

# To Be or Not To Be

Listening for the boundaries of coaching

By Melanie DewBerry-Jones

I just came from a taped session of a show called “Life Coaching.” A lovely, talented and engaging woman was promoting her new book. The problem is that she was not a coach; she was a therapist. Oh, how that sets my teeth on edge — just as much as it must for a therapist when coaches wander into the territory of therapy.

I know ‘coaching’ is a buzzword. A branding woman I work with calls herself a ‘branding coach.’ I beg to differ. What is most bothersome to me is that adding the title of ‘coach’ to any offerings might be sexy for the professional, but makes it very confusing for the consumer. The consumer thinks they’re hiring a coach, but they could be hiring anything from a consultant to a therapist to a ‘yahoo’ (and I’m not talking about the search engine). Equally important to me is that the industry suffers when it lacks service clarity. Harm can be done to the consumer, the coaching industry, and to the service provider’s integrity.

## Who are you?

Okay, I got that off my chest. Now let’s focus on coaches. I cannot tell you how many times I’ve heard coaches attempting to coach something that is well outside the capacity of coaching. While I know that the intention is to be of service, we must know our limits on what is *coachable*. One of the primary skills we should be developing is the skill of listening to what is not ours to coach — what belongs to other professionals like therapists,

psychologists, medical doctors and even consultants.

Potential clients call me all the time, but am I to be their coach? It’s my job to hear whether my skill base is what they need. I cannot coach everything that is coachable let alone those things that aren’t. It’s okay to hand off your potential clients to someone who can serve them.

First, there is my niche — spiritual and emotional maturity for entrepreneurs and leaders. I have a specific topic I coach. I don’t coach executive leadership, or organization development, or retirees, or motherhood. Doing this allows my perfect client to find me, and for me to be clear about where I can do the most good. I listen to what the potential client wants, and determine if I can give it to them. This builds trust for the industry instead of me trying to be all things to all people. I never coach something I’ve struggled with but have not overcome. For me, it’s a question of integrity. How can I coach someone into a place where I’ve denied my own strength? But I *will* coach *areas* I have never experienced before. For example, I have coached individuals into leaving the corporate arena for self-employment. In addition, I have coached people into the decision of retirement, and then handed them off to a coach who specializes in retirement.

Second, I listen for what is not being said. Intuition is an important ally in your coaching practice. Since most of what we communicate isn’t verbal, it is critical that you learn to hear what is *underneath* or *between* the

words. Train yourself to hear what your client really wants. This kind of intuitive listening makes us vulnerable because it invites an intimacy of closeness and connection. Are you up for that?

Third, and this one is a big one, I listen for when my clients need a therapist. If they are repeating patterns without *sustainable* success, then I refer them to therapy. The key word here is sustainable. Anyone can have a

he'll have at retirement, etc. His issue isn't money. It's what the money (or lack of it) means to him, and the issue is sourced from some old story he brings to life with each report about his money. This is a client for therapy. You can't coach him out of his story. When a client can't release the story, it's because the story has a strong hold on them, and as powerful as we are as coaches, coaching can't dismantle some stories.

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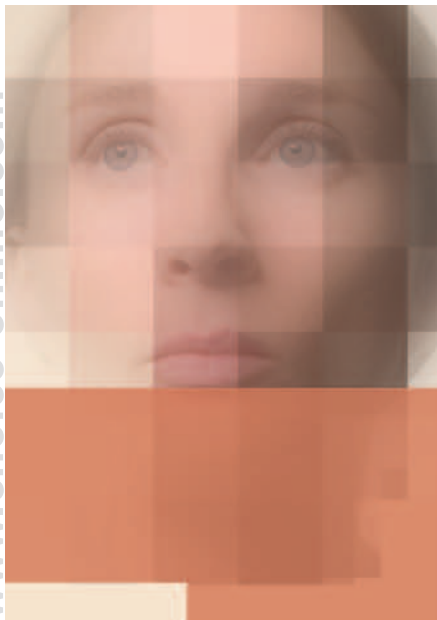
temporary breakthrough (think diets) but for it to be sustainable, it has to have consistency over a long period. I hear from new and seasoned coaches alike, “My client is really having a breakthrough,” and two months later they're seeking advice about how to help them get back on track with the same issue. This is a client for therapy. When clients get stuck in ‘woundology,’ it's out of the realm of coaching. We need to pay very close attention or, as well intentioned as we may be, we will do harm.

