From Frustrated Therapist to Successful Coach

By David Steele, MA, LMFT

It doesn't matter where you've been. What matters is where you're going and how you'll get there.

There Was this Men's Group…

Early on a cold Saturday morning in 1996 I was standing in a large circle of men for the monthly gathering of our men's organization. At one point a youngish man in his 20s stepped out and proclaimed: "I'm training to become a Life Coach, and I'm looking for a few volunteer practice clients!"

I was shocked. Here's the family-friendly version of my inner dialogue: "Life Coach, what's that? How can this guy help anyone with their life if he hasn't figured it out for himself? Wait a minute -- he's going to charge people money to help them with their life? But that's what I do and I have a degree and a license!"

But despite the alarm bells going off inside me I must admit that I was intrigued and wanted to find out what "Life Coaching" was about; a term that I was hearing for the first time. So I wandered over and asked him what this whole thing was about. His answer was to try a session with him and find out. I agreed.

The following week we met on the telephone (!) and he asked me some open-ended questions about what I wanted for my life. He paused long enough after each response to make me think that he had a list of questions in front of him and was awkwardly searching for the next question to ask. It was like helping one of my kids with their homework by practicing a school assignment with them. I went along with it and talked about my desire to help people have successful marriages and families, my burnout working with dysfunctional couples and feeling stuck with my current practice, and my frustrations, hopes, and dreams for my practice. And as I spoke, something…weird was happening.

By the end of our unskilled and awkward first meeting, I went from feeling burned out and stuck with my practice, to excited, empowered and re-energized. As a therapist I was obliged to categorize this as that thing that we crave; that
A Therapist Experiences Coach Training

My journey from therapist to coach was not, I must admit, so much a journey as it was an experiment. Except that instead of being in a nice clean lab, wearing a starchy white coat and generally feeling all experimental, I was earnestly driving to the only coach training around, and hoping that I’d find something to nourish my budding coaching spirit. Part of me felt that I was flying without a map, part of me wondered if I was setting myself up for severe disappointment, and whatever parts that I had left were wondering just what the heck I thought I was doing, anyway?

Fortunately – mercifully, I might say –the training was impressive. And by that I don’t mean that it was striking, remarkable, or anything else that my thesaurus tells me is a synonym for the word “impressive.” I mean that it made an impression on me – it re-shaped my mind, and altered the paradigm through which I now, as a successful coach, use regularly.

Here’s why: the coaching exercises were nothing short of transforming. For example, one of the earliest exercises was to work with a partner for five minutes, doing nothing but asking questions. That’s it. No suggestions, no feedback, no reflective listening, no brilliant insights, no small talk…just questions. Sound easy? I thought so, too, until about the, oh, 12 second mark. That’s when it hit me: as a therapist, I was trained to listen, assess, and use my clinical judgment to provide feedback and interventions. Yet here as a coach (or a coach in training), I had to ask powerful questions that helped the respondent
get in touch with his or her own personalized truth, wisdom and direction. My role as a coach was not to diagnose and treat, but to empower and enable; not to analyze and reduce, but to synthesize and co-create; not to uncover, but to discover. This. Was. Exciting!

Strangely, however, it wasn’t as if this was an entirely new experience. There was something familiar about this – and since my intuition at this time was chugging along like a popcorn machine on uppers, it quickly hit me what this familiarity was: this was the connection, the alignment, which motivated me to become a therapist in the first place. It was blissful.

Five Principles of Coaching

Through the lens of coaching I started to view my work in a different light; in a way that was in harmony with the very essence of the helping profession. I started asking myself surprisingly fundamental questions about what I was doing, who I was doing it for, and how I could achieve it.

The first principle I discovered is that coaching forces you (and yes, it is a forcing) to note how people make choices. This awareness provides you with the basic understanding that the problem and the solution are not “out there” in a diagnosis or a pill, but “in here” inside the coached individual him or herself. The simple key – and it’s not an easy key sometimes, but it’s clearly a key nonetheless – is to make choices in alignment with desired outcomes. That is, to help individuals see that they are the architect of the very problems that they want to solve, and that the problem as well as the solution lies in their choices. Yes, this is difficult for many individuals who want us to fix their problem, but at precisely the same time, it’s also very empowering and liberating.

The second principle I discovered is that coaching creates a developmental question for an individual to answer. Often, this question is not conveniently literal. In other words, it’s not as if an individual can easily articulate the question “how can I be a more positive creator of my relationships?” Rather, conceptually, the idea of coaching is about reaching into an individual (or more accurately, creating the space and safety for an individual to reach into themselves) and discover what they want to achieve; what they want to improve upon and develop. Again, this is markedly different from some forms of therapy where the clinical treatment is determined by the diagnosis, which in turn is determined by the therapist consulting a DSM. In coaching, both
the responsibility and the power ultimately lie with the person being coached; not
the therapist. Most therapists agree with this principle and even believe they
practice it.

The third principle that I discovered is that coaching is proactive and
about creating positive solutions; not about avoiding negative states. This
may seem blatantly obvious, but again, remember that these principles are more
than just knowledge; put into practice, they will shape how you apply coaching in
your professional world, just as it did to mine. Overall, this principle posits that
individuals are designed to be successful, and that an unsuccessful individual is
merely “stuck” on the road to success. The goal is then to identify the blocks,
effectively remove them, and then let the default, natural success resume.
Success is therapeutic, and instead of "treating" depression a coach might focus
on achieving goals and see if the depression lifts. Failure is therefore not
something to be avoided or even treated; success is something to be enabled.
This principle, you could say, captures a very eastern approach to life, and if you
already appreciate this view you’ll find coaching to be very satisfying.

