

# THE MINDFUL COACH



*Seven Roles  
for  
Helping  
People Grow*

Douglas K. Silsbee

## *Praise for The Mindful Coach: Seven Roles for Helping Others Grow*

“Silsbee’s approach is both practical and profound. This is a must-read for everyone concerned with people and learning.”

**Arthur M. Blank**

PHILANTHROPIST; CO-FOUNDER, THE HOME DEPOT; OWNER & CEO, ATLANTA FALCONS

“The development of people is a key competency for business leadership. *The Mindful Coach* provides an inspiring and practical roadmap for developing masterful coaching skills on-the-job.”

**Karen Wunderlin**

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“A useful book facilitating the growth and development of individuals and groups. His approach reaches deeply into human consciousness and experience where meaningful change and growth occurs.”

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“A welcome addition which teaches us that we can apply the deep spiritual knowledge of traditions like Buddhism to our modern business lives, in such a way that even our career becomes spiritually uplifting and a service to others.”

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SENIOR VP/COMPENSATION, SALARY.COM

“A clear and integrated model to assist people in understanding and applying the important skills in mindfulness and coaching. Executives from diverse backgrounds will find *The Mindful Coach* an insightful and practical guide.”

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“I loved this book! *The Mindful Coach* is personal, spiritual, systematic and insightful. This is mandatory reading for anyone who has the responsibility of helping others learn and develop. My trainers will all be receiving a copy. This is Thich Nhat Hanh meets Stephen Covey!”

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DIRECTOR OF TRAINING, JENNY CRAIG INTERNATIONAL

“In serving others, we can get overly focused on specific strategies or tactics and lose perspective of the larger, broader dynamic. *The Mindful Coach* delivers on clarifying, organizing, and contextualizing what it really means to be involved in a coaching relationship.”

**Joe Jotkowitz**

PRESIDENT, ESSESSNET

“*The Mindful Coach* captures the very essence of what coaching can be. Silsbee marries the art and science of human dialogue, of compassionate listening and advice giving without creating dependency. He guides the reader gently through the seven distinct roles of a true helping relationship. This is a process to be internalized and lived every day.”

**Rod Napier, Ph.D.**

PROFESSOR, CONSULTANT, AUTHOR, *The Courage to Act* AND TEN OTHER BOOKS

“*The Mindful Coach* is not just another coaching model. It is a frame of reference for anyone involved in developing people. This highly readable book should serve as a reference for anyone genuinely concerned about helping others. It has had a significant impact on the way I coach.”

**James N. Bassett, M.Ed.**

EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT, INSTITUTE OF NUCLEAR POWER OPERATIONS

“In his hands-on new book, *The Mindful Coach*, replete with artful and challenging exercises, Doug Silsbee models the mindfulness depth from which he springs in order to impart a valuable new coaching model based on professionalism, integrity, and dedication to service.”

**Maggie Lichtenberg, P.C.C.**

PROFESSIONAL COACH

“*The Mindful Coach* is warm, sensitive and intuitive, while at the same time clearly written by a scientific mind. The book provides a simple and cohesive model for the development process, coupled with practical strategies on how to become a more conscious practitioner.”

**Alejandro Bolaños, Ph.D.**

CONSULTANT, CENTRAL AMERICA

“*The Mindful Coach* is a book that anyone who is serious about coaching must read. It is comprehensive and compelling and will give you insights that will help you be the best coach you can be.”

**James A. DeSena**

AUTHOR, *The 10 Immutable Laws of Power Selling*

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## *Coaching*

*I know not how I may seem to others, but to myself  
I am but a small child wandering upon the vast  
shores of knowledge, every now and then finding  
a small bright pebble to content myself with.*

PLATO

*You cannot teach humans anything.  
You can only help them discover it within themselves.*

GALILEO

Over the past decade or so, coaching—meaning helping others develop personal and social skills that will enable them to be more successful—has found broad acceptance in corporate culture as an essential leadership competency. With roots in the personal development movement, organizational development, psychotherapy, and learning theory, coaching has become well established as a field in itself. Many organizations have launched internal training programs to teach coaching skills to their managers, and the whole field of personal coaching for individuals has been expanding exponentially.

