



Is Coaching the Right Fit for Me?

How to Select a Coach and Get the Most out of the Relationship

Date: **15 April 2023**

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Abstract

Coaching is an often misunderstood profession. Many see coaches as advice-givers or mentors, and are unready for what a coaching relationship entails. We invited our coaches to dialogue on the topic of coaching. Together we explore what coaching is, what it is not, how to select a coach, and what to expect during the coaching process. Furthermore, we reveal how to bring executive coaching into an organization in an optimal way that leads to desired results with a Key Performance Indicators (KPI)-focused approach. Throughout each section, the reader is invited to reflect on open-ended questions designed to elicit deeper thoughts on the topic of coaching, with the aim of gaining better clarity on their personal vision and objectives and to understand how to make the coaching process work for the reader. Responses to these questions can then be useful in a coaching discussion, whether in a new or existing coaching relationship.

Introduction

This article is a consolidation of the decades of experience of our certified coaches and the insights we have gleaned working with coaching clients from a wide range of industries, career levels, and coaching goals. It is tailored for anyone considering starting a coaching relationship who is curious about what a coach can help them achieve, as well as anyone already in contact with a coach who wants inspiration on how to leverage practical insights in their existing coaching relationship. Before diving into how to select a coach and set up the relationship for success, let us explore what coaching is and what it is not.

Throughout the article, we have sprinkled in some open-ended coaching questions that will help you to gain more clarity for yourself on what coaching can do for you. In addition, these questions can be great starting points for conversations with your manager or supervisor to create a business case to request financial and other support for starting a coaching relationship that will benefit your career. Consider reflecting on and answering each question.

Key Insights

Essentials of Coaching: What it is, and what it isn't

First we want to clarify a common misconception: A coach is not going to give you advice, mentorship in your field, or counseling/therapy. If you want or need support with behavioral or mental health, check with a licensed therapist, psychologist, counselor, or psychiatrist for more information. When you need advice or mentorship, there may be others in your social or professional circle who can help—a coach may help you uncover for yourself who belongs in that circle of support.

Instead, a coaching relationship helps you to achieve a vision or set of goals that you have defined by asking “through a series of well-phrased and timed, open-ended questions to **connect** your answers **with what you already know about yourself**” (Marshall, 2023). Coaching is also the “curious exploration of what is, what is desired, and what will be; it is a collaborative conversation between the client and the coach. *You* as the client have **inherent**

brilliance, intelligence, and answers” (Simmonds, 2023). Additionally, a coach is someone who can **“hold you accountable for taking actions** you believe are in alignment with your desired outcomes” (Shiple, 2023).

What differentiates coaching most from advice-giving or mentorship is that you have the answers and capacity to achieve your goals already, and a coach is there to support and guide you through the journey of discovery during the coaching process, which we explain in further detail in the next sections.

Section Recap and Self-Reflection

- Coaching is different from therapy/advice/mentorship
- In a coaching relationship, the coach will guide you to explore your inner capacity to unlock your own potential using carefully crafted open-ended questions

What is drawing me to seek out coaching?

Could I Benefit from a Coach?

All of our coaches unanimously agree that everyone can benefit from a coach, or by having multiple coaches to help with different desired outcomes. “Even Michael Jordan—arguably the best basketball player ever—had a coach” (Sullivan, 2023). Whether the coaching relationship lasts a couple of sessions or continues for many years, the relationship is “designed to help you **take action necessary to create the life you want** to have and gives you the support you need” (Shiple, 2023). Coaching sessions are a “**safe space** where you can express who you are without judgment or rules placed upon you, allowing you to **expand into new areas you didn’t know existed**” (Simmonds, 2023).

A coach is there to help you “expand the spaces you usually cannot reach on your own,” unlocking tools and ideas that you already possess, so you can use them to build a path to

achieve your desired outcomes. Sometimes we hold limiting beliefs¹ about our potential that stymies our thinking, and therefore we ourselves can become a roadblock on our journey. A transformational coaching relationship aims to shift the client's thinking, to reframe perspectives and see new possibilities.

Section Recap and Self-Reflection

- Everyone can benefit from a coaching relationship
- The main benefit is that a coach is a non-judgmental guide who provides a safe space for you to expand into spaces you usually cannot reach on your own
- Coaches can help you to be aware of your own limiting beliefs that might block the way you want to go forward

How aware am I of my own strengths and limitations?

In what ways could an expanded support system help me to use my strengths and/or reduce my limitations?