The fourth principle that I discovered is that coaching is an open
paradigm of working with people. This cannot be undervalued, because this
more than anything else is what blazed my coaching trail. Coaching is liberating
on many different levels; beyond those that help the person being coached. It
also allows you, as a therapist-coach, to step outside your routines and zones --
and approach the mission of helping people in fresh new ways. For me, coaching
was like learning a new language; one that enabled me to speak to new people
in new ways – people that I could never speak to before. I experienced freedom
as a coach that was unimaginable as a therapist. It's exciting to think that you
can pick any niche or specialty and build a private pay practice serving mostly
healthy people who want to move toward more optimal living in business and/or
personal life.

And the fifth coaching principle that I discovered during my training and put
to use in my work, is that coaching effects individuals by empowering them to
go after what they want in their lives. Now, this may not seem like an atom
splitting insight, but there is a subtle point here that resonates very deeply:
coaching is pro-active and intentional. It’s not about diagnosing a client who
really has no expertise in whatever they’re being diagnosed with. The success or
failure of coaching is determined by the client; not by the coach, and not by any
tool (e.g. a checklist, assessment, or treatment protocol). As a therapist, even with heartfelt compassion, how many times had I longed for clients to take responsibility for their problems – because their failure to do so prevented them from achieving a solution? Coaching doesn’t have this problem; because unless the client is using the coaching to go after what they want in their lives, there is no coaching.

The Therapist to Coach Transformation Completes

Probably like you, I worked hard for many years to obtain my clinical license, sacrificing time, money and quality of life, and my initial intention when I discovered coaching was to practice both. My identity as a therapist was so strong, that the thought of giving it up was shocking; inconceivable, really. Yet as my coaching practice took off, I found that I was having the time of my life creating events for singles, relationship seminars, workshops, classes, groups, and coaching singles and couples. Unbelievably, I was able to fill my new coaching practice in three months. My work was fun, fulfilling, exciting, profitable and exhilarating. As my therapy clients dropped off, they were replaced with coaching clients. And before I knew it, my practice became 100% coaching! While I swore to myself I would never give up being a therapist, I found myself referring therapy clients to my colleagues, because quite simply, coaching was just too much fun, and where I felt I could make the best contribution of my skills.

Looking back, I believe being a therapist was a long, but effective, road to becoming a good coach. Extensive experience with dysfunction gave me a much greater appreciation and understanding of the opportunity to work with functional people. The hardest part of the transition was letting go of judgments and formulas -- judgments about what's going on (diagnosis), what intervention (treatment) is needed, and formulas based upon therapeutic orientation for what “box” the client fits and what to do with them. Undoing some of my clinical training, but keeping true to the rigorous professional standards and ethics of my license, I feel that I’m now a much more qualified and better coach than someone without a clinical background. As a licensed therapist with an advanced degree I have more credibility with the public, and clients are more willing to hire me knowing I had to jump some pretty high hurdles to earn those initials after my name. You’ll likely find this as well; that your background as a therapist supports, rather than interferes, with your reputation and image as a coach.
When asked "what do you do?" my answer is now "Relationship Coach." I will always keep and treasure my license, even though my work no longer requires it. My mission of helping people enjoy successful marriages and stronger families is the same as it always has been, except now I'm doing so in a way that is in much better alignment with who I am, and achieves the results I've always wanted to see for my clients. While I encourage you to continue practicing therapy if you desire, for me, coaching transformed my professional work and identity in ways I never imagined. It simply takes curiosity and an open mind and motivated to make your professional life, and the lives of your clients, better.

About the Author: After two decades serving as a couples therapist in full-time private practice, David Steele grew weary trying to save marriages and chase insurance reimbursements to survive. He discovered personal life coaching in 1996. Within three months of completing his initial coach training, Steele transformed his therapy practice into a thriving and profitable coaching practice. He subsequently created and tested a standardized model for relationship coaching that is the foundation for the curriculum taught at the Relationship Coaching Institute — the first and largest relationship coach training organization in the world. Steele and his team at RCI have since trained thousands of relationship coaches and mentored hundreds of therapists and coaches to build successful, sustainable practices that guide their clients to enjoy more satisfying, functional lives so they can make a difference in the world. His new book From Therapist to Coach: Leveraging Your Clinical Expertise to Build a Thriving Coaching Practice (John Wiley & Sons, 2011) is now available at http://www.TherapistToCoach.com

From Therapist to Coach: Leveraging Your Clinical Expertise to Build a Thriving Coaching Practice

If you're a therapist attracted to coaching as a positive, goal-oriented model of helping your clients, this book is for you! Integrating coaching into your practice allows you to work with motivated, functional, private pay clients and build a fun and profitable business that makes a significant difference in the world.

Highly recommended! http://www.TherapistToCoach.com

"The definitive resource for therapists curious about coaching."
—Sharon O'Farell, MIHA

"This is the best book about coaching and building a successful coaching practice I've read so far."
—Irina Hart, MFT