

What Makes a Coach?

by Tony Stoltzfus

What does it take to become an effective coach? Most people's first answer would be the basic listening and asking skills coaches use. But skills are only one facet of what makes a coach—and if your focus never moves beyond skills, you likely won't get the transformational results coaching promises. Here's one list of qualifications for a superb coach.

1. The Heart of a Coach

I believe the most important key to coaching excellence is cultivating the heart of a coach—deeply embracing the value system that underlies coaching. Learning to see people as God sees them is the foundational discipline in coaching. God chooses to work with us according to our creation (made in the image of God) and our destiny (made for relationship with him) instead of our condition (woefully screwed up). If he were responding to us according to our condition, he'd just destroy the planet and start all over again.

Coaches choose to believe that people can be what the Bible says they can be. And they believe that God has us on the road to becoming just that. Coaches are people who have cultivated a posture of faith about God's work in human hearts: that God is already at work in people, he is well able to get his work done, and he doesn't need us to step in to fix everyone around us to make sure that his plan is carried out. Coaching is about having faith in the heart-changing power of the Holy Spirit.

This discipline of faith also leads us to a place of humility: our part in changing people is much smaller than what we've become accustomed to thinking. The work is started by God: we simply come along side it, help the person see it and take responsibility to see it through. When someone we coach gets a victory, it is their victory, not ours, because they've done the work.

This fact makes learning to stop fixing people a real dying to self. We're so addicted to the kudos and sense of accomplishment we get back from fixing others—but coaching doesn't offer those rewards. We are forced to actually give without receiving anything in return. If you've not actively cultivated the discipline of sacrificial love in your life, you'll find it extremely difficult to coach: everything in you will be crying out to tell so you can get something back.

2. The Skills of a Coach

This is the familiar part of coaching: listening, asking powerful questions, getting buy-in, helping people take responsibility for their lives. I won't treat this in depth here, except to say that it is crucial to ground your understanding of the coaching techniques in the coaching values. To really wield these skills effectively, you need to know **why** you are doing them.

3. The Lifestyle of a Coach

Here's another widely-overlooked part of being a coach. Your life is the reservoir you draw from when you work with others. Coaching is the art of drawing things out of people; and it's hard to draw out of others if you haven't dug your own well and learned to draw deeply from it. "The purpose in a man's mind is like deep water; but a man of understanding will draw it out (Prov. 20:5)." That understanding comes from your own life experience. For instance, many people come to coaches to get perspective on their circumstances. How will you help them gain a life-changing attitude adjustment unless you've paid the price to seek out new perspective in your own difficult places? Great coaching is drawn out of the well of a great life.

I'm not talking about accumulating knowledge or information to share with others. I'm talking about being fully, highly engaged with life. Coaches are people who help others live life at a higher level. To do that requires that you live a significant, growing, purposeful, heart-engaged life.

One way you do that is to meet God and allow him to shape you through your circumstances. If you consistently find the purposes of God in what is happening to you, and lean into them, the people you coach will, too. Living at a high level means cultivating deep relationships, giving and receiving genuine feedback, loving and grieving, going out of your way to find personal wholeness. To the degree that you are needy or are still grasping for something you don't have in life, you'll work out that neediness on those you coach.

Telling and fixing people are less habits than they are symptoms of neediness: we fix because **we need** to be fixers, not because people need to be fixed. When you are needy, what you do always seems to end up being about you. Coaching, on the other hand, is consistently, relentlessly being all about the other person. Only people who have a high degree of wholeness are truly free to be about others and not all about themselves.

Even though coaching is a non-directive discipline, it is as true as ever that the primary thing you have to give to others in ministry is what Christ has done in you. Great coaching springs out of fully embracing the work of God in your own life. Those who have embraced his work in themselves are best at helping others to embrace it as well.

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