

From Frustrated Therapist to Successful Coach

A burned-out therapist
discovers coaching and builds
a successful coaching business
in three months.

My journey from therapist to coach was not, I must admit, so much a journey as it was an experiment—except that instead of being in a nice clean lab, wearing a starched white coat and generally feeling all *experimental*, I was earnestly driving to the only coach training around, and hoping that I'd find something to nourish my budding coaching spirit. Part of me felt that I was flying without a map, part of me wondered if I was setting myself up for severe disappointment, and whatever parts I had left were wondering just what the heck I thought I was doing, anyway.

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Fortunately—mercifully, I might say—the training was impressive. And by that I don't mean that it was striking, remarkable, or anything else that my thesaurus tells me is a synonym for the word *impressive*. I mean that it *made an impression* on me—it reshaped my mind, and altered the paradigm that I now, as a successful coach, use regularly.

Here's why: The coaching exercises were nothing short of transforming. For example, one of the earliest exercises was to work with a partner for five minutes, doing nothing but asking questions. That's it: no suggestions, no feedback, no reflective listening, no brilliant insights, no small talk . . . just questions. Sound easy? I thought so, too, until about the, oh, 12-second mark. That's when it hit me: As a therapist, I was trained to listen, assess, and use my clinical judgment to provide feedback and interventions. Yet here as a coach (or a coach in training), I had to ask *powerful* questions that helped the respondent get in touch with his or her own personalized truth, wisdom, and direction. My role as a coach was not to diagnose and treat, but to empower and enable; not to analyze and reduce, but to synthesize and cocreate; not to uncover, but to *discover*. This. Was. Exciting!

It was as if doors and windows in a closed room were blown wide open and fresh air and sunlight were pouring in. Strangely, however, it wasn't as if this was an entirely new experience. There was something familiar about this—and, since my intuition at this time was chugging along like a popcorn machine on uppers, it quickly hit me what this familiarity was: This was the connection—the *alignment*—that had motivated me to become a therapist in the first place. It was blissful.

FROM BLISS TO EPIPHANY

A Zen master is credited with saying, “First ecstasy, then the laundry.” And while I'm certainly not a Zen master, I can still paraphrase and say that my next task was to take my *bliss* and apply it in a practical way to my professional life as a couples therapist and (budding) coach.

The first thing I noticed was that this wasn't going to be convenient. That is, there wasn't any template or step-by-step model to follow,

From Bliss to Epiphany

nor were there even the building blocks of one. Relationship coaching, as I've come to define it today, *simply didn't exist back in the late 1990s*. Sure, there were folks claiming to be relationship gurus, relationship wizards, relationship experts, and even a few relationship coaches, but there was no standardization for applying this exciting new methodology called "coaching" to relationships. Furthermore, except for coaches trained by programs accredited by the International Coach Federation (ICF), there wasn't even an appreciation for standards. Many people were just doing their own thing and calling it coaching. It was truly a licensing board's worst nightmare.

I had a problem with that. Because, even though I wasn't thrilled with life as a therapist, that didn't mean that I wanted to get rid of my principles, or my belief in the value of professional standards and a way to measure, achieve, and monitor those standards. So I had work to do.

Through the lens of coaching, which I'll discuss more in a moment, I started to view my work in a different light: in a way that was in harmony with the very essence of the helping profession. I started asking myself surprisingly fundamental questions about what I was doing, who I was doing it for, and how I could achieve it. (See, I told you they were fundamental questions.) And during this process, I experienced the biggest epiphany of my life so far. Three little words exploded into my head like flames after a lightning strike: "*Singles become couples.*" That's it! This was my *key* to reaching the public, lowering the divorce rate, and getting motivated clients. As a therapist I'd worked with many individuals, but it had never occurred to me to work with singles as a way to promote successful relationships. As a coach, this seemed natural. Because, after all, where do couples come from? They come from singles. It was so simple.

