



## Counseling & Life Coaching: Complementary or Competitive?

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As we approach the end of the first decade of the 21st century, one aspect of life has become increasingly clear. People don't talk to each other very much -- we communicate: phone, fax, email, and text messaging have all seemed to replace face-to-face contact. Despite the many and varied models of career guidance and counseling, our country is clearly lacking in teaching communication, life, and leadership skills. Enter the "life coach" (Cole, 2000), "executive life coach" (Gladis, 2007), "goal-focused coach" (Grant & Cavanaugh, 2007), and others, whose main emphases include performance enhancement, decision-making, effective management of life and work, as well as "developing practical strategies to tackle personal and professional problems" (Leney, 2007).

### Counseling Defined

Counseling is an art and science where two or more people are engaged in a helping relationship in which one of them (counselor) is a trained, educated, qualified, and most often licensed and certificated as the helper and the other(s) are client(s) seeking help. The purpose of the relationship is that of the counselor helping one or more clients to solve issues, concerns or problems which arise from attempts to cope with life in an increasingly complex world (Maples, 1996, p.47).

A shorter definition is also provided by the American Counseling Association, "...*counseling* can be...defined as a relatively short-term, interpersonal, theory-based process of helping persons who are basically psychologically healthy resolve developmental and situational problems" (ACA, 2007, Counseling section, ¶ 8). Finally, and ironically, the definition above from the American Counseling Association is the same definition found on Wikipedia (n.d.). However, the Wikipedia definition also adds: "There are probably as many definitions of counseling as there are practitioners to describe it" (¶ 2).

The reader, who is most likely engaged in the profession of counseling, may wonder why these definitions are shared in the article, when most of them have their own definitions. They are defined because of the similarity to the various definitions of coaching. For the purpose of this paper, the term will be modified by "Life" coaching, "Executive" coaching, "Career" coaching, and "Performance Enhancement" coaching, just as there are varieties of counseling: career, marriage and family, school, mental health, and college.

### Coaching Defined

According to Cole (2000), coaching is "an action-oriented partnership that ... concentrates on where you are today and how you can reach your goals" (p.95). She further states that "nothing beats having your own personal Bela Karolyi to help

negotiate the balance beams and uneven bars of life" (p.95). The International Coach Federation defines coaching as "an ongoing partnership that helps clients produce fulfilling results in their lives. Clients deepen their learning, improve their performance and enhance their quality of life" (Cole, 2000). Grant (2003) defines goal-focused coaching as a "collaborative, solution-focused and systematic process which is aimed at enhancing performance, self-directed learning and well-being" (p.752).

Recent coaching titles in the popular press include: "Coaches Wanted in the Game of Life" (Tahmincioglu, 2008), "You go, girl! That'll be \$300" (Savage, 2006), and "Hoping to get on the Fast Track, Students turn to Career Coaches" (Zimmerman, 2006). According to Cole (2000), "Life coaches won't drag up bad memories. They will tell you what to do – and how to win big," (p. 95). Sounds like an aggressive, directive, assertive form of counseling. But, according to many in the "life coaching profession," there remains a stigma attached to the profession of *counseling* (Jarvis, 2003; Wright, 2005; Cole, 2000; Hartung & Taber, 2008). Life coaching, also known as "performance and leadership coaching" (Betof, 2007), while not a profession *per se*, (that is, there are no guidelines, no standards, no accreditation, and no requirements), has swept through both the U.S. and the U.K. in recent years.

According to Savage (2006):

Until the mid-1970's, the word *coach* only appeared in the sports pages of newspapers. Then life coaches started appearing in the media in the last several years. Tahmincioglu (2008) notes that the International Coach Federation, an industry association located in Kentucky, counts 15,000 members, 900 of whom live in Canada, and growing at 200 members per month (p.63).

The movement includes everything from "executive coaches" who try to improve the performance of corporate managers, to specialists in attention deficit disorder or dating. However, the promise of "personal" or "life coaching" is most ambitious and most ambiguous. What is it, exactly? According to Savage (2006), "not therapy, coaches are quick to note. Therapy is about the past; coaching is about the present and the future" (p. 62).

The reader may, at this time, reflect that this "life coaching" sounds identical to personal or career counseling.

### Differences Between Counseling and Coaching

The first difference is the fact that there currently exist no standards for training in coaching, as compared to counselor training standards with the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP).

There is no certification for individuals conducting life coaching, as the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) certifies those who pass the national exam. Second, unlike counseling (by a licensed professional), which provides insurance compensation to pay for the professional's services, coaching is very expensive, \$300 per session (Caskey, in Savage, 2006) to "\$2,950 for eight 90 minute sessions" (Zimmerman, 2006, p. 12), or approximately \$370 per session, and cannot be compensated from health insurance.

Third, while the International Coach Federation in Kentucky offers various credentials and a code of ethics as well as accreditation through Coach U., a school based in Andover, Kansas, the training program, conducted entirely via telecast, costs \$4,000. It included 132 hours of training and took two and a half years to complete (Tahmincioglu, 2008).

Finally, and perhaps the most significant difference of all, is the fact that the majority of coaching sessions are conducted by phone. While the organization, Ready Minds, Inc. does provide certification for *professional, licensed counselors* in Distance Counseling, and is approved by the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC), again, the Coaching field does not have such a training program at this writing.

### Summary

In a brief amount of space, I have attempted to compare the two services to clients. There are similarities, in that both counseling and life coaching deal with helping people manage and improve their lives. They both, apparently, work with career, leadership and personal issues. But an attempt has been made to isolate the differences as well. Life coaching appears to be in its infancy as a service. Counseling has been around for at least a century.

### Conclusion — Complementary or Competitive?

While accreditation and certification may not guarantee qualification, one might wonder about how a helper, a life coach, a personal counselor or therapist can be qualified when lacking these credentials. Most readers are aware of the necessary training and background required of a career counselor, a marriage and family counselor, a college or mental health counselor because of the national, regional and state guidelines which must be followed before one can be hired. Many of these regulations are set by legislative mandate, for the protection of both client and counselor. Because the coaching career (life, executive, goal-focused, leadership) is relatively young, it can be stated, perhaps because of the stigma still attached by some potential clients, that the two careers are similar. Consider, for example, the description by Reiss (2004, p.35) of "A Good Coach ...":

1. Challenges and supports people in achieving high levels of performance.
2. Is trained in specific skills to help a client overcome obstacles and challenges.

3. Does not need to have expertise in the client's field.
4. Helps clients achieve specific goals or improve their life/careers.
5. Has expertise in the process of change.
6. Holds clients accountable for their goals and actions.
7. Has a confidential relationship with each client.
8. Produces increased performance, change or results for an individual and his/her organization.

With this brief comparison of counseling and coaching, it is left to the reader to determine: Complementary or Competitive?

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