

Charting the Course

Therapists as clients

By Bradley Foster, MA

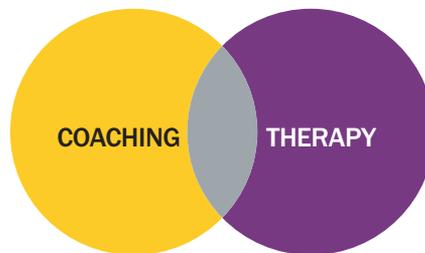


A Sargasso Sea lies between the terra firma of coaching and psychotherapy; there are just as many similarities as differences between the two practices. Coaches often help clients find the motivation to move on from a difficult situation. Therapists often help turn a client's motivation problems to action using coaching skills. So it's no wonder clients are often confused by the difference. Coaches and therapists seldom agree on where to draw the line. Coaches have to be an able captain when working with therapist clients or they can be drawn into the murky depths of the gray area between the two disciplines and founder.

Some coaches will tell you that therapy is all about the past and coaching is about the present but some therapeutic modalities like Gestalt Therapy are present-centered and do not delve into the client's past, and there are times coaches must explore a client's past to get more background.

What is clear to me is that the *intentions* of coaching and therapy are very different. Coaching is action and results oriented; therapy is more about guiding the process of deep, psychological change and emotional healing. Coaching is based on positive psychology, promoting change by drawing on the client's strengths, whereas therapy

modalities are wide ranging but often originate from a pathological approach; that is, therapists help 'fix' things that no longer work for the client. Coaching is also unique in that the coach articulates a contract with the client who agrees to work on a particular issue during the session.



Navigating the relationship

Therapists are some of the most complex and rewarding clients I've had. I find their insights and self-exploration highly rewarding and deeply moving. A therapist with a private practice has challenges very similar to any small business owner, yet therapists are more likely to have values and beliefs about serving people that run contrary to operating a profitable business. They are just as likely to have issues with time management, personal discipline, balance, getting things done, self-defeating behaviors and motivation problems as typical coaching clients. They are, however, more challenging to deal with.

Therapists and coaches are trained to be in control of the process of guiding their clients; however, therapist training is often deeper and more intense than most coach training. If the therapist-client is not coachable or willing to be coached, the coaching relationship can quickly become a contest of who's in control. If the coach cannot stick to the client's agenda and follow the process, he cannot coach. It is the coach's responsibility to correct this situation as soon as he becomes aware of it and make clear boundaries around the work.

Natasha Swerdloff, a Denmark-based consultant specialising in coaching, leadership training and organizational change says, "Recognition of a therapist's training is as crucial to the dance between the client and the coach as the coach's training. I always involve my therapist clients at a professional level in order to openly recognize their professional training. On the other hand I make sure to maintain my own situational rank during the process. This is the crucial balancing act." In addition, the coach's self management may be under close scrutiny by the therapist client. It is absolutely necessary that the

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Coaching vs. Therapy

coach avoid getting in the client's way.

Therapist clients often bring deep introspection and a high degree of self awareness to the coaching process. These are wonderful strengths the coach can work with. However, they can also quickly lead the session into a quagmire if the process is poorly managed. Wanda Ropa, a therapist-trained coach based in San Francisco discovered that, "Bottom-lining, or identifying the underlying core issue, peels away the fallacy of introspection and analysis as the protective tool to avoid movement on coaching goals. In other words, the client's introspection and analysis stimulates avoidance and promotes resistance, preventing progress. This process facilitates uncovering true motivations, adjusting perceived goals, releasing false assumptions, and allowing the coaching process to work."

Interrupting is also a useful tool when working with a therapist client. A session I had with a female therapist around her self defeating behavior in time management brought up a slurry of values and beliefs: she was taught to be productive, not screw up, avoid humiliating herself, or expect too much of herself. After processing the session she returned with detailed, analytical introspection. To steer her back to her agenda I often had to interrupt her insights and deep thoughts that, although fascinating, were a diversion and spoke to emotional wounds that were not my job to deal with as her coach.

Lastly, a major difference between coaching and therapy is accountability. Although it's a largely unfamiliar concept in therapy, clients become quite enamored with it as a therapeutic tool because it fits in nicely with the concept of

HELPFUL TECHNIQUES FOR COACHING THERAPISTS

- Decide if they are coachable
- Create a contract
- Stick to the client's agenda
- Set boundaries
- Deal with challenging and interrupting behavior
- Identify the underlying core issue
- Practice exemplary self management
- Stay with the process

responsibility for one's actions. By holding these clients accountable for their promises and their homework, they begin to understand how powerful it can be in their own hands with their clients.

The bottom line is that therapists don't need a coach to do their inner work and few coaches are skilled or trained in this area. My challenge working with therapists is to always be aware of the line between coaching and therapy and to steer back towards coaching when I feel my client is close to crossing the line. The margin between coaching and therapy is not defined by absolute rules and boundaries and it never will be. It is up to the coach to decide in the moment how to navigate the interaction with the client back to the coaching process whenever it appears to veer into the area of therapy. •

Bradley Foster, MA, is a coach with a background in psychotherapy and communications. He is a member of the ICF Coaching and Therapy Special Interest Group.