

## **Seven Tips for Effective Free Coaching**

*By Tony Stoltzfus*

If you are coaching as part of a staff role, working in the ministry arena or just starting out as a professional coach, you'll probably do some free (or pro-bono) coaching. No-fee coaching relationships present a unique set of challenges, particularly in the areas of buy-in and expectations. Here are seven key tips for keeping your free coaching relationships problem free:

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

One of the perils of free 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 about change, I use a commitment-check action step. Before volunteering to coach someone, 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 those who are receiving free coaching 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 agreement. 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 step is even more important in a no-fee 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 coaching agreement has a no work/no coaching clause – in other words, when a client consistently fails to do his or her action steps, your agreement 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 no-fee relationships just like professional coaches do with paid ones: meet only for planned times, stick to time limits, keep spot calls within a short time limit.

#### **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 coaching 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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