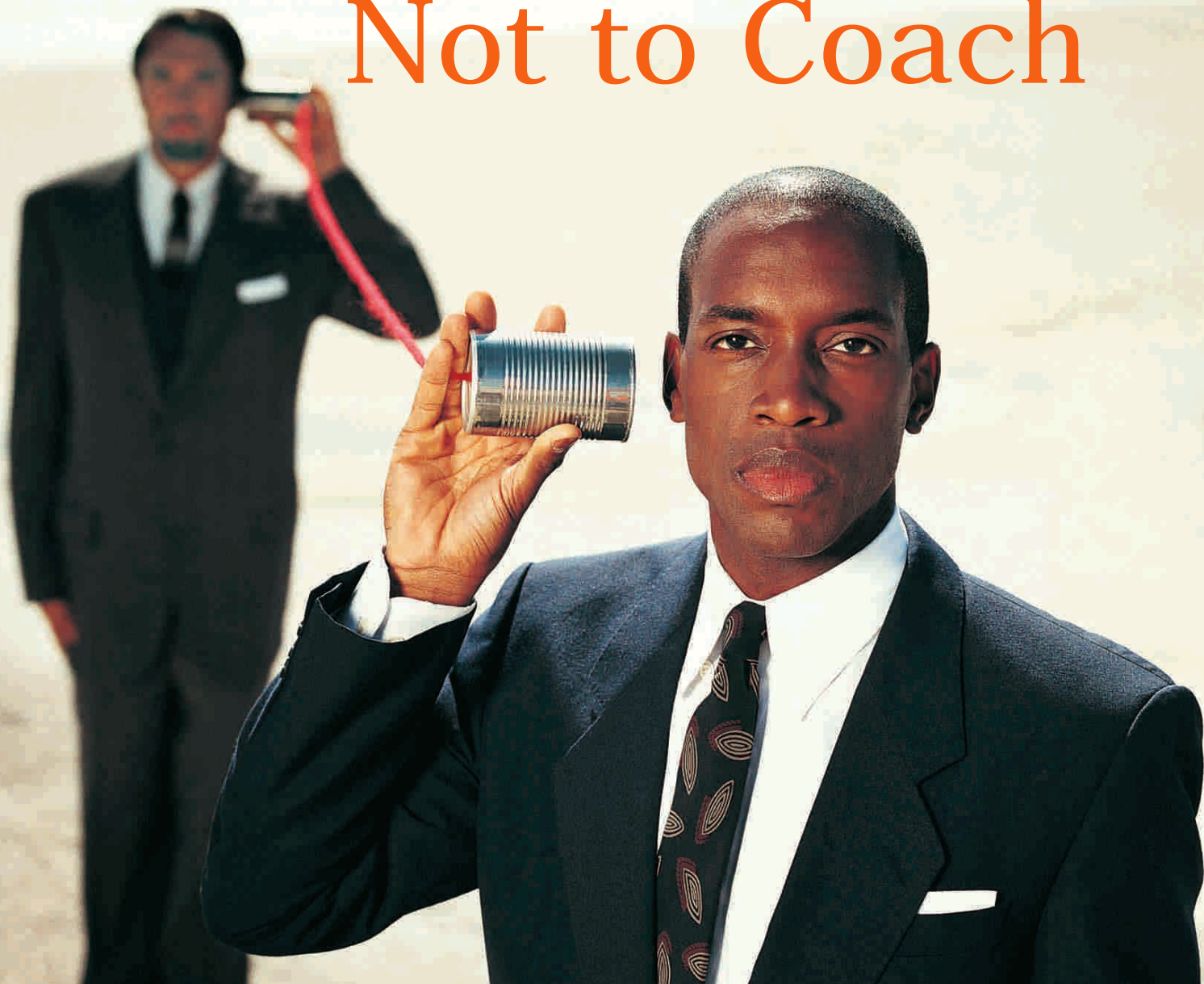


# To Coach or Not to Coach



CHRIS LONSDALE & ASSOCIATES LTD.

Copyright 2004 Chris Lonsdale & Associates Ltd. and ChrisLonsdale.com

# To Coach or Not to Coach

**A** few months back I was speaking with the Asia Area managing director of a pretty serious engineering multi-national.

