

Knowing Why Coaching Works: It Matters

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The benefit of a scientific approach for coaching is that we accelerate learning, adapt learning processes to diverse populations of learners and expand the scope of impact possible across diverse populations of clients. The ICF accreditation and credentialing systems provide a framework for curriculum standards and associated assessment approaches that invite coaches to demonstrate their knowledge of coaching and practical grasp of coaching skills and behaviors. High client satisfaction and the adoption of coaching interventions by individuals and organizations of all sizes suggest that what we are doing works. Yet, how do we know for sure without a scientific discipline?

The point here is not to determine *whether* coaching works; we know that it does all over the globe. Rather, it's that a commitment to systematically understanding *why* coaching works, *which* interventions are best suited to specific clients domains and contexts, *how* to best support and accelerate coaches' development (e.g., reflective practice, mentor coaching and coaching supervision), and *what* hinders achieving sustained, positive impact with clients is essential in order to improve education, training and, ultimately, the health of the field over time.

Achieving a disciplined science of coaching at this stage of evolution is one of the most exciting frontiers in our field of practice and is a critical step toward recognition of coaching as a profession. Without exception, a field of practice must submit to disciplined observation, analysis and interpretation on this journey. While we have seen the body of coaching research expand exponentially within the last decade thanks to the effort of a pioneering group of researchers and practitioners, a disciplined science of coaching can only take shape with the processes of coach training and education as its foundation. The foundational knowledge supporting an understanding at which coaching behaviors are and aren't effective is central to consistent efficacy in practice, and the coach-training environment provides a laboratory for this. The result will be a virtuous circle, whereby our enhanced understanding of the science of coaching informs education and training to sustain continued excellence and stimulate further useful innovation.

In practical terms, the journey of becoming a coach is as much an unlearning as a learning process. Understanding this scientifically will allow greater clarity and congruence for coach trainers and educators. Ways of listening for understanding, engaging in conversation to get a point across, being curious to seek information, and being direct in order to establish a clear request or call to action are all skills learned at one or more points in an individual's professional career. Every one of these skills *transforms* in coaching. Coaches listen to recognize what is meaningful for the client, engage to invite a client to deeper awareness, ask questions that evoke, and challenge clients to declare chosen actions and decisions.

Distinguishing coaching from other human potential and development professions, such as psychology, organizational development, performance improvement and training, is crucial to generating clarity about why the impact and influence of coaching are so positive relative to alternative interventions.

Observing and measuring which specific interventions are effective with clients will yield an invaluable feedback loop as standards for coach training and education curricula and practices evolve, boosting trained professional coaches' efficacy and heightening the likelihood of consistently high-quality practice across diverse approaches to coaching. The result is valid, reliable and consistent coaching practices that transcend disciplinary boundaries and empower practitioners to overcome skepticism in the marketplace by making the benefits of coaching explicit to all of our clients.

As coach artfulness grows so does the quality of being beyond competence to an inspired experience that trusts what is created in the moment-to-moment exchange with a client. Neuroscience reveals that radical shifts in attention open new possibilities, which at the start may appear illogical but ultimately activate something meaningful in the client context.

Performance has no place in effective coaching. Deep trust of self, client and the coaching process is more intention than engineering, more spontaneous experience than diagnostic or formulaic approach. These aspects of the coaching practice are more subtle and difficult to measure, as clients often report a felt sense; i.e., an emotional or somatic response, rather than objective criteria as the basis for their satisfaction. As our profession advances, it is incumbent on all of us to seek out and work toward a marriage between art and science as we cultivate sustainably effective coaching practice. Structures for education and training can only benefit from a thorough understanding of the science of coaching, but must remain flexible enough to allow a not-knowing field for learning and innovation.

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