

“Dear Master Coach”

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Dear Master Coach: At what point does the thick line between coaching and therapy get thin?

Both therapists and coaches are called to help people with change and hope and relationships and satisfaction and contribution in real life. Both aim to help people with the evaluation and repair of limiting beliefs and behaviors. Both are rigorous. Both have codes of ethics that include how we will interact with clients “outside of the hour.”

Coaches worry about sliding into doing therapy without a license, therapists, on the other hand, don’t tend to worry about helping their clients to think about their next steps.

There are some stock answers—I bet you’ve used some of them:

- *Therapists work with the past, coaches with the future.*
- *Therapists work with pathology, injury and pain, coaches with health and aspiration.*
- *Therapists work in a more open-ended, usually long-term way, coaches with specific outcomes in mind.*
- *The results that therapists work toward may be guided by theories of human change, mental health diagnoses, symptom relief or the cessation of problematic and entrenched beliefs and behaviors. The results that coaches work toward are guided by the coachee’s agenda and ambitions.*

Sounds familiar, I know. But, as with most easy answers, these contrasts don’t always apply.

I’ve trained over 250 executive and leadership coaches. And sometimes my fellow therapists are skeptical about this forthright young profession of ours. Some have talked to me about how coaches skim off their more high-functioning clients. As a free-market enthusiast, it makes sense that some therapists think we’re horning in on their market.

Part of my job is to be a respectful peer in the way I talk about their work.

So, let me tell you first-hand what it takes to become a licensed marriage and family therapist.

- Over the course of two years I earned a master’s degree, studying several schools of thought related to system’s theory, client-centered therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, solution-focused brief therapy, mental health diagnoses, professional law and ethics, HIV/AIDS, supervised clinical practice and state licensing requirements. The practice of therapy is heavily guided by theory and I had to learn a lot of it.
- Then, in the State of Washington, I accomplished 3,000 hours of supervised clinical practice experience with veteran therapists.
- Then I answered some “personal data questions” and drove to Olympia to take a half-day long licensing test constructed by the State of Washington.
- Then I’ve renewed my license with 36 hours of continuing education every two years for twenty years. It was a lot. I keep my license because it was hard to get.

The coaches I've trained have followed a different, but I think equally rigorous path.

- First they spend a decade or two or three getting great at something else.
- They have to figure out how to work with groups and teams in the course of delivering a product or service,
- And about resolving disagreements
- They are students of understanding markets and how to turn a profit so they could keep their jobs.
- Along the way, maybe they develop a reputation for mentoring, teaching and helping other professionals.

And then they hit mid-career and it dawns on them that life is big and life is short and life only moves in one direction and they're half-way through and that maybe they have a larger contribution to make. And so they show up at a place like SeattleCoach ready to be learners again. And you all know about the credentialing requirements that most of them sign up for.

Why did I become a coach?

Though I keep my license (it was hard to get), and I use my eclectic background daily ([See "Dear Master Coach," Summer 2018 on "Using your SME"](#)), I don't offer my services as a therapist these days. I'm just a coach. Here's why:

- The clients who were finding me in the late-1990s really were coaching clients. One famously looked me in the eye and said, *"Patty, I'm fine. I don't have a diagnosis and my relationship is fine. And I don't want to stop coming here."*
"Well," therapist-Patty asked, *"What would we talk about?"*
And my client leaned forward and said, *"I just turned forty and I'm half-way through. We would talk about my contribution and my satisfaction."*
"Well I can't bill your insurance for that." I challenged.
"I know." He smiled.
(It didn't hurt that along the way I learned that as an executive coach I made more money than I did when insurance companies were signing my checks.)
- I found that as members of ICF, we talk just as much about our professional ethics and mutual accountability. Between our relationships as coaches, our agreements with the ICF and our very-discerning market, we go beyond what would be required by any licensing requirements that Olympia might someday come up with.
- Most important, I find every day that the practice of coaching rigorously requires just as much emotional intelligence and self-management. And just as much continuous learning. It is just as poignant and satisfying.

So back to the thickness of the line. Here's how I think about it.

1. When I notice that the agenda they want to work on keeps returning to an old story, usually one they want to review, redefine and heal from through the course of weeks or months.
2. When my own self-awareness calls me to look back at them and say, "I think we need another member on our team—someone who specializes in helping people to unpack an old pattern or relationship or way of being in the world that is asking for some attention. I can still be your coach." And then I ask a few questions, (male? female? what part of town?) and then provide the names and websites of two or three therapists I know and trust.

It has only rarely been the case that I have run into the need for a thick line: severe mood disorders, addictions, and other clear DSM diagnoses. And when I have, I've usually consulted with another coach about the best ways to conclude a coaching relationship and make a referral to a licensed therapist.

I've always thought that counselors, therapists, clergy, coaches and good managers see ways they could help as they listen to this classic poem by Portia Nelson. The poet writes:

"I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost... I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But, it isn't my fault.
It still takes me a long time to get out.

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in. It's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault. I get out immediately.

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

I walk down another street."

How would you help?

PEB, MC

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