He had just come back from a conference, and was somewhat amazed by the fact that many of the senior leaders he talked to all had executive or life coaches. It came as quite a surprise to him.

Ten years ago, especially in Asia, nobody had even heard of “Executive coaching” or “life coaching”. Today it is all the rage. Apparently, many of the senior executives at this particular conference were comparing notes about their coaches, just as they might have done about their cars a few years back.

Given the growing awareness, popularity even, of having a coach you may well have considered getting one yourself. It’s quite likely that someone – a colleague or a friend perhaps – has suggested you should get a coach. Or, you may have taken the jump already.

If you’re thinking about getting a coach, but haven’t yet decided what you’re doing about it, there will be questions you are asking yourself about the whole coaching process. Why do you even need a coach in the first place? What, exactly, does a coach do? What can you expect from the relationship?

## What’s it all about?

Executive or Life Coaching, put in its simplest form, is a relationship between you and another person, focused on helping you to get better in some way. That’s it. Who you work with, and what you work on, depend on the goals that you have for yourself, and the skill set of the person who is supporting you.

Some coaches, for instance, will support you in a very narrow area of your life. They may have expertise in image, or fitness, or some other specific domain. You work with this sort of coach when you are focused on just one area. You are really clear about where your gaps are, and want detailed input for filling those gaps. You want to hit golf balls better, so you get a golf coach. You want to project your voice better, so you get a voice coach.

Of course, it’s not always that simple. As an example, if you want to project your voice better you may need to work on a number of things – releasing tension in your body, learning to articulate words better, increasing your level of confidence, learning to look people in the eye. That’s where you need a more multi-dimensional coach; someone who can address a range of issues and topics. I call these people multi-dimensional specialists.



# To Coach or Not to Coach

Coaches who are truly multi-dimensional specialists will have spent many years going very deep into a range of different knowledge areas. They will almost certainly have expertise in communication and relationships, because without this you really can't be a life coach or executive coach. A committed life coach will also have personal experience working with a range of tools and techniques for self-advancement. They will understand self management, thinking styles, learning styles, health, and fitness, among other things. They will also have skills for creating change, on a personal level and frequently on a group level. Training in various psychological disciplines is an added bonus.

In addition you would expect a range of more technical skills and experience, all of which can be brought to bear in helping you achieve your goals. Some, for instance, will have deep experience in business or organizational dynamics; others will be great at marketing, others will have a sporting background; while others will have backgrounds in different industry areas such as banking, or manufacturing, or distribution, or government, or the arts, etc.

## Why Coaching?

Before you start thinking about what sort of coach you want, maybe it's useful to think through the case for coaching. Why on earth do you need a coach in the first place? Fundamentally, there are two major reasons. There's the remedial reason, and there's the generative reason.

## Generative

You don't need to be in trouble in your life in order to get a coach. Being strong, effective, and on top of the world is a great place from which to launch yourself on the next phase of your own development. It's much better to do it from there than waiting until you are in the depths of depression.

You take on a generative coaching process when you sense you are coming to an inflection point in your life. This is a point where you have the opportunity to move to a whole new level, or the choice to stay on a plateau upon which you may rest for years. If you decide to explore the possibilities beyond where you are now, then generative coaching can help you on that journey.

When you want a generative approach to coaching, you know that it's time to refocus your life. You have gone as far as you can with your old approach. You want to try something new; something different. You enter the coaching process with a powerful intent. Quite simply, you desire to restructure things in a way that will open up new possibilities in your life.

In the generative coaching process you need to reconnect with your core aspirations – your reason for being alive – and then align yourself with that. This requires deep introspection, and frequently a “skill reset”. By skill reset, I mean that you will need to evaluate the skills that have helped you get to where you are now. Often they are not the skills that will take you to the next stage. Often, you will need to master an entirely new body of knowledge,



# To Coach or Not to Coach

and skills that are quite different to those you have been using. You go back to the bottom of the hill, and start all over again.