How to Select a Coach

Establishing an effective coaching relationship starts with clarity on your vision and desired outcomes. Once you are clear what it is you want to achieve (whether in your personal or professional life, or both), the next step is to select a coach who matches your personality and can help you achieve your outcomes. All of our coaches agree that the clearer you are on what you want to achieve, the easier it will be to go into a discussion with a prospective coach to determine whether there is a good chemistry match.

Next, find a few coaches who have experience working with clients aiming to achieve similar outcomes as what you want. Check out their website, or if someone has referred them to you, see if you can find out more about their areas of specialization and their reputation for helping

¹ A belief based on, for example, past experience, which we believe will always hold true, and therefore we limit ourselves and our thinking

others to reach similar goals. Reach out to the prospective coach and set up a getting-to-know-you session with them to talk about your goals, their experiences, and get a feel for whether there is a match. You should feel comfortable and safe with them. Research shows a correlation between a strong coach-client relationship and achieving outcomes from the coaching, and that the actions the client and coach take together have a strong impact on outcomes (de Haan et al., 2013).

One way to approach the coach selection process is to think holographically (Schneider, 2007, 212). Holographic thinking uses three lenses to analyze a topic, making the process more robust and well-rounded. Typically we lead with one or two of the lenses; yet we are able to make better, more informed choices when we exercise all three. The three lenses of holographic thinking include:

1. **Logic** - using facts and information,
2. **Emotion** - based on feelings about the topic, and
3. **Intuition** - using gut instinct to determine what is the right thing to do.

Practicing holographic thinking will allow you to use three lenses simultaneously to approach the decision-making process of selecting a coach, and this will give you a leg up on the coaching process, as this method might be one your coach uses with you to help you make other decisions in your life related to your coaching objectives.

From these conversations, you may have a gut feeling whether the relationship with one or more coaches fits for you, and whether the coach is the right one to help you reach your goals. “Invite your intuition to guide you,” says our coach Bridgette Simmonds (2023). Lastly, your prospective coach should be a **certified coach**. The International Coaching Federation (ICF) is the world’s largest coaching certification accreditor, and their [website](#) has a search feature where you can verify whether the coach is ICF certified.

Section Recap and Self-Reflection

- First, start with a clearly defined vision / outcomes you want to achieve
- Seek out different prospective coaches who are experienced helping others with similar goals

- Select a *certified* coach who fits for you and can help you unlock your inner potential

What am I seeking to achieve in my personal and/or work life?

In what ways do I feel stuck making the progress I desire?

As I think holographically about my decision to make a coach, what is coming up for me logically, emotionally, and with my gut instinct?

What to Expect during Coaching Sessions

Each coach has their own tools, personality, and techniques. The coach likely will focus first on your vision for yourself and your goals, to understand what you want to achieve. Then they will ask open-ended questions² to understand what is getting in the way or what is motivating you, raising awareness of the gap between where you are and where you want to be. Further discussions are dedicated to helping you create a strategy to bridge the gap between where you are now and where you want to be and to help you hold yourself accountable to achieving the actions you commit to.

Some coaches use assessment tools to uncover how you think or how you perceive the world around you. These can bring both you and the coach deeper insights about you. Coaches also use thought-provoking, open-ended questions to deepen their and your knowledge about you, the driving forces behind your goals, and any roadblocks standing in the way. These questions are intended to raise self-awareness and not to judge you or your goals.

Each coach will personalize the experience to your unique situation and vision. If you are unsure about how a part of the coaching process serves your needs, open up a conversation about it with your coach to understand more or to adjust the process so it works for you.

² Open-ended questions are designed to invite you to think and cannot be answered with a “yes” or “no.” Whereas closed-ended questions can generally be answered with a “yes” or “no.”

Career Coaching and the Inspirus Model

Most coaches offer different and unique coaching packages. Some coaching packages may include topics, such as executive presence, career change or transition, leading through conflict, complex decision-making, etc. One example of a career coaching package is the Inspirus model, which includes seven steps to support our clients to achieve their objectives. These include:

1. **Begin with the End in Mind** - Discovering your ideal role, whether in your current organization or a different one
2. **Tell Your Story** - Creating / enhancing the ideal resume for your desired role (making updates as your career progresses, creating multiple versions for different focuses, highlighting quantified results, and including relevant keywords)
3. **Fish Where the Fish Are** – Developing your networking skills and creating an action plan
4. **Connect and Assess** - Perfecting your interview skills & establishing early rapport and follow up with interviewers and/or key stakeholders
5. **Ask For What You're Worth** – Leveraging the art and skill of negotiating a win-win salary and compensation plan
6. **Go From Zero to Hero** - Being intentional about charting your path to career advancement and continued success after getting the job
7. **Be Your Highest and Best** – Using your energy to get more of what you want in the areas of your life that matter the most

Section Recap and Self-Reflection

- First, a coach will explore with you your vision, current situation & roadblocks, and then help you develop a strategy to bridge the gap towards desired outcomes and/or solutions
- Coaches use different tools and techniques, such as self-assessments, open-ended questions of curiosity, and more, all in service of helping you achieve your desired results

Which areas of the coaching process am I still curious about?

