

Is there an Ideal Coach Personality?

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Although coaching is a science, it is also an art. Regardless of the approach, paradigm or method one follows, coaching requires a strong degree of human inference; establishing a meaningful psychological connection; and drawing not only from data and theory, but also personal experience.

However, attempts to evaluate the efficacy of coaching interventions have generally focused on the method, including the training or background of the coach.¹ Such studies are no doubt useful, and they provide valuable information to enhance the power of coaching interventions. At the same time, the assumption that the same methodology is equally effective when deployed by different coaches is naïve. Furthermore, there are surely personal qualities that make some coaches more effective than others, regardless of the method or paradigm they utilize, and irrespective of their experience level and the coachability level of their clients.

One factor determining the effectiveness of the coach is their personality. Independent academic research is yet to explore this, but there are three main reasons to expect an effect of personality—the typical patterns of behavior, thought and emotion displayed by the coach—on the outcome of the coaching session.

First, personality affects job performance and career success in every single profession, including freelance professional occupations in every culture and at every level of age and experience.² The reason for this is obvious: personality determines a person's reputation (how they are seen by others, including clients), as well as the raw ingredients of career success (i.e., how rewarding to deal with able and willing people). And when jobs require a high degree of interpersonal contact, the importance of personality is exacerbated—this is why librarians, software developers and academics depend less on their personality to succeed than coaches and consultants do.

Second, coaching requires empathy—the ability to understand and feel what others are thinking and feeling—and empathy is in essence a component of personality. Some see it as a combination of interpersonal sensitivity, altruism, and adjustment, but it is also one of the main elements of emotional intelligence (EQ).³ It is, in fact, conceivable that individuals with high EQ operate as informal or undercover coaches in any work environment, even when they are unaware of it. Being a stabilizing force for peers, colleagues and especially subordinates; people with high EQ can enhance other people's work performance and make both individuals and teams more effective. With that said, one does not need to have high EQ to be a great coach. Many effective coaches I have met have rather low levels of EQ. They are excitable, moody, unpredictable and irritable, and can barely manage themselves. However, this profile may help them tune into their clients' problems and draw from their own personal experiences to provide advice—so long as they can tame their own dark side during the coaching session.

Third, any dyadic relationship between people is profoundly affected by their values and attitudes, and these are partly determined by their personality. Much like in romantic relationships, the coach-client dyad is therefore dependent on the level of compatibility of their values—the core beliefs about what is right and what is wrong, common interests and passions, and ways to find meaning in the world and interpret reality. It is thus feasible that some clients may be repelled by certain coaches even when the coaches are highly experienced and have a great personality because their values or attitudes clash.

Thus, if you are interested in predicting the success of a coaching intervention, it is informative to attend to the personality of the coach. Personality assessments are already widely used in coaching and development interventions, but to assess the client.⁴ Perhaps it is time for clients to administer a personality assessment to their potential coaches before they decide to contract with them. Moreover, when coaches advertise their credentials and experience, they may also want to include information about their personality—both their bright and dark side. Not only would this help clients evaluate fit and predict success, it would also enable them to deal more effectively with their coach.

References

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