## What it means in practice

Alfred is in his early forties, and is successful in his career. From feedback that I've received from people close to him, he's actually one of the best in his particular field in Asia. He came to me some time ago to explore how I might become his personal coach – for life, career, and business. Alfred wanted to engage in a coaching relationship because he perceived, quite strongly, that he was not yet being all that he could be in life. He was successful by other people's standards, but not his own. For one thing, he wanted to change what he was doing, and move into a different but related field. For another, he has goals for living the second phase of his life in a very different, much more enriching way.

The work with Alfred has involved a number of critical elements, ranging from the setting of compelling outcomes, through to re-patterning of automatic behaviours and reactions. It has been a transformative process, helping him maintain the essence of who he is as a person, while giving him the tools he needs to achieve the next step in his life's evolution.

Carter's case was very different. He was in his mid-thirties, and working for a major multi-national corporation based in Hong Kong. We began working together when he started to discover that he just didn't "fit" any longer.

The company he worked for had a very strong "up or out" culture, which was putting him under increasing pressure to do things that he neither liked, nor was good at. He knew that the longer he stayed the unhappier he would become. Rather than waiting to be pushed, he decided to take control of his life. It was time for him to decide his own future.

The work with Carter evolved on a wide front, moving from intense exploration of his goals and aspirations for life, through exploration of health and fitness, to some of the more practical aspects required to engineer a change in career. A key was to understand his true gifts and strengths, as well as some weaknesses that blocked him just short of success.

Early on it became clear that Carter had a unique and powerful mind. He was able to visualize problems, and their solutions, in exquisite detail. This gave him a great advantage, and the ability to solve problems that were beyond the capacity of most people. Despite this great strength, however, he was almost totally unaware of it. He was certainly unaware that he was quite different to other people, or that this particular skill had any real value. To him it was just normal. And it bordered on genius, especially in his area of technical expertise.

He was also a deeply compassionate human being, who cared deeply for the people around him. This, too, was something he didn't fully appreciate, and from which he benefited little. His quiet, un-expressive communication style alienated him from most of the people around



## To Coach or Not to Coach

him. This was not helping him in his current career, and it would obviously block him from doing most things effectively.

We began by asking the question, “what do you REALLY WANT in life?” The initial answer turned out to be a fantasy which, once explored, created more problems than solutions. It turned out that Carter didn’t really want what the fantasy had to offer. But he did have to test the idea to find out. Once he learned that lesson, he was able to set goals that he really did want.

From there we moved to exploring Carter’s internal value structure, and discovered sets of competing priorities. These held him in place and he needed to free himself. They also accounted for the problems that he had with relationships and communication, and were worthy of intense focus. Once his internal priorities had been aligned, we could move into a phase of creating a developmental journey that would, over time, lead Carter to fulfil his aspirations and more.

Today, he is moving through a new job while putting in place the stepping stones that will allow him to live the life that he truly chooses for himself.

### Remedial

When your life has suddenly turned to mush, you are at a dead end, you are about to crash and burn, or you find yourself in a hole, then you need to think about getting some remedial coaching. You use remedial coaching to stop the fall, and get back onto a healthful path.

While some problems in life are not of your making, many are. And, whether or not you created the current situation in which you find yourself, no-one but you will can really get you out of it. It’s your responsibility to fix the problem, and external support can help. That’s where the coaching comes in.

In a remedial situation the coach plays a range of roles. Initially, it is to help you stabilize yourself. If you have gotten yourself into a mess, you may not be in a position to make the best of decisions. A good coach will strongly encourage you to take steps that, as quickly as possible, ensure you regain the focus and mindset needed to make sensible decisions.

Beyond that, the role of the coach is to help you break old patterns. Why? Frequently, your own patterns have contributed to creating the situation in which you now find yourself. You’ve done it to yourself. Not deliberately, for sure. And, in many cases where you find yourself in trouble of some sort (money, job, relationships, etc.) you can trace back to a series of similar situations in the past. Somehow, history seems to repeat itself. So, while it’s uncomfortable to hold that thought, when you look back and identify the common factors, you find yourself at the centre. You are the common factor. The situation that has been created is, in large part, caused by your own patterns.

The problem with these patterns is that you live through them, in the same way that a fish swims through water. They are so close to you that you are not even aware that they are



## To Coach or Not to Coach

there. This is where the coach can help, first by supporting you to become aware of those patterns, and then by working with you to change them. Only when you truly change those patterns do you have the opportunity to create a new trajectory in life.

