," Tony says. The programs also meet the requirements for ICF coach accreditation but as yet, the courses are not accredited for APS membership purposes.

The University of Sydney courses follow three main themes: behavioural science, concerned with developing critical understandings and applied applications of the behavioural and cognitive scientific underpinnings of coaching; the applied 'art' of coaching which covers the core coaching microskills, self-development and the ability to work with a wide range of client types; and ethical and professional practice. The Coaching Psychology Unit works within the ethical and professional framework promoted by the International Coaching Federation.

Practising psychologists — whatever their discipline — are perfectly positioned, Tony says, to evolve into coaching psychologists because of their extensive training in the science of human behaviour. What concerns him—and many other coaching psychology advocates—is the lack of professional accreditation in Australia and the ability

of anyone to hang up their shingle and announce to the world that their 'career' as a 'coach' has now begun.

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"If psychology as a profession does not embrace coaching as a legitimate discipline and seek to curb the growing trend of untrained people becoming 'coaches', we will end up in the same position as counselling and clinical psychologists who face increasing competition from 'counsellors' and 'psychotherapists' who do not have the scientific training that is the core of our profession," Tony says.

These sentiments are echoed by Educational and Developmental Psychologist, John Munro, who has spent several years working as a coach. He says coaching psychology is one of



those unique areas that crosses the boundaries of several traditional disciplines in psychological practice and is one where sports, clinical, counselling, organisational and educational and developmental psychologists can gain from a combined approach.

"What has become very clearly apparent is that psychologists who specialise in these particular areas have a great deal to offer when it comes to coaching" he says. "The concept of coaching psychology is undersold and we all believe that a theoretical underpinning is required if psychologists are to become the recognised coaching experts."

## Manager As Coach Workshop

### Coaching for Managers



Coaching involves getting your people to believe in themselves and their abilities, being firm while staying flexible, staying in control without being controlling, and disciplining without causing resentment.

Managers in all types of organizations can learn and apply coaching skills to motivate people, change problem behaviour & boost individual & team performance. As managers move from traditional 'command, control & coercion' to a more supportive, collaborative &

empowering leadership style, the skills of coaching become essential.

Benefits include greater alignment of employee & company vision & values, increased commitment, improved communication, reduced conflict and greater productivity.

### Who Will Benefit?

Managers and project leaders at all levels who are committed to empowering their workforce, including those who are moving to, or involved in, a team-based structure.

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# COACHING AND PSYCHOLOGY: PARTNERS OR RIVALS?

For the last few years both the business and popular press have been ripe with articles describing the value of coaching. A recent example is authored by Sandy Vale and appeared in the December, 2001 issue of Workplace News. Ms. Vale describes why more people are seeking the assistance of a coach for corporate or business purposes and the benefits that come from such a relationship. She identifies four key benefits: (1) saving the cost of firing and hiring a new employee; (2) bringing new employees up to speed; (3) preventing turnover of star quality employees; and (4) providing managers with a skill that can empower employees. Coaching also helps individual employees increase their awareness of what satisfies them at work, how to get more of it and how to gain more meaning in their lives.

Yet an article to be published in the June 2002 issue of the Harvard Business Review warns of the dangers of involving coaches with business executives. Written by clinical psychologist and self-styled executive coach, Steven Berglas, this article challenges the practices of the coaching profession and specifically targets executive coaches. **The author believes that coaches because of their backgrounds and biases tend to ignore or minimize the real, psychologically-based problems of executives and consequently do more harm than good, particularly when an executive's difficulties are connected to deep-seated psychological problems. Coaches, according to the author, engaged in this type of work can make a bad situation worse.**

This article ignores the strides made by coach training organizations such as the Institute for Life Coach Training <[www.lifecoachtraining.com](http://www.lifecoachtraining.com)> to bring together clinical training with coaching and minimizes the attention that most coach training organizations give to boundary issues. **However, the general point of the article, that coaches may find themselves in over their heads because they may not be aware of deeper psychological problems experienced by clients, is certainly valid.** While this message might be taken to heart by coaches and coach training programs, the author builds his case on exceptionally limited data and seems to be totally unaware of his own bias to see most dilemmas and challenges faced by executives as having a deep-seated psychological nature.



The coaching profession should welcome such criticism and use this article as an opportunity to reflect upon the practices described. But I recall a phrase used as a joke during my psychology graduate school degree training: "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean that there isn't someone out to get you." In other words, no matter how much psychologists spend their time diagnosing problems and focusing on the root cause or pathology, executive clients are still faced with the gap between their current realities and their desired results. As one of my clients told me: "I might be schizophrenic, but we're both president of this company."

Clients I work with are faced with a number of challenges. We work together to specify the challenges, articulate goals and desired outcomes and determine various ways to make and assess progress. If, during our conversations, we identify barriers to gaining the desired results and that barrier is a deeper level "psychological problem," then the trust and rapport we have developed enables us to discuss referral options.

Although my first graduate degree was in clinical psychology, I neither want to nor am interested in helping clients in this way. I am glad to make referrals to practitioners I trust who specialize in clinical areas, but it doesn't mean I abandon the client because he or she is now working with a psychologist. **Unfortunately the Berglas article makes no mention of how a coach and a psychologist can work together. This is particularly ironic since Berglas believes many coaches are sports figures turned coach; yet, top athletes often have both psychologists and coaches working with them.**

Maybe the real importance of the article for coaches is to (1) focus on our ability to recognize more serious psychological issues of clients, (2) know how to help clients assess the relationship of such issues to their desired progress, and (3) explore with clients the options available.

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