As in any growth industry, this profession has seen a rapid development of new concepts and approaches, as well as the adaptation of

coaching to many different venues. Specialization and competition are increasing, and coaches are finding success in remarkably narrow niches. At the same time, questions have arisen about what qualifications, training, and certification processes distinguish professionals who are likely to provide useful service to their clients from people who just declare themselves to be coaches and hang out a shingle. It can be difficult to separate out what's substantive from what's fluff—frankly, there's a lot of both.

This book attempts to come back to the heart of what makes coaching powerful, to focus on the substantive—the advantages of a one-on-one relationship, the skills and insights that coaches have collectively developed and/or brought to the profession from other fields, and the application of those skills and insights in many different contexts. (It should be noted that although there is a significant body of work on “group coaching,” coaching as we're addressing it here is a one-on-one process.)

The Septet Coaching Model is one view of what it takes to meet the requirements of any coaching situation. Since these vary so widely, we'll begin by outlining what we mean by coaching, and then explore how to do it.

## *A Working Definition of Coaching*

Much has been written by other authors about what coaching is and what it isn't. For our purposes here, we'll define it quite broadly as “*that part of a relationship in which one person is primarily dedicated to serving the long-term development of effectiveness and self-generation in the other.*” Let's take a look at the elements of that definition.

Some relationships that involve coaching—for example between a coach and a paying client—are exclusively built around the learning, growth, and change of the client. In exchange for the coach's expertise, the client pays the coach money. In many other situations, however, coaching represents *part* of a more complex relationship.

Consider a department head with ten managers reporting to her. She has supervisory responsibility for the entire unit and is held accountable for its collective performance. A significant portion of her job involves organizing—making scheduling and budgeting decisions, delegating tasks, and monitoring the work of the whole department. That is not coaching. Coaching comes in when she works one-on-one with her direct reports to ask about their concerns, provide feedback, elicit ideas (for example, about how to increase employee “ownership” and commitment within a work unit), and discuss new challenges and opportunities for their own professional development. Coaching is a critical part of the manager’s relationship with each of her direct reports; it is not the entire relationship.

Similarly, parents often coach their children in the context of a larger relationship. Whereas basic parental duties and pleasures—providing food and shelter, establishing rules and enforcing discipline, or enjoying a game of catch for its own sake—couldn’t be considered coaching, other interactions, like encouraging a toddler after a successful potty visit, helping an eighth grader learn how to manipulate algebraic equations, taking a teenager out driving, would fit our definition. (Generally, as children move into their teenage years, they are less and less willing to be coached by their parents. However, even then, and sometimes especially then, opportunities for parents to act as coaches will present themselves.)

The phrase “primarily dedicated to serving” in our definition means that the learning and growth of the client are central to the purpose of the coach in a given situation. This is the overriding consideration. It is not, however, the sole consideration. In addition to his commitment to his client, the coach always has a responsibility to take care of himself. “Solely dedicated” would imply that whatever the client wants goes; “*primarily dedicated*” means that while the development of the client comes first, there’s room in the relationship to articulate and address the legitimate needs of the coach as well.

The coaching relationship is often a professional one, in which the coach is paid by the client or a third party such as a company, an agency,

or a congregation, but it is also a personal one as well. Setting up a framework that will work for both parties is important. The nature of each person's responsibilities, including keeping appointments, being respectful, and remaining truly engaged, should be made explicit at the beginning. Establishing guidelines and mutual expectations for the coaching process is central to enabling the coach's dedication to serving the client.

It is absolutely appropriate, at times, to provide quick answers to a client's direct questions or immediate needs for help. But it is also important to remain aware that this is not the only approach to supporting the client; if we always give in to the temptation to go for the quick fix we will most likely be undermining initiative and fostering dependence. Helping clients build long-term capabilities means helping them develop their own problem-solving skills. This *long-term* view needs to be kept in mind and made explicit.

*Development* encompasses a number of meanings. According to *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, to develop is "to become fuller, larger, better, etc.; to expand . . . ; to strengthen . . . ; to unfold gradually, as a bud." Development implies that the raw materials are already there, that nothing is being created from scratch. In coaching, the client's development means that she is growing into her potential, becoming increasingly intentional and proactive about what she wants to achieve and who she wants to be.

The long-term goals of coaching include both effectiveness and self-generation. *Effectiveness* means that the client becomes more competent and successful, according to her own defined standards and goals, in the content area of the coaching, be that building a business, learning a better tennis serve, getting or changing a job, or any other endeavor she and the coach have agreed to focus upon.