#### Pathway to therapy

When a client can't let go of an old story — and that story is in some way running them — this is a client for therapy. I have a friend who always talks about how much money he is making, how much something he purchased cost, how much money he is investing, how much money

When a client uses all the right language, such as, “It's my responsibility to take care of myself, I see my culpability here, I'm getting in my own way,” but never has any sustainable progress, it's time for a therapist. Just because someone talks the talk doesn't mean they're walking the walk. Can you hear the distinction between what is being said and what you feel is true or what the client shows to be true over time?

It's difficult to coach cultural issues. In fact, I would venture to say this is outside the coaching realm. When you are coaching someone to go against what their culture says, you are asking them to deny a part of themselves and their upbringing. You are asking them to possibly close the door on their family and friends. Clients who go against what seems a small cultural value are inviting ostracism. Culture is



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## soul of coaching



a big part of most people's identity. A client may sincerely want to break with culture. But culture isn't just tradition, i.e., what has always been done. There is an intertwining of social dogma that is enfolded into culture that we are not trained to handle even if we are from that very culture. This is not to say that this client should not or cannot reach their goal but consider that this may be a client for a psychologist or other professional.

This doesn't mean you can't coach them on other subjects for which they are not getting therapy. Many of my clients over the years have seen a therapist while continuing to coach with me. I just don't enter into territories that I feel aren't within the coaching realm. And then there are those clients it is inappropriate to coach because it would split their focus when they should be centered on healing.

Many times I've had very success-oriented, forward-moving clients who become depressed, and stay there. They can't pull up and out. I'm not a therapist and I'm not clear what is happening, and that undeniable dark, unmovable place they find themselves in is unreachable by my skill base. Therefore, I ask them to see their doctor.

### Knowing your limits

As you begin your relationship with a client, inform them that if you hear that they need help or support beyond your ability (give examples) you will tell them so, and you expect they will do what is necessary for their health.

I encourage you to discontinue coaching someone who refuses to get the help they need. While I realize you may gasp and feel as though you are abandoning your client, you do them no service by acting co-dependent. You cannot be co-dependent and remain a coach; they just don't go together.

Notice if you ever justify coaching someone by saying things like:

- She really had a breakthrough this time.
- But if I'm not in his/her life he/she will have no one.
- Yes, they are mean and rude but I'm there for them. They are lonely and they need me; besides I think I'm getting through.

And, beware the 'nice' coaches who say things like:

- I don't want to be bold and offend him/her.
- If I'm not nice they won't like me.
- I can't say that; they'd fire me.

*Now* who needs the therapist? We do if *our* needs get in the way of our client's needs. You, I, and the profession of

coaching are not the saviors our clients are waiting for. Therapy and coaching may overlap but they are distinctly different professions. As a profession of high integrity, we should know our limits and respect them in order to coach a client for the highest good.

Whether clients come to us to reach a vision or goal, to change, or resolve an issue, it's our job to educate them about the process of being human. Realizing our desires means calling on many people for support. One person, one retreat, or one seminar isn't enough to support sustainable change, manifestation, or growth. We all need our 'A-Team' — a group of people, some professional and some personal — to help us be our best. We must help each other in being interdependent and working together as a community of

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souls. It's time to abandon the legacy of rugged individualism, hiding our weakness and being proud of our strengths. Let's be proud to be loving and compassionate enough to know when to call in someone else for help. As coaches it is our legacy to approach life holistically. Spread the news. •

*Gloria in Excelsis Deo*

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