

Chapter Number

COACHING AS

TRANSFORMATION

DEBORAH HOWARD

David Wright (Wright)

Today I'm talking with Deborah Howard, Founder and President of Guiding Change Consulting Inc. Deborah is a change catalyst, writer, coach, educator, consultant, and lifelong learner who evokes insight, clarity, and new perspectives to empower, energize, and inspire individuals, teams, and organizations to make positive change. She has more than ten years' experience helping leaders, teams, and organizations with professional and personal development, leadership, team-building, conflict management, diversity, strategic planning, and overall organizational development. She provides consulting, facilitation, leadership coaching, and training to a wide variety of clients including non-profit organizations, corporations, government agencies, hospitals, unions, educational institutions, legal service organizations, and foundations.

Deborah, welcome to *No Winner Ever Got There Without a Coach*.

Deborah Howard (Howard)

Thank you so much, glad to be here.

Wright

Deborah, you have an unusual and eclectic background. You grew up in Brooklyn, practiced law in Anchorage, Alaska, lived in Japan, ran a non-profit organization, and now have a consulting business. What made you decide to leave the practice of law?

Howard

I went into the practice of law because I wanted to leave the world a better place by creating positive change. After working in law firms and government agencies as a litigator, however, I got to the point where I just wasn't happy with the adversarial system anymore. If you are familiar with the judicial system, I'm sure you realize it leads to either a win/lose situation or sometimes even a lose/lose situation. Somebody can win a case nominally but walk away feeling like a loser.

I decided that I wanted to do work that involved helping people develop win/win solutions—to help people live better, have better relationships, and more satisfying and productive work environments. So, I went back to school to get my master's degree in organization development and started my own consulting practice. Later, I decided to train to become a coach as well.

Wright

What do you enjoy most about your coaching work?

Howard

I love to see individuals transform from feeling “stuck” and unsure to being able to access their inner wisdom and tap into their deepest potential.

Often clients come to me feeling at a loss as to what to do next. They feel like whatever they were doing before isn't working anymore, whatever felt good before doesn't feel good anymore, and they know they want to move forward, but they either don't know how to move forward or are not sure about what direction to move toward. In short, they feel stuck. What I find remarkable is to work with people who start out feeling this way and through the coaching process, I witness them expanding into all of who they can be. I see them push through walls, and discover options and alternatives they could not see before that enable them to live more fully.

Wright

What are some of the reasons that people end up feeling “stuck”?

Howard

That's a great question. I think we all have times in our lives when we feel unable to move forward. We have a goal we are trying to meet and we just can't seem to get started or maintain momentum.

There are a number of reasons why this may happen. First, I have clients who, in the process of coaching, realize that the reason they are unable to progress toward their stated goal is because it's not really something they *want* to do—their heart is not in it but they have been pursuing the goal because of some “should” that has been embedded in their mind. This “should” is often the result of a parent's desire for them, or of a societal expectation based on gender, etc. that has become an unquestioned assumption. When they are able to recognize this, they are freed up to discover what they are truly passionate about doing. For example, I have coached a number of attorneys who, like me, have been unable to find satisfaction in the practice of law. It's by discovering that their true passion lies elsewhere, that they are able to garner the energy and motivation to move forward and find purpose and satisfaction.

Another reason people may be unable to move forward is that they have a limiting belief of some kind that prevents them from doing so. They feel stuck, but don't know why because that limiting belief is so deeply buried in their unconscious that they're not even aware of it. So the coaching is really about discovering and surfacing that limiting belief and then reframing it or replacing it with a new belief that enables them to be empowered and move forward.

For example, I had a client who was the founding executive director of a nonprofit organization. She had put her heart and soul into establishing and nurturing this organization but she was ready to move in a different direction in her professional life. Despite her stated desire to move on, she was having a difficult time letting go and telling the board of directors about her decision.

Through the process of coaching, she discovered she had been operating under the belief that she held total responsibility for the success or failure of the organization. She was also worried about what would happen if her successor were not able to maintain the organization's success. This limiting belief was preventing her from taking action.

Once she realized this, she was able to replace that belief with the understanding that she had done the best she could to create this organization but it had to be able to survive without her. It was at that point she was able to let go, focus her energy, and move forward.

