

## **Seven Tips for Trouble-Free Pro-Bono Coaching**

*By Tony Stoltzfus*

If you are starting your practice, coaching as part of a staff role or working in the ministry arena, you'll probably do some free (or pro-bono) coaching. No-fee coaching relationships have a unique set of challenges all their own. Here are ten tips for keeping them problem free

### **1. Use a Commitment-Check Step**

One of the perils of pro-bono coaching (especially for pastors and ministry leaders) is that the client views the coaching relationship as a way to hang out with you or befriend you instead of as a way to work on personal growth. To weed out people who aren't serious, I use a commitment-check action step. Before coaching someone pro-bono, I request that they read a few chapters of a coaching book or take some action toward their goal, then call me when they are done to schedule our first session. The ones who aren't serious about working never call back.

### **2. Set a Time Limit**

It is easy for pro-bono clients to just assume you'll give your valuable services to them ad infinitum, and then get hurt when you need or want to stop giving. A great way around this is to structure a time limit into your initial contract. Just say, "I'll coach you for 4 months and then we'll stop and reevaluate whether to continue." Having that break point gives you a graceful way out without someone's feelings getting hurt.

### **3. Have a Written Agreement**

This is more important in a pro-bono relationship, not less! You need to do everything you can to reinforce that this is a serious, professional relationship with serious, professional expectations. Don't skip the contract, even with a friend. You won't regret it.

### **4. Inform About Your Real Fees**

If you are starting a coaching practice, you may be coaching your first clients for low or no fees just to gain experience. Instead of quoting people a low start-up rate, put your standard rate (the one you want to be at in three

to six months) into your contract, and offer your first customers a discount for a limited period of time. The right pitch will let you easily convert them to paying clients when the time is right. Try something like this: “I’m jump-starting my coaching practice by offering one-time discounts to a selected group of clients. I’m willing to offer this great discount rate for the first three months, because I’m confident that once you’ve seen what coaching is worth to you, you’ll want to keep right on working with me.”

#### **5. No Work/No Coaching Clause**

Paying for coaching motivates people to work. When there’s no fee, some clients expect less of themselves, and so they accomplish less. Make sure your contract has a no work/no coaching clause – in other words, when a pro-bono client consistently fails to do his or her action steps, your contract should call for bringing the relationship to an end. It is no fun to coach someone who refuses to work.

#### **6. Keep Time Boundaries**

Pro-bono relationships, especially with friends, tend to expand beyond their boundaries more easily than a paid coaching relationship. A chance meeting at church or at the gym becomes a 20 minute extra session, or unscheduled calls in emergencies grow into an extra burden. Run your pro-bono relationships just like your paid ones: meet only for planned times, stick to time limits, keep spot calls within reason.

#### **7. Maintain Coaching/Mentoring Boundaries**

We live in a generation of fatherless and motherless people. That means that many times when we invest in someone, they begin to look to us to fill the hole left by the lack of blessing and attention from their own parents. This is probably the biggest cause of breakdown in pro-bono relationships: the client unconsciously expecting more than the coach can give. Maintaining clear coaching and mentoring boundaries can help. In other words, don’t regularly fall into giving the client answers and advice. Be a coach, not a mother or father!

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