So, even though (at the time) I had no idea how to help them, I started to focus on singles. That is, I relied on straightforward marketing strategies (more on this in a moment) to reach out to singles and, through the lens of coaching, I created systems that enabled singles to find and have healthy, nourishing, and loving relationships. And to my delight, it worked! People from all walks of life—not unhealthy people in search of a cure, but everyday people in search

of something *better*—were attending my events, lectures, and workshops. Things became so busy that I started training associates, who could then reach out to more people. In three months, though I still had a few therapy clients, 99% of my time was spent on coaching, and on coaching new coaches (say *that* three times fast).

With the luxury of hindsight, I can say that there were four key ingredients that enabled my success. It's hard to say which was most important and which least; it's easier (and more honest) to say that they all worked interdependently to move me forward. They were:

1. My willingness to put aside my fears and anxieties as a therapist and fully explore something new. It's probable that it would have been easier for me if I *hadn't* been a therapist, because it's sometimes easier to launch into something new when you aren't comparing it to something old.
2. The empowering principles of coaching itself, which I'll focus on later in this chapter.
3. The people around me: the singles who showed up at my events and workshops, and the other coaches and associates who contributed to the vision that became the Relationship Coaching Institute (RCI).
4. My marketing strategies (and guesses and hopes and "let's try this—it can't hurt" tactics). Let's look at these now.

MY MARKETING EXPERIENCE . . . I MEAN *EXPERIMENT*

Later in this book, I devote a solid chunk of space to easy, practical, and low-cost—sometimes *no-cost*—marketing ideas, all of which I've used with success. For now, however, I'd like to take a smaller look (call it an appetizer, if you wish) at the specific marketing that I experimented with early in my coaching career. As you read these strategies, I'd like you to keep two good things in mind:

1. Yes, marketing *can* be this easy, and you don't already need to be a marketing guru to figure it out.

2. Even if you aren't planning to be a relationship coach (and I don't presume that you are), you can still abstract the strategies I used here and easily apply them to any kind of coaching that you'll do—sports, business, weight loss, helping artists. There's no limit.

Now back to my marketing experiment—and I call it that instead of *experience* because, back then, it was honestly more of an experiment. I needed to find a way to reach out to singles. But how? I wasn't used to this way of doing things. As a therapist, I had relied on my yellow pages ad, managed-care referrals, and word of mouth to build my practice. But as a coach, I had the freedom—and the responsibility—to venture out of my office and be more proactive. For that, I needed marketing. Because that's what marketing is *good* at doing.

Keeping things simple out of necessity more than preference, it occurred to me that finding prospective single clients for my new coaching practice in traditional settings would probably be a mistake. By traditional, I mean singles bars and other places that are, typically, thinly veiled meat markets that attract two types of clientele: predators and the dangerously uninformed. While I empathize with the latter and admit they need help (i.e., they need to *leave* the premises as soon as possible), I needed to look elsewhere. Aha! My men's organization and an affiliated women's organization would be the places to start. That's where my target market could be found; that's where, presumably, I'd connect with singles looking for the tools and support for creating and maintaining successful relationships.

Using old-fashioned tools like my own voice and the telephone, as well as this relatively new thing (at the time) called e-mail, I spread the word about my four-session pilot program for singles: meet in my office as a group every Thursday evening for a month. And just like the Field of Dreams, I built it, and they came. Well, okay, there wasn't a flood of demand. But there wasn't a sad trickle, either. I could fit only 12 people in my office, and all 12 slots were filled within a week after first announcing the program. Though I wasn't fully conscious about my strategy at the time, this became my focus group that helped me understand the goals, needs, and challenges of

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singles in my area. The attendees' feedback helped me craft a weekly Friday Night Social that was designed to be an alternative to the singles scene, and provided what I billed as a "safe, fun, educational place for singles to meet." It was a positive community resource for singles that helped me connect with prospective coaching clients—everybody benefited.

