

# What is Coaching ?

In search of a definition

*Coaching - the trendy term, is used for all kinds of consulting formats. Thus, anyone working as a coach would do well to be able to offer a professional definition of the activity.*

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## A well-accepted Definition

There are many ways to define a profession. When new professions emerge, this often happens through comparison/distinction to already existing professions. For example, a few years ago I heard supervisors say: "Coaching is supervision with executives." - Well, such a definition might be useful for an approximation, but in the long run it is unsatisfactory, because the profession is attached to an environmental condition ('executives').

The following distinct definition by Sir John Whitmore a pioneer of modern coaching has gained general acceptance in the profession:

**“Coaching is unlocking a person’s potential  
to maximise their own performance.  
It is helping them to learn, rather than teaching them.”**

(Whitmore, 2022)

and further

"The essence of coaching is raising awareness and responsibility. [...]

- Awareness is created through broadening perspectives and improving the focus of attention, which increases interest, insight and learning.
- Responsibility is generated by offering choice and setting up accountability, which increases confidence, self-motivation and commitment." (Whitmore, 2022)

It is therefore a matter of developing personal potential with the aim of increasing performance. And this should happen through support in one's own learning rather than through instruction.

The essential elements (essence) in the coaching process are increasing awareness and ownership (responsibility).

Let me shed some light on these elements one by one.

## **Objective: personal potential development to maximise own performance**

In accentuation to other counselling formats like e.g. 'supervision' where the "*reflection of the professional action*" is in the center of attention (bso, 2022), coaching is focused on development of the personal potential. Potential development is a much more holistic concept

than reflection. In line with humanistic psychology<sup>1</sup>, the focus of coaching is on the individual as a whole. With his/her values and desires in both the private and professional spheres. The term 'performance' used here should not distract from this, although in everyday usage it is often equated with 'operational performance'.<sup>2</sup>

### Coaching: Help for Self-help (Empowerment)

In contrast to regular (technical) consulting, coaching does not give advice ("*rather than teaching them*" (Whitmore, 2022) ), but rather supports the coachee in activating his/her own resources and making them available in the way he/she desires (Empowerment).

Whereas counselling and supervision are more about increasing knowledge and insight, coaching clearly focuses on empowering the coachee as the goal of the interventions. The tools of NLP Neuro-Linguistic Programming are exceptionally well suited for this purpose.

German coaching scholar Siegfried Greif also refers to the "facilitation of result-oriented problem and self-reflection (...) to improve the achievement of self-congruent goals." (Greif, 2008)

### Unlocking potential and self-congruence is more than cognition and understanding.

If coaching promises the release of potential and the achievement of self-congruent goals, that is surely a much more binding promise for the development of the overall personality than is the case with consulting and supervision.

Self-congruence arises from the congruence of personal goals with behaviour, abilities, beliefs, values and belonging. Self-congruence is thus a building block for self-actualisation, as postulated by the founders of humanistic psychology (Abraham Maslow, Virginia Satir and Carl Rogers).

Thus, coaching must meet the following conditions

- specific wishes, needs and potentials of the client are in the center of attention;
- resources are sourced from the client;
- empowerment of the client to new (internal or external) options;
- goal- and outcome-orientation;
- self-congruence is strived for.

"Coaching as goal achievement without self-congruence would then consequently lead to self-exploitation and coaching as self-congruence without goal achievement to the absence of success.

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<sup>1</sup> Humanistic Psychology, a movement in psychology supporting the belief that humans, as individuals, are unique beings and should be recognised and treated as such by psychologists and psychiatrists. (Britannica, 2022)

<sup>2</sup> A Personal Performance Plan strictly refers to one's performance outside working hours, from personal appraisal and envisioning, to setting personal goals, measuring their attainment and establishing action plans in order to achieve the desired state in those areas that are important for each individual. (Chelniciuc, 2015)

## Coaching is not a methodology

This conceptual specification clarifies something essential: Coaching must not be understood as a consulting method. Coaching is a specific understanding of consulting, in which individual development and growth as well as contextual fit and success (in action) are equally important. Coaching is therefore always about success and satisfaction, and never just about one or the other.

## Learning and development processes are central

In the sense of definition, coaching thus stands for an innovative consulting format in which performance goals and success in action - usually with reference to the professional context <sup>3</sup> - are the focus through the improvement of self-management. In so doing, successful learning and development processes are the basis for the success of coaching, as is the assertion that the desired goals are in line with the values, interests and potentials of the client." (Wegener, 2022)

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<sup>3</sup> Author's note: In this observation, I do not agree with Wegener, 2022. According to my many years of experience, coaching with NLP Neuro-Linguistic Programming focuses more on personal issues, which of course also affect new professional empowerment.