The second desired outcome of coaching is self-generation. In his book *Coaching: Evoking Excellence in Others*, James Flaherty notes that well-coached people understand that there is always more to learn, and a self-generative person is a life-long learner.<sup>1</sup> Self-generation means

taking personal responsibility for enhancing one's own capabilities, and ultimately it implies an independence from the coach.

Finally, there are many formats for coaching. In my own practice, I have coached in half-hour phone conversations, half-day sessions in person, day-long conversations beside a mountain creek, and e-mail exchanges with someone on a different continent.

It's not the schedule or the setting that determines whether coaching is happening, but the nature of the work, specifically the dedication of the relationship, in whole or in part, to the development of effectiveness and self-generation in another. Beyond that dedication, the practical details are dictated by what best serves the learning process given the requirements of the individuals and circumstances involved.

### *Distinguishing Coaching from Other Professional Activities*

It's my hope that this book will be of use not only to those who want to hone their skills as professional coaches but also to other professionals, like our department head, whose work includes coaching. Whichever is the case with you as an individual reader, taking a look at how our definition allows us to clearly identify the elements of coaching will help us all become more mindful and competent in helping others.

Table 1 on the following page provides some generalized examples of coaching and non-coaching activities in three professional venues. Its contents are intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. While coaching takes place in many professions not represented, the principle will be clear.

The purpose of the table is to help you consider how various activities do or don't fit the definition of coaching as we've framed it. (Please note that I've used "subordinate," "student," and "patient" in this table, as being more natural in the context of the professional

realms represented here. However, throughout the book the word “client” is used in general discussions in order to reinforce the point that the coaching process is essentially the same across disciplines.)

It will also be helpful to look for exceptions to the generalizations presented, not in order to argue with the points being made but to help hone your own understanding of the distinctions between coaching and other activities in relation to your own unique circumstances.

**Table 1: Coaching and Non-Coaching Activities in Three Fields**

Professional Field	Coaching Activities	Non-Coaching Activities
<b>Managers/ Executives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career development conversations with a subordinate</li> <li>• Eliciting and discussing a subordinate’s suggestions</li> <li>• Providing feedback about a subordinate’s thinking</li> <li>• Discussing options for how to accomplish delegated tasks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delegating authority or tasks</li> <li>• Invoking authority as leverage or to get something done</li> <li>• Making annual review assessments and compensation decisions</li> <li>• Expressing personal dissatisfaction or judgment</li> </ul>
<b>Teachers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asking questions that encourage a student to think differently</li> <li>• Working with an individual student on test-taking strategies</li> <li>• Processing experiential learning activities with an individual</li> <li>• One-on-one tutoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grading tests and homework</li> <li>• Lecturing and group discussions</li> <li>• Disciplining students</li> <li>• Any interaction with an individual student which uses authority as a basis to get a student to change behavior</li> </ul>
<b>Health Care Workers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asking patient to observe symptoms more closely</li> <li>• Helping client to see and understand his body as a whole system</li> <li>• Making suggestions for client self-responsibility in treatment</li> <li>• Discussing a diagnosis with patient</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making an expert diagnosis</li> <li>• Prescribing medication, tests, or treatment</li> <li>• Viewing patient as a complex mechanical system with a breakdown</li> <li>• Practice-management activities</li> </ul>

Everything in this book is intended to invite you to do your own mindful discernment, not to constrain you with a definition imposed by someone else. The ultimate goal is learning to know in your gut when you are in service to a client's needs and when you are serving a different agenda.

Based on the examples in Table 1, we can make some further generalizations about coaching. Coaching is

- evocative, drawing upon the client's capabilities, aspirations, and resourcefulness,
- based on a partnership with clear and mutually defined expectations,
- focused on, and dedicated to, the learning and development of the client,
- interactive and non-prescriptive.

Other activities, although they may be necessary, legitimate, and valuable parts of a professional relationship, and may result in client learning, are not, however, coaching. A person is not coaching when he or she

- uses authority or positional power to motivate the "client" by stating organizational expectations or implying consequences for non-compliance,
- makes unilateral decisions that directly affect the client,
- diagnoses the client using an "expert" system (while this is an important function in many fields, it serves a different primary agenda than the client's learning and development),
- makes decisions based on the needs of a larger system over the needs of the individual,
- communicates out of an emotional need, implicitly placing that need higher than the learning needs of the other.

