

Blending Consulting & Coaching For Real Value

By Cheryl C. Belles

I've heard many times that coaching and consulting are very different things. Yet I see that effective, value-creating consultants *and* coaches truly care about their clients, work in partnership with them, and support them in accomplishing their objectives.

No bright line exists between effective consulting and effective coaching when one takes a whole-system view of organizations. Consultants and coaches are not “good” or “bad,” but their approaches may be either “effective” or “ineffective.”

An effective consultant has well-developed coaching skills. An effective coach has well-developed consultative skills.

The most effective consultants and coaches are able to create value for their clients using an optimal blend of consulting and coaching skills. They move back and forth between these roles in a seamless way. Clients just want an approach that gets results. Artificial distinctions are irrelevant to them.

Traditional Consulting – “The Expert Model”

Under the expert model, you have done your job once you have written the memo, published the report, or delivered the PowerPoint presentation. This can result in what Marvin Weisbord calls the “Report-in-the-Drawer Phenomenon.”

Knowledge is not the equivalent of action. When a client has difficulty moving forward, in most cases, the primary barrier is not lack of knowledge.

In fact, clients often have so much information at their disposal that they become paralyzed by information overload—thinking they need to have more and more information before they can move forward. *Informed, thoughtful action is what they need.*

When consulting emphasizes knowledge over action it is generally ineffective in getting the client to move forward, implement real change, and realize real benefit.



Traditional Coaching – “The HR Model”

Coaches are often called in to organizations to help individuals or groups around specific performance or “soft-skills” — interpersonal effectiveness, conflict management, leadership competencies. Working with various assessment tools and goal-setting strategies, coaches support individuals and teams in improving their performance.

Sometimes this type of coaching fails to take into account the organizational system context within which the person being coached must operate.

It's often said that coaches do not need to have content knowledge—only to be skilled at asking questions, encouraging, and supporting the client's efforts. *But how can you know the most powerful questions to ask without some knowledge of the client's environment and the challenges they are facing?*

Coaches may diminish their effectiveness by failing to provide information and advice that is needed to support the client in linking the goals of the coaching with the critical, business goals of the organization.

Coaching then takes a back seat when other more pressing organizational issues need to be addressed. It becomes just another “HR program” rather than part of an integrated improvement initiative.

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A Blend of Coaching and Consulting

Consider this a bell curve. At one end of the curve is pure consulting; at the other end is pure coaching. In the middle, for each consultation (or meeting with a client), there exists an optimum blend of coaching and consulting behaviors. In business, few situations call for either pure consulting or pure coaching.

The Cambridge Dictionary of American English partly defines a “consultation” as the act of exchanging

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information and opinions about something in order to reach a better understanding of it or to make a decision regarding it. That's not far off from many definitions of coaching.

To serve each client in the best possible way, a consultant needs to have a deep grasp of coaching concepts. Likewise, coaches need to be cognizant of the information that their clients need so they can be consultative when the situation calls for it.

In each interaction with a client, consultants and coaches are required to make judgment calls regarding the appropriate consulting or coaching strategies to employ that provide optimum benefit to the client.

This is an art—not a science. For example, in some cases, the client clearly needs information to move forward. In some cases, providing information before a client has gone through the process of fully exploring the situation is counterproductive.

A Coaching/Consulting Strategy. Ask more than you tell, and then tell gently.

An opportunity to blend coaching and consulting skills happens during almost every conversation with a client. The rule is simple. Don't tell them what to do too quickly.

One of the most important coaching skills is effective questioning. Every consultant, every coach must know how to ask great questions. That leads to well-developed assessment and diagnostic skills.

Try this technique. The next time you are overcome with the urge to tell a client what they should do - ask three questions first. It can be **any three questions** that are intended to help the client clarify their wants, needs, concerns, action plan, anticipated value, and maybe just to give you a little more information even if you think you know everything you need to.

Really listen to the answers. Then go ahead and share your insights. One very effective way to do this is to send up a trial balloon. Ask a question such as, "What if we...?" "Would it be more effective if...?" "How about this idea...?" "Try this on..."

Start with the assumption that the client would eventually solve their own problems even if you weren't there. You add value by helping to accelerate the process, minimizing false starts, helping them anticipate roadblocks or problems, enabling them to make higher quality deci-

We continue to find practical strategies for blending coaching and consulting—strategies that are effective with today's savvy clients in today's complex organizations. Consider a company in the midst of any type of significant organizational change. For example, it may be implementing enterprise-wide technology, involved in a merger, forming a strategic alliance or undertaking large-scale process redesign. What all these initiatives have in common is that they require a blend of consulting and coaching strategies to be effective.

Whether consultant or coach, being a facilitator of change involves helping the client understand what needs to be done, including practical strategies for doing it. This means sharing knowledge and strategies, presenting frameworks for decision-making, and providing information necessary for the client to evaluate alternative courses of action.

Being a facilitator of change also involves supporting the client in taking action on those decisions. This means assisting the client in outlining specific implementation steps, establishing timelines, securing resources, and removing barriers. A consultative coach is able to operate skillfully in both arenas of change.

Most consulting methodologies have a theoretical base that encompasses people, process, technology, and organizational structure components. Many consultants tend to focus on the process and technology aspects. Many coaches tend to focus on the people and organizational development aspects.

The most valuable consultants will provide true, integrated service to their clients by blending coaching and consulting competencies to truly address all dimensions of individual and organizational success.

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"Ask three questions first...any three..."

