

2: What Being a Life Coach Actually Requires (And What It Doesn't)



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Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome back to The Future Coach. Quick note, before we dive in, last episode we covered what coaching actually is and what it is not. So if you haven't listened to that yet, go back and start there first, because today we're building directly on that episode.

So, today we're going deeper into a question that I think stops more people from becoming coaches than anything else, which is, who actually makes a good coach? And I think when people ask this, there's actually two different questions hiding inside that one question, one of which is subconscious. So what people think they mean is, what do I need to know or be able to do to be a coach? But under that is a deeper, more existential question, which is, am I the kind of person who can do this? Am I cut out for this? And both are important questions I want to answer for you today. So let's get into it.

Welcome to *The Future Coach*, the podcast for independent coaches, in-house coaches, and the coach curious. I'm your host Kara Loewentheil, founder of The Socratic Coaching Academy. If you want to chart a new path, uplevel your skills, and build a successful career around coaching, you're in the right place. Let's go.

So let me start with the thing that I hear frequently from people who are thinking about becoming coaches. They say something like, but I don't have a psychology degree, or I don't have a master's, or I don't have a PhD. So who am I to help people with their mental and emotional lives? Or sometimes they'll say, I think almost more honestly, that they believe that their own life isn't perfect. There's still things that they are in a messy stage with. So how could they possibly coach someone else? Or they'll express fear that because they haven't experienced everything a client might have gone through, they can't possibly know what the client should do.

Every single one of these objections is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what coaching actually is. So, let's look at the psychology degree objection first. The reason that feels disqualifying is

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because you might be assuming that coaching is like a lesser version of what a psychologist does, and so without the credential, you're just doing it without the qualification.

But coaching is not just like psychologist light or like an uncredentialed version of being a psychologist or a therapist. It's its own discipline. It has its own methodology, its own training, its own set of skills, and it's a different thing. There are a variety of careers in which people help counsel those who need help with the experience of being a human. There are psychologists, there are coaches, there are religious leaders, there are spiritual leaders. There's lots of people who do this work in different ways, and they aren't just variations of each other. They're different disciplines and approaches and frameworks. The absence of a degree in psychology doesn't mean you're not qualified to coach. It just means you're not trained as a psychologist, which is fine because you're not trying to be one, you're trying to be a coach.

So, let's think about the second objection, which is the one where people feel like because something in their life is not fixed or accomplished or healed or perfect, they can't coach anyone. But your life being imperfect is not a disqualifier. It's actually evidence that you're a human being who has had to work through something. And that is something that coaching clients actually value. Now, I'm not saying you should coach on a thing that you are in a very messy, unresolved state with. If you are in the middle of trying to find a partner and you have a lot of dating drama, and you have a lot of low self-esteem around dating and blah, blah, blah, maybe don't become a dating coach, right? You want to be a few steps ahead of the people that you are helping.

But your job when you're helping someone, as a coach, is not to be able to give them the action roadmap they should take that you took to solve the problem. Your job is to reflect their thinking back to them and help them believe in themselves. And the truth is that people relate to people who are

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having a human experience and are willing to share about it. Your human experience and the wisdom that you can mine from your own process is part of what draws people to you. So no one is expecting you to have a perfect life.

And I understand this so much. I actually put off becoming a coach for a few years after wanting to because I was still deep in my body image work, and my thought was that nobody would hire a fat coach. Nobody would hire a coach who wasn't thin. That very thought was proof that I had not worked out that area of my life enough to be coaching on it. But when I did work through that area of my life and I changed my body image, and I became a coach, it was so clear that I had been totally wrong about that. And so many of my clients have come to me and said, the reason I chose to work with you is because you're so confident in your body, and I thought, I need to find out what she knows. These are not necessarily people who are coming to work on body image. They just see the way that I am willing to show up as a fat woman in this world, and they are inspired by that and they want to know what I know.

So, you don't have to be perfect according to what the outside world thinks, and you don't have to have sorted out every single thing in your life. When I became a coach, I had done a lot of work on my family relationships, on my body image, on my money mindset. I was still in it around dating and working on my own dating life. I still was able to effectively coach a lot of people. I didn't specialize in dating coaching, but obviously dating came up when I was coaching, and that was okay because my job wasn't to say, "Oh, hey, I have it all figured out. Let me just tell you what to do." My job was just to reflect back to someone what their own thoughts about themselves were and help them believe in themselves more. And that is a meta skill that you can do on any area that a client brings you. It doesn't matter if you yourself have had that exact experience.

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I coach C-suite executives and partners of global law firms and novelists and these people have had a lot of experiences I haven't had. That's okay. My value doesn't come from, I did the exact literal same thing you're doing. My value comes from, how can I help you change your thinking about yourself?

And so that really speaks to that third concern people have, that you haven't lived what your client has lived. So how could you understand what they need? That's not what your client needs. Shared experience is not what makes you a great coach. It's not a club. It's not like a shared hobby you need to have. You need to be able to be curious about your client's experience and help them see themselves more clearly and help them build more positive self-regard and more self-efficacy so that they can change their lives. You don't have to have done the same things they've done to be able to do that.