Obviously, the distinction between coaching and non-coaching activities will sometimes be blurry. I encourage you to draw upon the guidelines above to define the boundaries of coaching in your particular arena. Clear distinctions about the professional activities you perform that are and aren't coaching will provide the basis for ongoing discernment and lay the groundwork for everything that follows as you expand your expertise as a coach. Exercise 1 will help you get started.

### **Exercise 1: Defining Coaching for Yourself**

1. Write a brief summary of your job responsibilities; include those that entail coaching and describe the objectives of coaching as you do it in your context.
2. Consider again the definition of coaching I've presented—that part of a relationship in which one person is primarily dedicated to serving the long-term development of effectiveness and self-generation in the other—and think about it in relation to your job and the people whose skills you feel responsible for developing.
3. Then, get specific. Make a two-column table like Table 1 and fill it out with some specific examples of what you do in your interactions with the people you coach. Examples of interactions that fit our definition of coaching will go in the left-hand column and those that are excluded by the definition will go in the right.

The purpose here is for you to try out this book's definition of coaching and get you thinking about when you're coaching and when you're engaged in some other legitimate aspect of your professional relationship with a client, whoever that client might be in your particular professional venue. Later, based on the results of your observations and your own process of learning as you work with the ideas in this book, you can modify this definition or even create your own.

Becoming clear about what you aspire to provide for your clients is the first step toward mastery in coaching.

## *The Politics of Coaching: Four Dynamics*

Let's look at how the structure of the coaching situation can influence the establishment of a viable relationship between coach and client. Here the focus is upon how to set up—and maintain—a healthy win/win situation.

### **Client-Initiated Coaching**

Self-employed people, managers and executives, and people going through life transitions often hire private coaches to help them pursue their dreams and aspirations or to support them in addressing the problems they face. Many areas of specialization (executive coaching, small business coaching, creativity coaching, “life coaching,” etc.) could be identified here. Usually the client finds the coach by word of mouth or other forms of referral; sometimes the coach finds the client. Either way, the client is eager to enter into the coaching relationship.

The important thing about this kind of situation is that it is a one-on-one contractual relationship, for an exchange of fees, between two people free of organizational constraints. Sometimes the client is paying the bill directly; other times the client is paying out of an employer's funds but has authority to do so, or can get the necessary signature, without any involvement by a third party. Since the person paying the bill is the person who is being served, the dynamic is pretty much self-regulating: if the client is getting what she believes she wants and is paying for, it's a successful relationship; if not, she will renegotiate or terminate the contract.

### **Third Party Involvement**

A more complex situation arises if there's a third party with a vested interest in the outcome of the coaching. Consider the following scenarios.

- An executive wants a high-potential direct report to be coached in order to take on additional responsibility.
- A higher-up in a social service agency has his or her own agenda for the outcome in a particular case or cases.
- A manager is in trouble and coaching is an effort to remediate the situation. The client's job may be at stake, for instance, and the coach may be required to make progress or outcome reports to a third party who has the power to hire and fire, promote or demote within the organization.
- In health care, social work, or counseling settings, a third-party payer may place constraints on the coaching process, or may condition continued support on demonstrable results or actions taken.
- Coaching is being provided to managers by HR specialists or other line managers who are not in a supervisory relationship to the person being coached. Here the coach represents organizational interests as well as the client's interests.

In all of these situations, it may be a challenge to ensure that the coaching is truly dedicated to the long-term development of the client. The key, of course, is to put the various agendas on the table from the beginning and construct a coaching process that addresses them all. If there is to be communication about progress or outcomes to a third party, it's especially critical to be explicit about confidentiality.

A special case of this dynamic results if there are consequences to the client for not achieving the coaching outcomes expected by the third party. The bad news is that the client may well be resistant or resentful about being coached in the first place. He or she may or may not recognize the problems that the third party sees, so coaching may need to begin with determining if there is compatibility between the client's goals and those of the third party. The bottom line here is that if the client is unwilling or unable to engage in the coaching process in service to some motivation of his own—even if it's to jump through someone

else's hoops in order to keep a job—the coaching cannot succeed. The good news is that the leverage provided by the dynamic can be helpful in getting results.