Another client of mine headed a department in a nonprofit organization. She was excellent at what she did and highly respected in her field. She had achieved her success by working incredibly long hours, but she had come to realize that life was not sustainable or particularly enjoyable that way. She was overwhelmed and resentful of all the work she had to do. She wanted to create more balance in her life.

As we worked together, a pattern became clear. Whenever someone on her team appeared to be failing, she would swoop in and take over. I think you can imagine how this contributed to her inability to develop work-life balance. Through the coaching process, she came to understand that she had an internal unconscious belief blocking her ability to meet her stated goal. She believed that, as a leader, being supportive of and responsible for her team members meant she had to make sure that they never failed.

In working with her, she came to realize that if she kept taking over whenever she felt there was a problem, not only would she continue to be overloaded, but she would be preventing her team members from learning and developing professionally. As she began to step back, she discovered that sometimes her team members were not failing but were simply doing things differently than she would have done. And in some cases, they even produced a better result than what she had anticipated!

There are some limiting beliefs that are common among certain groups. For example, I do a lot of work with women leaders, and one of the limiting beliefs they tend to suffer from, particularly those in the non-profit world, is the belief that if they put their needs first, it means they are being selfish. So, they put everyone else's needs in front of their own needs—both at work and at home. This leaves them overwhelmed and overloaded. And, it threatens the very relationships they value because they become too tired and stressed to spend quality time with their friends and family.

The coaching process enables them to see that they're not going to be able to take care of anybody else or enjoy fulfilling relationships if they don't take care of themselves. Often, simply giving themselves the gift of an hour a week of coaching is the first step they are able to take in terms of self-nurturance and self-care.

Wright

Sometimes when people feel “stuck,” they see a therapist. What is the difference between therapy and coaching?

Howard

Well, that's a question people often ask and there is a simple difference. In both therapy and coaching, the processes can surface limiting beliefs that keep a person from living a fulfilled life.

In therapy, the process involves looking backward into the past to explore the origins of that belief. Often, this can involve becoming focused on the problem rather than focusing on ways to move forward.

In coaching, on the other hand, we focus only on the present and the future. So when we identify a limiting belief, we look at whether this belief serves the client or not. If it's not serving the client, then it's a matter of reframing it or replacing it with a belief that is going to help the client achieve his or her goals.

Wright

You have talked about individuals who feel stuck or stymied in some way. It's clear how they can benefit from coaching, but what about people who are successful? Can they benefit from working with a coach?

Howard

People who are successful and feeling fulfilled can definitely benefit from having a coach. When you think about it, almost anyone who is among the best in their field has a coach. These people include individuals such as Winton Marsalis, the trumpet player, or Rafael Nadal, the tennis player. It's not because they aren't successful or because they feel unfulfilled that they need a coach. Rather, it's because they want to remain at the top of their game and be able to move even further than they thought they could go before.

Coaching helps individuals continue to learn and grow, which is what life is all about. The minute we stop learning and growing is when we become stagnant. That is why top athletes, top musicians, and others have coaches. It's really about staying on the cutting edge.

Wright

How does a client know that a coach who is right for him or her?

Howard

That's a really important question. The coach/client relationship is an intimate and personal one so I suggest that people try a coach out before making a decision. I always give individuals a free session so that they can gain an understanding of what the process is like and to enable them to see if my personality and style are a fit for them. The foundation of a successful coaching relationship is mutual trust.

Wright

Well, that sounds like a good friendship. What's the difference between a friendship and a coaching relationship?

Howard

There are certainly similarities between the two kinds of relationships. They both involve trust and true caring. The primary difference, however, is that the coaching relationship involves setting up a contract in which the coach agrees to serve the best interests of the client putting the client's needs and desires first. In doing so, however,

the coach takes on responsibility to help clients heighten their awareness of their thought and behavior patterns, provide them with direct and candid feedback, and enable them to access their own wisdom and answers.

Wright

What do you see as the foundation of your coaching style?