So, those are the specific objections. But I also just want to flag that the self-help and wellness and coaching industries are predominantly women, not entirely, but majority. And women are socialized to believe that we have to earn the right to ever have an opinion about anything and that we are almost never qualified to be an authority. So we think I can't see myself as someone who could actually help someone else unless I'm an expert. It's so interesting because women are socialized to believe that they should help everyone and be of service. But we interpret that as meaning, I'm supposed to give my time and my energy and maybe my money and I'm supposed to sort of be in service, right? As opposed to being of service.

And in order to be a coach, you have to see yourself as someone who has something valuable to share, someone that might be worthy of having their insight or opinion solicited. Your job isn't to have an opinion about your client's life, but to have an opinion about how the brain works, to have an opinion about why self-belief is important, to have an opinion about how to create self-belief. So, seeing ourselves as an expert, as an authority, is

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very foreign to many women. And the way we think we would feel safe in claiming expertise or authority is if we knew everything, were perfect, and had done everything.

And so those thoughts, I've addressed them on the conscious level, but subconsciously under them is often this belief that unless we know everything and have done everything and our life is perfect, who are we to think that we could offer anything to anyone else? That is a lie of socialization. Nobody has a perfect life and knows everything and has done everything. That's not required to have insight or information or knowledge or perspective that you can share with someone. Those things are not required to be able to hold space and to believe in your client so they can start to believe in themselves.

All of the things that you're doing as a coach are really about those meta skills. They are not about you being perfect. But women are socialized to believe that it's not safe to call attention to themselves or to claim that they know something or are an expert or an authority of any kind unless they are unimpeachably perfect. So in order to be able to show up as a coach, you have to start changing that thought pattern. We will do more on that in another episode.

So, we're going to take a quick break right now, and after this we're going to talk about that second subconscious question. Am I cut out for this? Can I do this? Stay with us.

So before the break, we talked about the fears that people have or the concerns they have about becoming a coach and how those are really a product of how women are socialized, especially. But I said at the top of the episode that there's actually two questions hiding inside the question of who makes a good coach. And the second one is the one I think keeps more people stuck. And that's not, what do I need to know? But am I actually the kind of person who can do this?

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So, I want to talk really honestly and frankly about what predicts whether someone is well suited to being a coach. I don't believe everybody in the world is well suited to being a coach, and I don't believe that everyone who finds value in coaching or thought work or mindset work, which is the kind of coaching that I teach, is suited to be a coach. Some people find it incredibly valuable, it changes their lives, but it's a personal practice they do, just like some people love working out, but they don't ever want to nor should they be a fitness trainer.

So, the first quality that I think is important for actually being a coach is that you've done enough of your own work to know what it feels like to create change in your life that starts from inside you. So, that's not the same as, well I took a big risk and I moved to Paris. Now, that could be the outcome of internal work, but lots of people make kind of dramatic changes in their lives not from doing internal work, from doing something impulsive, right? To like get away from a feeling they're having.

So it really is about have you created internal transformation? And sometimes that does look dramatic on the outside, and sometimes the circumstances of your life don't change at all. You just go from disempowered to empowered, or you go from miserable to happy, or you go from anxious to calm. So it is not about anything external and whether other people would recognize it. It's have you done yourself the kind of work that leads you to a moment where you see things in a new way, you change a thought on purpose, you become someone you didn't think you could become in some area of your life.

And that's really important because if you haven't created internal transformation, you are going to respond to clients with external suggestions. So if you haven't done this internal transformation, and a client brings you a problem. A client brings you a problem like they tell you that they've always been someone who starts things, they never finish

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them, and this is something they want to change about themselves. And they're telling you that like it's this piece of factual information.

If you haven't done significant work internally to question your own thinking and change it, you're just going to believe them. We call that being in the pool. You believe them. You're like, "Oh my God, you aren't able to finish things. We need to create accountability structures. We got to have check-ins, we got to have deadlines. Let's have external pressure." But of course that doesn't work because the problem is that the person is identifying as a person who can't follow through or finish things.

So you have to have done your own identity shifting work so that you can number one, come into these conversations with the integrity of someone who is teaching something you've done. And two, so that you can spot when a client is identifying in a way that they think is just like, I'm describing a truth, and you can see that it's a thought, it's a story, it's a narrative, because you've changed a narrative you had. When you're able to do that with clients, that's when you can actually help them create change that no one else has been able to help them do.

The second quality I think is finding other people's thinking genuinely interesting. I don't think that it's enjoyable to be a coach if you don't find this interesting. I do not recommend that anyone become a coach just because they want a flexible lifestyle or to make more money or whatever. Those are nice things, but you can go become an AI consultant if that's what you're looking for and you don't care what it's in. There are other ways to do that.

Being a coach means you're going to be listening to people's thinking a lot, especially in the beginning or as long as you're doing one-to-one coaching, that is what you're doing. So you have to be really interested in that. You have to be really curious. You have to feel like people's brains are puzzles that you want to understand and figure out. So let's say you have a client

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come in and they say, "I do everything around the house and my partner doesn't appreciate me."