Getting the Most out of Coaching and the Coaching Process

Once the coaching relationship is started, getting the most out of the journey is important so that you achieve your vision / goals and reap a return on your investment of time, energy, and financial resources.

Summarizing the experience of our coach, Lillie Marshall (2023), many clients only want to talk about surface things, without going into the deeper causes, and expect to be told exactly what to do and how to do it when they start their coaching journey. This approach will limit a coaching client to become dependent on their coach, rather than to hone their inner toolkit so they can grow and develop over time. Contrastingly, those who are willing to go deeper and look at what is going on inside of themselves—for example, what is working, what is not, and *why*—are better equipped to go forward in life in the direction they want to go.

Bridgette Simmonds (2023) and Cornelia Shipley Bearyman (2023), two of our coaches, recommend a few tips for getting the most out of a coaching relationship:

1. **Open yourself up** to being challenged by your coach, for example by analyzing yourself and answering questions during the session openly and honestly;
2. **Communicate with your coach** what you want, expect, and need out of your investment with them, and then come to an agreement with your coach;
3. **Be willing to call yourself out**, for example if you withhold something from your coach, mention it and talk about why you held back. There may be a learning and growth opportunity to gain;
4. **Invest yourself into your coaching sessions** and any take-away action items to the point that it feels “edgy,” as this is where meaningful transformation takes place; and
5. **Be prepared** for your coaching sessions by being clear on what you want out of the sessions and then open yourself up to your coach’s questions of curiosity about what can help or what is getting in the way of your achieving your goals.

To track progress, ask your coach to have checkpoints at regular intervals (Waldorf, 2018). This could include a self-rating questionnaire to check on the change of attitude, knowledge,

and/or progress towards reaching the stated goal for the coaching sessions. There are other self assessment tools available to track progress, such as the Energy Leadership Index (ELI), one of the Inspirus Consult coaching assessment tools, which you and your coach might find useful.

Section Recap and Self-Reflection

- Preparation and readiness for the coaching experience are key factors to getting the most out of the relationship, especially being clear on what you want, need, and expect
- Self-exploration and going deeper into self-understanding might feel awkward but are key factors to growing and achieving your goals
- An effective coaching relationship between the coach and the client should create a feeling of healthy tension, where you are not resting on your laurels, and you are being pushed to be the highest and best version of yourself

What do I wish my coach knew about me but I am hesitant to tell them?

What are your expectations from your coaching relationship, from your coach and from yourself, that would disappoint you if they were not met?

Take a moment right now to write these down for yourself and bring them with you to your next coaching session

The Benefits of Coaching

Pertaining to the benefits of coaching, the results vary for each individual. At a minimum, you can expect to gain more clarity about yourself, what you want in life, and some tools to help hold yourself accountable to achieving your goals. A study on the benefits of coaching revealed that executives who participated in coaching were better prepared for their roles, as their confidence in their own ability and their capability to plan and execute functions of their role increased (Moen & Andre Federici, 2012). Our coaches agree that you will get out of coaching as much as you put into it.

When you first meet with your coach, you will likely discuss what you think is getting in the way of achieving your desired results. This is the “presenting problem,” and as you work with your coach, you might discover that the actual challenge is quite different. One of Lillie’s (2023) coaching clients came to her with the presenting problem that they needed a new job. After asking some clarifying questions to understand why a new job was what they needed, Lillie’s client realized more than just a new job was top of mind for them. They realized that over time, they had changed as a person, and that their current job was no longer aligned to who they are. With this clarity they had more information about themselves and could then create a new career path forward that aligns with who they have become.

Another benefit of coaching aside from clarity of what is desired is “permission to pursue” that desire (Shipley Bearyman, 2023). It can be too easy to allow mental roadblocks to stop us from changing course and going after what we truly desire in life. With a coach who is ready to support you, and clarity on what your new future looks like, the next step is to change your inner monologue from one of “you can’t” to “go for it!”