Finally, the third party's goals must be respected as well. For example, if I'm coaching a manager in an organizational setting, I always ask whether it will be a good use of the organization's investment if the client leaves the organization as a result of my coaching. If the answer is yes, then I feel much freer to truly serve the client's needs and not get caught between the client's needs and the organization's goals. Whatever the situation, it will be important to ensure that the client's goals aren't in conflict with those of any third party involved.

### **Transitioned Relationships**

Another special dynamic results when a relationship of another sort (with a colleague, friend, former supervisor, business partner, etc.) becomes a coaching relationship. Generally, in any relationship with meaningful engagement, some of the mutual learning and exchange of ideas inherent in coaching will be present. This, however, is different from the explicit dedication of a portion of the relationship to the learning and development of one of the parties.

When this transition takes place, a new kind of relationship is formalized, one in which it is now understood that one person will be learning with the support of the other. This can be awkward, especially in collegial or peer relationships, because there can be an implication of inequality that challenges existing assumptions within the relationship. Recognizing this means having an open exchange of mutual expectations and frank discussion about how the other aspects of the original relationship will be affected. Bringing these issues to the surface and working on them is important. It may build comfort initially to place boundaries around the content of coaching, and to agree not to discuss this content outside of the portion of the relationship dedicated to coaching.

## Supervisory Relationships

The last type of coaching situation we'll consider here is when the coach is the client's direct supervisor in an agency, business, or other organization. Here the coaching element is inevitably influenced by the power differential resulting from the authority of the coach/boss over the client, and by the potential for the interests of the supervisor to differ from the interests of the individual.

Coaching in a supervisory relationship often occurs in order to increase the subordinate's skill in meeting organizational objectives. This is generally referred to as performance coaching, and it can be very helpful to the subordinate as well. It is, however, conditioned on the assumption that the subordinate's goals are consistent with those the employer. Performance coaching becomes more delicate when the subordinate has other career interests, or sees his performance more favorably than does his boss.

In order for coaching to be successful in a supervisory relationship, four conditions must be met.

- The goals of the boss must not be in conflict with the personal and professional goals of the subordinate, or the boss must be able to place other considerations temporarily in the background in order support the dedication of the coaching, in good faith, to the best interests of the subordinate.
- The subordinate must be motivated to make a commitment to learning and development for reasons of his or her own.
- Both parties must be able and willing to draw distinctions between the coaching aspect of their relationship and others, separating the development process from power issues and supervisory consequences.
- The boss and subordinate must trust each other that the first three conditions are present.

If any of these conditions is not present, it will be difficult for the supervisor to coach the subordinate, and a different means to provide development support for the subordinate may be more appropriate. If these conditions are met, however, the two parties can build a real coaching relationship dedicated to the client's growth.

I recommend to my clients who are coaching direct reports that they set aside a special time and circumstance for the coaching aspect of their relationship. The authority of the supervisor and other aspects of their relationship are then placed in the background and that time is dedicated to the service of the subordinate's development. When coaching is over, that is also made explicit.

## *Summary*

In any of the relationships described above, coaching can take place in informal interactions—say, meeting by the water cooler for a brief exchange. The descriptions of coaching in this book, however, will be based on the assumption that most high level coaching takes place in conversations that are dedicated to that purpose. The book, then, presents a model of coaching that will guide any professional in structuring conversations dedicated to the development of others.

As coaches, we must remain aware of our commitment to the learning and growth of the client. The client is in charge; we are in service to the stated purposes of the client. We must also remember that while it is important to meet the short-term needs of our clients for immediate ideas and solutions, their long-term development is the ultimate goal, and therefore it's our responsibility to foster those skills and habits of mind that will enable them to make wise choices on their own in the future.

To the extent that we allow ourselves or a third party—or, more precisely, our own needs and goals or those of an organization—to drive the agenda, we risk undermining this primary mission. This is

why the parameters of the coaching situation should be discussed openly and frankly at the outset, so that both the coach and the client—and a third party, if one is involved—can make a determination as to whether there's a good fit. The most challenging of those situations we've discussed above is coaching within a supervisory relationship, where both parties must be able to place the authority differences in the background in order to maintain a clear focus on the goals and needs of the client.

Service in coaching, then, is the process of engaging in coaching as described here, and doing so with the fullest possible awareness of the client and his or her opportunities. This requires recognition of our own needs, agendas, and blind spots, and a willingness to set them aside in service to the client. A mindful self-awareness is the essential starting point in being able to serve one's clients well.