### What it means in practice

Simon was having dinner with me complaining, once again, about how bad things were for



him. Just three weeks previously the conversation had been about his new girlfriend, and about how he now was in the relationship of his life. This was the one. And the job he was in was the perfect job for him. This was how he was going to make his fortune. Now, just a few dozen hours later, everything had changed. He had a new girlfriend (who happened to be just perfect, and finally, the real one). And, he had given up his perfect job and was going to an even more perfect one. Just like the last time.

I had no choice. I had to stop him in his tracks, pointing out that I had heard it all before. I told him my prediction that he would last 6 weeks with the new woman, and probably about the same amount of time in the new job. He looked at me shocked. And I explained to him that, since we had known each other, I had seen him repeat the same cycle a number of times. The patterns of his life were clearly driven by him, and he was totally unconscious of them.

At that instant he knew. He understood that if he was ever to get what he really wanted in life he must look inward, and address the very fundamental patterns that were driving him. He decided to enter into a coaching relationship, focused on restructuring himself at a fundamental level. And so we began.

Initially, the focus was tactical. Simon needed to negotiate a new business deal and get himself stabilized economically. My role as a coach in that situation was to provide tactical support and guidance for the negotiation process. Some of this work focused on the communication and negotiation patterns that Simon was using. Of necessity, the approach was directive. Simon had to do things as instructed, and experience the results. We had time to discuss the reasons why it worked later.

Knowing that his old approaches didn't work, Simon followed the tactical guidance and was able to successfully land a workable business deal. Now, stabilized, it was time for us to focus on some of the core drivers. While I continued to provide tactical input, we began



# To Coach or Not to Coach

to explore the fundamental value structure that had driven Simon into his predicament. And that is where things began to get very interesting. Step by step we discovered the edifice of beliefs that Simon had cobbled together over the years, and he began to see how this prevented him from achieving what he really wished for in life.

Anthony was an entirely different situation. His habit was to try to rush his success, and take on far more than he could ever handle effectively. He would then start to panic, and this would result in a state of total paralysis. His workload would build, along with a pile of broken commitments, and the worse he felt about himself the worse it would get. Ultimately, he would find himself in a position where he was unable to fulfil even his most basic commitments. Around the same time his marriage would begin to falter. This cycle would repeat itself every three or four years.

In Anthony's case, the initial stage in the coaching process involved giving him very direct instructions as to how he should reduce his commitments. Once he had stabilized, we moved to dealing with the more fundamental drivers that had helped to create the patterns in the first place. These were core beliefs which, once addressed, freed him up to act in a more rational and effective way.

## The Role of a Coach

To understand why coaching can be useful, it's important to understand the roles that a coach can play. There are a variety of different

roles, and they are all equally important. In any coaching relationship, most if not all of the roles should be operating at the same time.

## The Feedback Loop

At a very basic level, the coach acts as a feedback loop. If you've ever listened to yourself on tape, or seen yourself on video, you'll understand why this is so important. Very often we are unaware of what we are doing, and certainly unaware of how we impact on those around us. A coach can reflect back a relatively objective view of what is happening, so you then have the choice to modify your behaviour in order to be more effective.

## External "Energy" Source

I use the term energy very broadly. If you've ever observed a stream feeding into a river, you'll have a sense of what I'm talking about here. The smaller flow comes into the larger flow, creating whirlpools and disturbances. These disturbances, which are literally injections of energy, influence the direction of the larger flow. A coach does something similar. New ideas and information affect you like new bursts of energy. These new ideas and new energy create the possibility for you to take new directions and make new decisions. Without the new ideas or energy, this would have been more difficult; maybe impossible.

The external energy source can be absolutely critical in the coaching role, especially when you are dealing with difficult issues. There are



# To Coach OR Not to Coach

times when you will face issues that are uncomfortable at best. If you are on your own, it's so easy to come up with excuses for NOT addressing these issues. At such a time, the coach provides energy and motivation, insisting that you face your problems and work through them. The presence of the coach, and the energy that he or she brings, helps push you through where, on your own, your preference to back down would probably win.

