

# Coaching Evolution

From psychological theory to applied behavioral change

by Patrick Williams, EdD, MCC

Coaching is seen as a relatively new phenomenon, but as a field it borrows from and builds on theories and research from related fields such as psychology and philosophy. As such, coaching is a multidisciplinary, multi-theory synthesis and application of applied behavioral change. As coaching evolved in the public arena, it began to incorporate accepted theories of behavioral change as the evidence base for this new helping relationship. However, in recent years, more and more research has been done and evidence-based theories developed to begin creating a body of knowledge and evidence that coaching can call its own (Stober & Grant, 2006).

Possessing some understanding of the origins of coaching can offer prospective and current life and leadership coaches the framework needed to understand their profession. This framework also helps coaches orient themselves in the larger context of a profession still developing its identity, as well as providing insights into possible future opportunities. Life coaches will feel more grounded in the present

– and be better prepared for the future as coaching expands in the 21st century – if we are gazing across the diverse lineages upon which our work is based. Understanding the evolution of coaching can also assist therapists and counselors (and others from the helping professions) to make the transition to life coaching by laying out the similarities and differences between life coaching and other professions (Hart, Blattner & Leipsic, 2001).

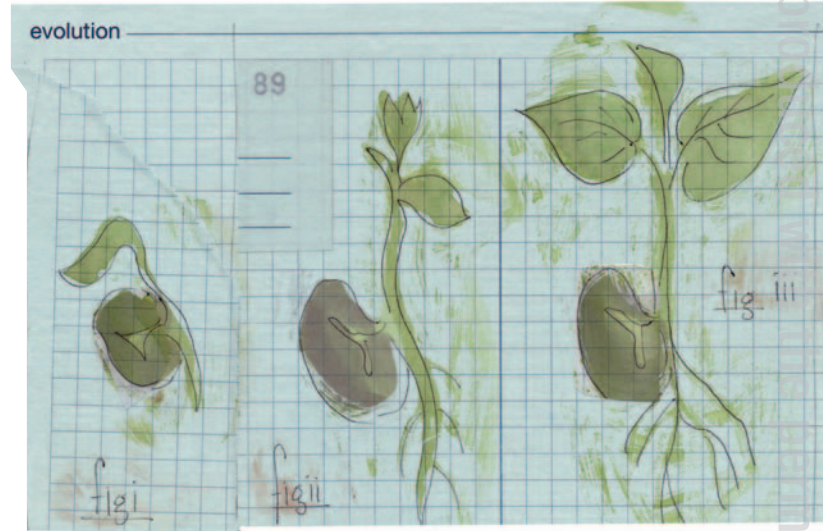
## In The Beginning

Coaching has its foundations in psychology, and knowing this history is essential to appreciating the model as it exists today. There have been four major forces in psychological theory since the emergence of psychology in 1879 as a social science. These four psychological models are Freudian, behavioral, humanistic and transpersonal. Both the Freudian and behavioral models grew out of biology and were focused on pathology and how to “cure” it. The humanistic approaches of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow were a response to the pathological model; they attempted to make space

in psychology for those elements of being human that create health and happiness. Coaching seeks to build on this tradition of seeking what is healthy and productive in people as a foundation for creating a meaningful life.

In a similar vein, the transpersonal psychology movement arose in the late '60s as a further attempt to include more of what allows human beings to function at their best. Its focus was on mind, body and spirit, and included studies and experiences of states of consciousness, transcendence, and what Eastern traditions and practices had to teach Western theorists and practitioners. As coaches, we can benefit from incorporating the spiritual beliefs of our clients within a more expansive vision that seeks to understand human development and our desire to evolve mentally, physically, spiritually and socially.

In recent years, several other psychological approaches have arisen as adaptations of one or more of the original four and have been taken up by many coaches. Cognitive-behavioral psychology grew from a mix of the behavioral and humanistic schools. I



## My Personal Story

In 1995 I was a burned out psychologist due to the restraints and constraints of mental health insurance, increased documentation, decreased payments, and increased lack of patient confidentiality due to legal pressures. I was ready for something new, exciting and creative, which would also allow me to be flexible in where I lived and traveled (both of my daughters were in college and charting their own life course).

I bought a property owner's manual and tourism business guide for the Caribbean islands and was excited about this possible adventure, planning on opening a scuba dive shop in my chosen paradise. I hired a personal coach recommended to me, who lived on her sailboat in the British Virgin Islands and coached by phone from the marina. That sounded like the best of both worlds so I began to wonder about how to become a coach.