Additionally, a coach will help you hold yourself accountable to your action plan. Without this accountability, it becomes all too tempting to postpone each seemingly small step towards the future you envision for yourself. The coach will hold you accountable by asking about your progress, what helped you take a step forward, and what got in your way. Sometimes we get in our own way, and a coach will hold up a metaphorical mirror to this behavior and explore with you what is the cause and what action to take to change it. Your coach typically will be open to the idea of you updating them on whether or not you took an agreed action that you committed to. In future sessions, you can discuss the status of the committed action and reflect on what worked and/or what got in the way.

Bridgette’s clients (Simmonds, 2023) report an increase in power and confidence, expansion of possibilities of what they are able to achieve, and increased satisfaction in their lives.

Additionally, they have commented that coaching has been an empowering experience by having someone else “in their corner” who believes in them and who will not let them succumb to their own limitations and excuses. Coaching sessions are also powerful places of safety. Conversations are confidential and are with someone who is outside of everyday work and personal life, making it easier to bring up topics that otherwise might be difficult to discuss

with someone you fear might judge you. Coaches enable their clients to be heard and to open up to be their full selves.

Lillie (Marshall, 2023) highlights that her coaching clients, especially in younger generations, are seeking more fulfillment in their careers. For them, what is important is more than just promotions and salary increases; they want their lives to have meaning and purpose, too. Lillie, who climbed the corporate ladder herself and felt unsatisfied before becoming a coach, wants coaching clients to come to this realization as early in their lives as possible, so that they do not regret their decisions later in life. Brigette (Simmonds, 2023) echoes this sentiment: “Coaching is a great life-expander. We have limited time on the planet; it’s a choice to get to play with life in a way that surprises you and makes you proud. You can leave a legacy that is your own that others cannot replicate.”

Forbes also notes that executive coaching clients “learn new ways to respond” (Andersen, 2017). As a neutral third-party, a coach can change the way you see a situation, looking at it from different angles and exploring different ways to approach it. In a coaching relationship, you are also able to discuss different “what if” scenarios, enabling you to be prepared for different reactions and then determine which path fits for you. For those who feel stuck, or are unsure how to move forward, a coach can help you reframe the situation and enable you to use your strengths to help you gain traction. See also [Finding 3: Coaching Improves Neuroplasticity](#) for more details on how coaching impacts our ability to adapt to change.

Section Recap and Self-Reflection

- Different clients report different benefits of coaching
- A coach can help you unlock your inner potential, remove your inner roadblocks, increase confidence, and improve satisfaction with life
- Life is short. Take a path that allows you to get fulfillment and to leave a positive legacy behind

Which of these benefits are you hoping to achieve with your coaching relationship(s) and why?

Relating to your desired outcome, what is one thing you wish you could talk about with someone, if you had a safe space to be heard?

What legacy do you want to leave behind?

Noteworthy Findings

Below are a few additional points from research that we found interesting:

Finding 1: Coaching Effectiveness Requires a Results Orientation

A Harvard Business Review (HBR) article on executive coaching suggests turning the logic and expectations of measuring coaching success on its head (Ashkenas, 2020). Instead of expecting a change of behaviors to lead to better results, organizations and leaders ought first clarify what results are desired and then determine the requisite behaviors to achieve those results. Coaches can then support their clients to reach these results once the clarity of what to achieve is identified. For example, rather than hiring a coach to help an executive with their soft skills identified in a 360 review (eg: increase delegation), the organization should focus on the results or KPIs for which the leader is responsible (eg: increase revenue of a suffering product line). With this in mind, the coach and client leader can determine the behaviors requiring adjustment that will allow the leader to bring desired results.

Finding 2: What Executive Coaches Say about Who Hires Them

In a Harvard Business Review survey of 140 coaches who work with organizations, nearly all (97%) responded that organizations frequently hire coaches to focus on organizational challenges (*What Can Coaches Do for You?*, 2009), yet three-quarters of coaches end up discussing personal topics in their coaching relationships. Organizations are made up of people, and our personal lives impact our work lives. Coach respondents also revealed the top three reasons organizations have hired them:

1. “Develop high potential or facilitate transition,
2. Act as a sounding board, and
3. Address derailing behavior.”

A typical engagement with an organization lasts 7-12 months, and the process may involve HR, a manager, and others in the organization. When asked about the “ingredients of successful coaching,” respondents said that executives who are highly motivated to change will get the most out of coaching. Those who are not motivated—such as when the organization is trying to force coaching on the individual—likely will not change or receive any benefit from coaching. Similarly to our findings mentioned above, respondents of the HBR survey also highlighted that chemistry is key to a successful coaching relationship.