Howard

My coaching style is based on my training with the Success Unlimited Network® coaching program. An integral part of that program is helping clients identify their life purpose. When people hear the term “life purpose,” they may think it’s a specific goal or interpret it as something they are *supposed* to be doing in their life. But your life purpose is not a goal or a responsibility; rather, it’s a unique description of who you are and what you were put on this earth to do and be. It provides a sense of meaning and relatedness among all parts of your life. So once you identify your life purpose, you are able to live with more focus and in alignment with what inspires and excites you. Your life purpose serves as a navigational tool to help you in your life journey. Once you have clarity about your life purpose, you are easily able to prioritize, make decisions, and face challenges effectively and with more certainty.

Wright

What’s an example of how you use a client’s life purpose in your coaching work?

Howard

I often have clients come to me who are in a state of transition of some kind—a life change, a career change, a relationship change, and so on. As I’m sure you know from your experiences of significant transition, these can be difficult and challenging times. When you are in the midst of a transition, it’s often hard to conceive of what’s coming next or to develop any clarity about desired next steps. The first step in helping people get clear and focused, therefore, is to have them identify their life purpose.

In addition to helping clients obtain clarity about next steps, their life purpose can be a tool to help them face challenges.

I had a client who was stressed about an upcoming job interview and wanted me to help her prepare for it. Her entire focus was on what

other people were going to think of her. Instead of giving her suggestions of what to do or say at the interview, I asked her how she could use the energy of her life purpose to help her in this interview. Her life purpose was to playfully and joyfully journey through life. She realized that she could view the interview as simply one step in her life journey that she could approach with a sense of play and joyfulness, without worrying about the outcome. When she was able to focus on her life purpose, she was not only able to stop worrying about how others were going to view her, she was able to bring her authentic best self to the interview.

Perhaps what is most powerful about being able to identify your life purpose is that it energizes you and brings you in touch with your passion. When you can live in alignment with your life purpose, you can experience feeling empowered, resourceful and an overall sense of well-being.

Wright

How do you develop a successful coaching plan?

Howard

Developing a plan is the first step in the coaching process. Often, however, a client comes in with a stated goal that is not the real or meaningful goal. Part of the coaching process, therefore, is about helping the client articulate his or her goals. So for example, a client might come in and say, "I want to lose twenty pounds." Well, that's a clear goal, right? But stopping there is not enough. The real question is how the client will benefit from losing those twenty pounds. So I help clients go deeper by asking them, "If you lose twenty pounds, what would that mean?" They often say things such as, "I'll be more confident" or "I'll feel better about myself," and so on. But why should clients wait until they lose twenty pounds before they start to be confident and feel good about themselves? In fact, clients could end up losing the weight and still not be confident or feel good about themselves. In this way, we discover that the clients' deeper goal is to feel confident and better about themselves whether or not they lose weight. So in this case, the plan would involve not just a *doing* goal—the goal of losing weight—but also a *being* goal—the goal of developing confidence and feeling good.

Including both *doing* and *being* goals is an important part of what makes coaching transformative, rather than simply about performance. For example, I often have clients tell me that they want to spend more time with their spouse or children. They may start the process saying, "I want to set a goal of spending one evening a week with my

spouse/child.” I think you and I both know that you can set aside time once a week to spend with someone and have a miserable time. So the goal has to involve more than simply setting aside time to spend with someone because the underlying need is really about developing and maintaining meaningful relationships.

Therefore, the coaching process involves having clients examine times when their relationships are great and what that looks and feels like. When they explore this, they realize that having good relationships involves more than simply spending time together. It involves listening, paying attention, and being 100 percent present. Then the goal becomes setting aside time once a week with an intention to be 100 percent present and attentive and to listen intently so as to be truly connected with their spouse and/or children. That’s a big difference, isn’t it?

Wright

How do you determine when the coaching process has been successful?

Howard

The coaching process involves more than simply meeting goals. In fact, some long-term goals are not met until after the process has concluded. A successful coaching process is one that is transformational in some way. To be transformational, it must involve learning. The process needs to help clients learn what works best for them in achieving their goals. This involves exploring and culling the learning from the client’s experience. When a client succeeds, it is important not to simply move on without garnering the learning. Thus, instead of simply saying, “That’s great, check it off the list,” I ask the clients what made it possible for them to achieve their goal. We take time to enable them to analyze their success to determine what they did that made that success possible.