I scheduled my first Friday Night Social for the following month, marketing it mostly through word of mouth, a few press releases, and some free listings in local newspaper calendar sections. I rented a private, comfortable space in a nearby group practice that could hold up to 25 people, and recruited one of my office mates to help out (thanks, Kathleen!). Nobody worked in the building on Friday nights, so we had the place to ourselves. The first week I was a nervous wreck, fearing that no one would come, and was grateful and excited to have 18 participants. The second week 24 showed up. The third week was standing room only as participants overflowed into the hallways, and I had to scramble to find a larger space for future meetings. My coaching practice was full within three months, and I brought a partner (Marvin Cohen) and some associates on board to manage the growth of our singles community and the demand for our classes, workshops, groups, and individual coaching.

The Friday Night Social was a success and attracted local singles hailing from different walks of life, all looking for empowerment and information. It was inspiring and fun. Word quickly spread, and even fellow therapists were referring their single clients to me and asking me to conduct a training for them. That first training marked the birth of the Relationship Coaching Institute (RCI). Again, I'll take a deeper and less autobiographical look at marketing later in this book. The preceding account was simply to provide you with an idea of how easy it is to pull together.

Now, I'd like to switch gears and refocus on coaching itself. During my training, I discovered (i.e., bumped into, was hit over the head with, was shocked by, and so on) coaching principles that supplied my "aha" moments. They created my new paradigm of doing work and have influenced everything that I've done with RCI. Since these are principles, and not specific to me or my coaching niche, they can

Five Principles of Coaching

work for you, too. So that means that if you're one of those readers who likes to underline things in books, the next part is where you want to have your pencil sharp and at the ready.

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF COACHING

The first principle I discovered is that coaching forces you (and yes, it is a forcing) to note **how people make choices**. This awareness provides you with the basic understanding that the problem *and* the solution are not out there in a diagnosis or a pill, but inside the coached individual himself or herself. The simple key—and it's not an easy key sometimes, but it's clearly a key nonetheless—is to make choices in alignment with desired outcomes. That is, to help individuals see that they are the architects of the very problems they want to solve, and that in each case the problem as well as the solution lies in their choices. Yes, this is difficult for many individuals who want us to fix their problems, but at precisely the same time, it's also very empowering and liberating.

The second principle I discovered is that coaching creates a **developmental question for an individual to answer**. Often, this question is not conveniently literal. In other words, it's not as if an individual can easily articulate the question, "How can I be a more positive creator of my relationships?" Rather, conceptually, the idea of coaching is about reaching into individuals (or more accurately, creating the space and safety for individuals to reach into *themselves*) and discovering what they want to achieve, and what they want to improve upon and develop. Again, this is markedly different from some forms of therapy where the clinical treatment is determined by the diagnosis, which in turn is determined by the therapist consulting the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*. In coaching, both the responsibility and the power ultimately lie with the person being coached, not with the therapist. Most therapists agree with this principle and even believe they practice it.

The third principle that I discovered is that coaching is **proactive and about creating positive solutions, not about avoiding**

negative states. This may seem blatantly obvious, but again, remember that these principles are more than just knowledge; put into practice, they will shape how you *apply* coaching in your professional world, just as they did to mine. Overall, this principle posits that individuals are designed to be successful, and that an unsuccessful individual is merely stuck on the road to success. The goal is then to identify the blocks, effectively remove them, and then let the default, natural success resume. Success is therapeutic; and instead of treating depression, a coach might focus on achieving goals and see if the depression lifts. Failure is therefore *not* something to be avoided or even treated; success is something to be enabled (and by success, I don't necessarily mean relationship success, but any kind of successful experience, such as successful careers, successful management of time, successful approach to money and finances, and so on). This principle, you could say, captures a very Eastern approach to life, and, if you already appreciate this view, you'll find coaching to be very satisfying.

