

The Two Essential Energies in Modern Coaching and Why They Need Each Other

By Steve Mitten

Professional coaching is a relatively young calling. It's still evolving. Since the early days of what we might refer to as modern coaching, there has been an ongoing dance between the energies of purism and realism.

The energy of purism in coaching has been well represented by those dedicated souls who worked long and debated hard to: define what exactly coaching was, figure out how it differed from other helping modalities, establish the core coaching competencies, and defend coaching from being absorbed into some other existing discipline such as consulting, therapy or training. Coaching purists believe in the transformational potential of pure coaching, and scoff at any attempt to blend coaching with any other form of assistance you might provide to a client.

The energy of realism in coaching has been well represented over the years by all those other dedicated souls who explored the many ways to: apply coaching to real world problems, gain recognition, create demand, and otherwise help coaches apply their skills and make a living – outside of the world of pure life coaching or the training of other coaches. Coaching realists often shake their heads at purists who artificially restrict the range of possible support being offered to clients. They look on with incredulity and frustration as so many purists, and graduates of coach training schools who believe that to venture outside of the pure coaching model is some form of sacrilege, struggle to find commercial success.

For the purists, who defend an intentionally narrow definition of coaching, the strength in this approach is that it has helped all of us learn and master the core coaching skills, and overcome decades of conditioning to simply give advice, share experience, diagnose, prescribe, or present a solution. The grounding we receive in the core coaching competencies has helped us all appreciate the transformative power of carefully designed and supportive relationships that help our clients find their own answers. The purist energy in coaching helps defend the core “being,” or way coaches show up and empower clients.

The realists have helped us find thousands of real-world applications for coaching and found many productive ways to integrate knowledge, experience, and prior art into coaching conversations that help clients greatly accelerate their learning and not re-invent the wheel.

If we are too narrow in our definition of coaching, we run the risk of commercial stagnation or simply being irrelevant outside the world of life coaching or the training other coaches. If we are too broad, we stand the risk of losing hold of the basic coaching philosophy and approach that evokes transformation and makes coaching such a powerful experience for clients.

I believe both these energies, and the people that represent them in the ICF and elsewhere, have been essential to get coaching to where it is today. And we will need both to maintain the uniqueness of coaching and fully realize its greater potential in the years ahead.

Practically, I have a very diverse practice. Some of my leadership and business clients greatly benefit from discussing various leadership competencies or specific, proven marketing strategies. Sharing that information in the context of a coaching call, where I am not consulting, diagnosing, prescribing, or otherwise taking the power of decision away from the client, adds a great deal of value and significantly accelerates the client on their agenda.

And I have other clients that come to me in the middle of some big life, career, relationship or spiritual transition, where they are best served by plain and simple powerful coaching.

The seemingly opposing forces present in professional coaching need not be in combat with each other. They can indeed complement each other, and serve the greater good. There is more than enough room in the world of modern coaching for the purist and realist energies, and I believe that the wise path forward is one of balance. We are better, and stronger, together.



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