I then have clients create a winning principle that articulates what enabled them to achieve their goal. As the coaching process progresses, clients develop a list of winning principles that can be applied to other goals and challenges in all aspects of their life. What is most important is that clients develop these principles based on their own experience and what worked for them. Their winning principles are, therefore, unique to them. And, once the coaching process is over, they can refer to these winning principles moving forward. The coaching process is about helping clients learn to fish, instead of doing the fishing for them.

Similarly, when clients are not able to follow through on their plan, it’s not something to be upset about but rather an opportunity for

learning. Then we discuss what got in the way of their being able to achieve their goal. This is often a chance to help a client discover a limiting belief. And what's significant about this is that often, a belief that is limiting clients in some part of their life, is also limiting them in other parts of their lives. So, being able to surface and reframe or replace a limiting belief can be enormously transforming for all aspects of one's life.

Wright

Deborah, what do clients value most from the coaching process?

Howard

Clients take a lot away from the coaching process. They value feeling themselves move forward and being able to look back and see how much they have changed. Just as important as seeing that they have created change, however, is what the coaching process itself provides. It provides clients with something that most successful, busy people don't have a lot of—the space to simply stop and take the time to reflect. Often people are just so busy *doing*, they don't take the time to stop and just *be*. After all, we are human *beings* and we need time to just *be*. Coaching sessions are almost like a vacation for the clients' heart and mind. In that way, part of what a coach does is hold the space and time that enables clients to feel more empowered and energized, or simply relieved that they have been able to reflect and develop the clarity they need.

As I mentioned earlier, I work a lot with women leaders. I coach them individually as well as in groups. As leaders, these women face a number of common issues. What stands out the most for me, however, is their sense of isolation as well as their tendency to burn out because they do not take the time to nurture themselves. Through the coaching process, they are able to discover that the issues they face are common to individuals in their position. But, more importantly, the process provides them with time and space for them to simply slow down, have a chance to reflect, and focus on their own needs and dreams. It not only helps them re-energize and re-invigorate themselves, but also brings them into a resourceful and creative state of mind.

Wright

What is unique about you as a coach?

Howard

I think what makes me unique is that in addition to being trained as a coach I also have training and experience in working with organizations and understanding organizational behavior and group dynamics. Oftentimes what people are experiencing professionally involves not just them as individuals but the system in which they are operating. As someone who consults regularly in organizations and with teams, I bring a unique perspective to a client that somebody who does not have that experience might not be able to bring.

Also, in both my personal and professional life, I have taken risks and undergone numerous transitions. I left my hometown of Brooklyn, uprooted completely and moved to Anchorage, Alaska. Then, I left what had then become my home in Anchorage, picked up again, and moved to Kyoto, Japan. In addition to making geographic transitions, I have transitioned professionally numerous times from working as an attorney in government agencies and law firms, to a legal recruiter to an administrator in an academic institution and to a director of a nonprofit organization before opening my own consulting practice.

I have also personally experienced the feelings of confusion and distress that come when one is on the verge of a transformative change. I know what that feels like, so I can empathize with others and confidently let them know that there is light at the end of the tunnel. I find joy in helping others discover their inner strength, passion, and greatness.

Wright

Today I have been talking with Deborah Howard, a life-long learner who helps clients move forward to achieve their dreams.

Thank you, Deborah, for being with us today on *No Winner Ever Got There Without a Coach*.

Howard

Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Deborah Howard, Esq, MSOD (Master of Science in Organization Development), is the Founder and President of Guiding Change Consulting, Inc. Deborah began her professional life in the field of law. After receiving her bachelor's degree from Harvard University, she went on to receive a law degree from Northeastern University School of Law. She returned to school to receive her master's degree in organization development from American University/NTL. Deborah's experience also includes having lived, studied, and worked in Japan. Her professional experience includes positions in government agencies, court systems, law firms, educational institutions, and nonprofit organizations. Deborah is a member of the NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science, the author of *Repairing the Quilt of Humanity: A Metaphor for Healing and Reparation*, and publisher of a blog on transformative change www.guidingchange.org/blog.

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