If a coach is not curious about thinking and doesn't want to get under the hood and see what's going on in their brain, they just jump right into action, right? They just start coming up with a script the client can use to communicate their feelings to their partner. It's not even necessarily bad advice, but it's not coaching. You're just giving someone a script that they're not going to use because it's not like they couldn't google how to talk to my partner about this. The issue isn't not having the script. The issue is the story, how it makes them feel, what is all the evidence their brain has marshaled for this story, how are they identifying with this story? It is all mindset that needs to be worked through in order to allow them to actually step into an empowered version of themselves that can have that conversation if they want.

If you're someone who is really curious about someone's thinking, about their brain, you don't just jump into that action line. You notice that they're reporting someone else's mental state as a fact that they know. They're reporting something absolute, that they do everything, and now you're curious about how they feel when they think that way, how is that making them show up? Where did this story they have come from? How long have they had it? How is it impacting their relationship? You get in under the hood, you explore the thoughts. You ask powerful questions like, what would it mean if your partner did appreciate you? What would that look like? How do you believe you get to feel? And that actually slows the client down to look at what's going on with them.

Their friends or their colleagues or their parents may have just validated what they were saying, and that didn't make them feel any better. A coach who's really interested in what people are thinking is going to ask questions to explore those thoughts. And that is what actually can move that conversation to more self-awareness. It can uncover why they haven't

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spoken to their partner yet if they've been bothered about this for so long, and that's when you can actually start to get some real change because you're uncovering what's really driving them.

The third quality I think that you need to have if you want to be a coach is the ability to sit with a client's discomfort or negative emotions without immediately trying to make it stop. This is something that's hard for a lot of people to tolerate discomfort or a negative emotion in others. And I'm not saying you have to be 100% comfortable with it right when you start as a coach. It is a skill you build. But it's pretty hard to be a coach if you get really uncomfortable and can't sit with it when someone else is sad or is angry or is just having some kind of emotion.

When a client's uncomfortable in a session, that's not a problem to solve. It's information. Those emotions coming up, it's good that they're coming up. One of the reasons somebody came to coaching is probably to have the space to explore what needs to come up. So let's say a client comes in and they say, "You know, I've been trying to leave my job for two years. I just can't make the jump." And they're frustrated, they feel ashamed, they feel defeated, and they start crying.

Now, if you can't tolerate that, you would do probably what their friends or their partner or their parents do, which is you just want them to stop crying, stop feeling bad, feel better, and start reassuring her and trying to rush her to a solution. You know, like, "Okay, let's make a plan. How many jobs are you going to apply for? What websites are you going to use?" Blah, blah, blah. Client comes back the next week if you do that and nothing has changed.

But the coach who is willing to tolerate that discomfort can sit with it long enough for that feeling to come up and going back to skill number two, to ask the questions that really matter. What do you think would happen if you left? Why do you think you might be afraid to leave? And then the client

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actually gets to pause and think about it. Maybe they're afraid they would fail on their own if they went out there. Maybe they would feel guilty for leaving their team. Because you're willing to sit with that emotion they're having and be curious about it, now you find out what's really driving the behavior. The only way to get there was being willing to be there with them in that emotion.

So, here's what I want you to take from this episode. You don't need to be perfect or know everything or have done everything to be able to help clients. Because the way that we help clients is by asking them powerful questions that uncovers things they didn't understand about themselves, and then we help them shift those things by building new beliefs. That's why the skills that a coach really needs are being interested in people's thinking, being really curious, being able to sit with and tolerate when someone is uncomfortable or experiencing negative emotion.

And being someone who has done some of their own work, not who's solved every problem, not who has the perfect life, not who's coached themselves to perfection, right? We are all still humans having the human experience. But when you have been in the trenches of your own mind and you have created your own transformation in some area of your life, that is when you are so passionate about this work. You are a true believer in it, and you can model what you've done. And that is what your clients will also respond to because they're often learning new skills. How to be present with their own negative emotion, how to be curious about their own thinking, and it's reassuring to them to have someone who's been through it and who can speak with conviction from their own experience. Those are really the qualities that matter for being a coach.

So, on the next episode, we're going to talk about how to use coaching, because being a independent life coach entrepreneur is not the only way to be a coach or to use coaching. I think 10, 15 years ago it kind of was, like when I started out, nobody really knew what a life coach was. I mean,

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people knew what life but it was not as mainstream, it was not as accepted, it was not as common. But now you can be an entrepreneur and start your own business. You can be a full-time coach in someone else's coaching business. You can be a coach inside another organization, right, a company that does whatever, produces widgets, makes beverages, is a consulting company, but has in-house coaches, or you can actually just bring coaching skills into your career as a manager, as a mentor, in HR, as a team leader.

So there's so many ways you can actually use coaching skills these days that go far beyond just being like the stereotypical entrepreneur life coach. And so next episode I want to dig into all of those because I think that there's so many varied ways to use coaching and being a coach that people aren't even really aware of. All right y'all, I'll see you then.