Then, in 1996, I read the article in *Newsweek* about Thomas Leonard and personal coaching; read about Cheryl Richardson and life coaching in *East-West Journal*. Soon thereafter I enrolled in Coach U, hired a new mentor coach and began to make a rapid transition. I closed my psychotherapy practice in six months, moved to Florida and had 18 clients who just needed my new phone number. Wow, this was a great profession.

In 1998 I started the Institute for Life Coach Training, specializing in teaching coaching to therapists and other helping professionals who could add coaching to their business and someday make the transition I did, if they chose to. What could be better than having high functioning and relatively healthy clients who paid you a monthly retainer – and you could live wherever you wanted? The rest is history.

say this because much of cognitive psychology embodied wisdom and learnings from behaviorism and even operant conditioning. But when the humanistic aspect was included, it became a way to use those techniques and theories of change to increase choice for the individual.

### Coach As Guide

In coaching, then, we can utilize what we know about our client's shifting mindset and behaviors by using a process of inquiry and powerful questions that guide the client toward understanding their ability to respond rather than react to their personal situations. Reacting relies on pro-

grammed behaviors that often were learned in childhood and may not be adaptive to an adult perspective. Responding, however, comes from viewing the multiple choices available in cognition and behavior rather than just reacting habitually, and feels more expansive and personally validating than a knee-jerk reaction.

Positive psychology builds on two key principles from humanistic psychology: a non-mechanistic perspective and a view of possibility as opposed to pathology as the essential approach to the client. Humanistic psychology arose to promote the emphasis on personal growth and the importance of beingness and the phenomenology of the human experience. Along with each revolution in psychology, a changing image of human nature has evolved along with greater insights into how to effectively work with people. Coaching has especially benefited from the focus on what makes a person healthy rather than that which we judge as pathology.

Coaching has grown as a profession, I believe, because of the shortage of real listening in our society today and due to the lack of true connection that many people experience. All of these factors arise from the socioeconomic conditions of rapid change, technology advances, and the instant availability of information. Carl Rogers said counseling was like buying a friend; hiring a coach is similar. But, of course, it is much more than that. A coach is a partner who is hired to assist the client in going for greatness in any and all domains of their life. People may not always need a coach, but I believe they do *deserve* a coach.

### Bringing It All Together

It is very important for those progressing as professional coaches today to understand how much of this theoretical foundation of coaching has become part of their "ground of being" rather than a technique they pull out of their pocket to use with a specific client, particularly those who transition into coaching from psychology or other helping professions. Some of this theoretical foundation has become infused in our culture as a whole, further deepening this ground of being. At the same time, the contributions of certain theorists (particularly more recent ones, for example the positive psychology of Martin Seligman) offer a unique new lens through which to understand human behavior and sometimes even help to shape an entirely new paradigm.

We have come to see that each element of the coaching relationship is related to other areas of the client's life, and

## psychology alliance

as such is influenced by the coaching conversation. For example, if a client is concerned about making a career transition, the conversation will naturally touch on interpersonal relationships, personal wellness, or even his/her emotions around the idea of making changes. All of these issues are relevant in a whole-person approach. As coaches, we need to be willing to expand the conversation through asking questions that may seem off topic, but relate in a systemic manner.

The hallmarks of coaching are its synthesis of tools from other fields and its proclivity for innovation. With all the research going on today, coaching is developing its own evidence-based theories. It has borrowed from what has gone before, much as psychologists borrowed from philosophers. As coaching grows as a profession, it will develop its own research base of effective strategies and tools within the unique relationship that is the coaching alliance. What we are finally seeing now is the arrival of a tipping point in society – people know about life coaching, know when coaches can be helpful, know how to find a coach, and are beginning to know the difference between receiving psychotherapy to

heal old wounds and partnering with a coach to achieve optimal living and expressing their magnificence. •

*Patrick Williams has been a licensed psychologist since 1980 and began executive coaching in 1990 with Hewlett Packard, IBM, Kodak and other companies, becoming a full-time coach in 1996. Pat has co-authored the following books: Therapist as Life Coach: Transforming Your Practice (2nd Edition 2007); Total Life Coaching: 50+ Life Lessons, Skills, and Techniques to Enhance Your Practice and Your Life. (2005); Law and Ethics of Coaching: How to Solve and Avoid Difficult Problems in Your Practice. (2006); and Becoming a Professional Coach: Lessons from the Institute for Life Coach Training. (2007).*

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