## The Sounding Board

Have you ever noticed that you have some of the best ideas when you are talking out loud? Often, thinking quietly to yourself just doesn't help you make the connections that you need to make. But, talking out loud, especially when someone else is listening, can be a very enlightening experience. Somehow you find yourself articulating thoughts in ways that you didn't expect. It's almost as if one part of you is talking to another part of you, and the mouth has to be involved.

Having a committed listener as part of the picture, especially one who asks penetrating questions, simply makes the process even more powerful. You find yourself thinking very deeply, and making connections that you otherwise might not make.

A good coach will listen to you probably more deeply than anyone ever has in your life. This alone can draw out of you thinking and insights that you did not know you had. And, these insights can help you make important changes in your life.

## Pattern Connector

Another very important role of the coach is what I call the "pattern connector". Whether or not you realize it, when you communicate with someone else you will often make distinctions about things without realizing that you are doing so. You might sense very strongly the difference between management and leadership, for instance, but not be aware of that at a conscious level. You might know, in your gut, what your mission is but maybe have never been able to connect words to that mission. As you speak to someone, your passion shows through, even if you don't know that this is happening. And, you express ideas that are important to you, using certain words and certain intonation, even though you may not be aware of the essence of what you are saying.

A good coach should be able to notice the patterns that you wear for the world, but of which you are unaware. And, as you express those patterns the coach will connect the pieces together to make it all visible to you as well. When that is done well you know that it comes from you, even though the coach helped to make it visible. This process creates powerful insights that help you to make important shifts in your own thinking.

## The Guide

Another very important role of the coach is the guide. A good coach will have, over the years, been challenged by situations similar to that which you are now facing. Having gone through these challenges and survived, the coach is in an ideal place to help you navigate. Knowing



# To Coach or Not to Coach

that you are exploring difficult territory with someone who has been there makes the process that much safer for you. In the same way that you would prefer to climb a mountain with someone who has climbed many mountains before, you will gain so much more when you work with a coach who has been challenged by life and who will share that learning with you openly whenever you need it.

## Why Not a Friend?

Many people will think that asking a friend for advice is the same as having a coach. However, when you examine this more closely you discover that it is not true. There are a number of reasons why, in most cases, a friend should not take on the role of coach.

### Too Nice

Friends, in most cases, can't coach you because they are too nice. Often, in order to get your attention so you will change, you need to hear unpleasant things. These are things about you that you really don't want to acknowledge. To talk about such things is very risky. For sure, when you hear them, you are going to be upset. A friend, under most circumstances, will avoid saying something to upset you in that way because they are concerned it could break the friendship. So, at the most important moment, a friend is likely to cut you some slack – just when you should be held in place, and made to squarely face the issue that you have been avoiding.

### Too Critical

The opposite problem with friends is that they are too critical at times. There are phases in your development when you need a guide to be patient with you. Certain skills and attitudes take time to master, and you need to have a guide who will accept the clumsy attempts that you make as you try to master those new areas.

Often, friends will say “you've already been told what you need to do, so why aren't you perfect already?” That simply doesn't work, and will tend to demotivate you rather than give you the support and encouragement that you need to succeed.

### Part of the Problem

If, as is frequently the case, relationships are part of the issue that you need to address friends are probably not appropriate as coach. Your friends are part of your relationship network, and as such they are a part of the problem that you have. How you interact with your friends, and how they interact with you, all need to be examined if this is your focus. You will find it very difficult to tell your friend that you have a problem in the relationship if that friend is also your coach.

### Training

Training is also another critical factor. Some coaching simply involves looking at superficial, tactical type issues. However, once you get into dealing with deeper, ongoing patterns it isn't that simple. While there are techniques



# To Coach or Not to Coach

to help you deal effectively with patterns that no longer serve you, few of your friends will have the necessary training.

## Is Coaching For You?

In this short article we've explored a little what coaching is about, and some of the issues that you need to be aware of. Today, in a rapidly changing world, more and more people are discovering the value that they can get from having a professional committed to supporting their growth and development.

Of course, whether or not life coaching is for you is an entirely personal decision. However, if you're committed to excellence in your life, getting support from people who have the passion and the skills to help you make a difference can be profoundly important. ●