The fourth principle that I discovered is that coaching **is an open paradigm of working with people.** This cannot be undervalued, because this more than anything else is what blazed my coaching trail. Coaching is liberating on many different levels, beyond those that help the person being coached. It also allows you, as a soon-to-be coach, to step outside your routines and zones and approach the mission of helping people in fresh new ways. Coaching *legitimizes* that new approach; it tells you: "Yes, it's okay to do that. It's responsible, it's ethical, it's helpful—and it's necessary." For me, coaching was like learning a new language, one that enabled me to speak to new people in new ways—people I never could have spoken to before. I mean, can you imagine a therapist going out of his or her office to find singles and to try to help them? That's not how it works! As a therapist, I'd have to wait until individuals have suffered so much that their insurance company tells them, "It's okay for you to get *some* therapeutic help." Yet as a coach, I can gloriously walk outside my office, proactively find people who want successful relationships (which pretty much covers everybody), and provide them with safe, ethical, and progressive support to achieve that goal. I can

The Transformation Completes

work with functional people who want good relationships. Wow. (Likewise, you can pick a niche or specialty and find mostly healthy people who want to move toward more optimal living in business and/or personal life.)

And the fifth coaching principle that I discovered during my training and put to use in my work is that coaching **affects individuals by empowering them to go after what they want in their lives**. Now, this may not seem like an atom-splitting insight, but there is a subtle point here that resonates very deeply: *Coaching is proactive and intentional*. It's not about diagnosing a client who really has no expertise in whatever they're being diagnosed with. The success or failure of coaching is determined by the client—not by the coach, and not by any tool (e.g., a checklist), strategy, or intervention. As a therapist, even with heartfelt compassion, how many times had I *longed* for clients to take responsibility for their problems—because their failure to do so prevented them from achieving a solution? Coaching doesn't have this problem, because unless clients are using the coaching to go after what they want in their lives, *there is no coaching*. In this way, you could say—and in fact, I'll go ahead and say it—coaching can be more starkly honest than therapy, because if it's not working . . . it's not working. As Forrest Gump might say: *Coaching is as coaching does*. There's nothing to hide behind when it's not working. In fact, when it's not working, it's not coaching.

THE TRANSFORMATION COMPLETES

Probably like you, I worked hard for many years to obtain my clinical license, sacrificing time, money, and quality of life, and my initial intention when I discovered coaching was to practice both as a therapist and as a coach. My identity as a therapist was so strong that the thought of giving it up was shocking—inconceivable, really. Yet as my coaching practice took off, I found that I was having the time of my life creating events for singles, relationship seminars, workshops, classes, and groups, and coaching singles and couples. My work was fun, fulfilling, exciting, profitable, and exhilarating. As my therapy clients dropped off, they were replaced with coaching clients.

And before I knew it, my practice became 100% coaching! While I swore to myself I would *never* give up being a therapist, I found myself referring therapy clients to my colleagues, because, quite simply, coaching was just too much fun, and where I felt I could make the best contribution of my skills.

Yet with all of this being said, I have no regrets about the path I've taken. I believe being a therapist was a long, but effective, road to *becoming* a good coach. Extensive experience with dysfunction gave me a much greater appreciation and understanding of the opportunity to work with functional people. The hardest part of the transition was letting go of judgments and formulas—judgments about what's going on (diagnosis), what intervention (treatment) is needed, what formulas are appropriate based on therapeutic orientation for what box the clients fit in, and what to do with them. Undoing some of my clinical training, but keeping true to the rigorous professional standards and ethics of my license, I feel that I'm now a much more qualified and better coach than someone without a clinical background. As a licensed therapist with a master's degree, I have more credibility with the public, and clients are more willing to hire me knowing I had to jump some pretty high hurdles to earn those initials after my name. You'll likely find this as well: that your background as a therapist supports, rather than interferes with, your reputation and image as a coach.

When asked "What do you do?" my answer is now "I'm a relationship coach." I will always keep and treasure my therapist's license, even though my work no longer requires it. My mission of helping people enjoy successful marriages and stronger families is the same as it always has been, except now I'm doing so in a way that is in much better alignment with who I am, and achieves the results I've always wanted to see for my clients. While I encourage you to continue practicing therapy if you desire, for me, coaching transformed my professional work and identity in ways I never imagined. It simply takes curiosity and an open mind—which you have in abundance already, since you're reading this book and are motivated to make your professional life, and the lives of your clients, better.