Further, organizations typically have a starting objective or challenge in mind that they want the coach to help with, and 94% of coaches in the study reported that the focus of their work has shifted as they uncover bigger topics than the “presenting problem.” Survey participants also revealed how to select a coach, and top of their list is finding a coach who has experience with the topic at hand, which matches our findings as well. Another important factor is the ability for the coach to evaluate and measure impact in relation to the original objective of the engagement.

Finding 3: Coaching Improves Neuroplasticity

Coaching has further benefits when viewed from a neuroscientific angle, namely exercising the brain’s neuroplasticity (Bellen, 2020). During a coaching relationship, the coach is aware of how resistant our brains are to change; our brains prefer repetitive, automated processes, since deep thinking and change expend a lot of energy. Therefore, when faced with change, our minds often trigger a fight or flight response in our bodies, which is why many experience physical reactions, such as stomach aches, when they face a change in their life. A certified coach is trained in these body and mind reactions and will be able to guide you through the change process using open-ended questions and dialogue to connect your emotions, logic, intuition, and bodily reactions to be in tune with bringing about your desired new future. They will help you to visualize a multi-sensory new future and then to take steps to practice new behaviors in line with your coaching objectives until they become the new, automatic habit.

Section Recap and Self-Reflection

- Start with the future in mind and the desired results to be achieved
- Organizations who hire executive coaches should expect that the engagement may reveal deeper challenges or topics of interest
- Coaching is most effective when it is entered into voluntarily by those who are motivated to change

What results does the organization expect to achieve with a coach and which behaviors correlate to supporting those results?

Remember to separate results (eg: KPIs) from behaviors

What is the motivating factor for hiring an executive coach?

Call to Action

Are you stuck and unsure how to achieve your vision? A coach can help you or your organization to reach your objectives faster. Inspirus Consulting has ICF certified coaches ready to partner with you, including coaching for individuals, executives, teams, and organizations.

Inspirus Consulting has 15+ years of experience coaching leaders and guiding organizations on planning effective and impactful diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

We help you achieve results because we value research-backed methodologies and data-based decision-making.

[Contact us](#) today for more information on how Inspirus Consulting can help you with your challenges and opportunities. <https://inspirusconsulting.com/contact/>



Al Sullivan
Founder & CEO

Meet Our Inspirus Coaches



Cornelia Shipley Bearyman

Cornelia is a sought-after speaker, professional development and diversity consultant and strategic planning expert who works with clients to expand their capacity, increase their capability and drive clarity in the organization to ultimately increase the retention and advancement of mission critical talent. She has more than twenty-five (25) years experience in sales, sales training and development, and human resources and is considered among the best in personal and professional development with extensive experience in the consumer goods, health care, financial services, consulting, social enterprise, education, and entertainment industries.



Lawrence Henderson

Lawrence has 18+ years professional experience as a corporate trainer, HR manager/leader, coach/trainer, adjunct professor, and US Army Officer.



Lillie Marshall

Lillie specializes in working with women 40+ who are at a turning point in their careers and want to find new possibilities in their work and personal lives. She has 30 years of corporate leadership experience in the financial services industry coaching and developing talent and leading powerful teams. She participated in Sr Leadership Counsel, responsible for customer service strategy & business planning. Recent projects include customer service redesign, assessment and rewards program redesign, business continuity program, and attendance policy redesign.



Jessica Samuels

Jessica spent the last 20 years developing learning & OD programs for many international organizations. She has worked in all areas of Global Talent Mgmt, including workforce career development, DEI programs, employee resource groups, leadership development, e-learning design, employee onboarding & training, succession planning, employee engagement initiatives, & human capital strategic planning. Over the years, she found her niche to be building high-performing people development programs that attract, grow, retain, & empower diverse talent across the globe.



Bridgette Simmonds

Bridgette has spent nearly two decades in Business Development and Marketing in one of the largest financial services corporations in the world. She's worked with Fortune 500 executives, entrepreneurs, & self-startups. She enjoys coaching individuals as well as groups and has had the opportunity to coach business owners and professionals of many diverse industries.



Al Sullivan

Al has 20+ experience working at all organizational levels from the front lines to the executive suite. He served as an Army Officer, Manufacturing Manager, and Global Human Resources leader during his career, and now is CEO and coach at Inspirus Consulting, Inc.



Bernard Theora

Bernard has over 25 years Professional experience, including as a program director for the International Development Research Center (IDRC), program director at Hope Worldwide - East Africa office, as founder of Synergy International CCT, and as a counselor, mentor, and trainer of Peer Educators.

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