

How coaching has moved off the sports field

Promising to help you to become a better version of yourself, life coaching is in ever-growing demand in Ireland

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Life coaching helps people who want be more successful or seek better performance in business or in life.

Life coaching used to be seen as a fad, but with hundreds of coaches now in Ireland – focusing on everything from life, fitness, career, relationships, to change – it is now a major influence on people. These coaches are a product of the 21st century’s love affair with self-improvement – and are often promoted with promises of helping you become “the person you were meant to be” and “finding your authentic road”.

Out on a limb from the ‘mental health’ disciples of counselling and therapy, coaching doesn’t actually claim to diagnose or treat anything. Instead it offers to guide you to finding your own solutions – a sort of friend with a price tag.

In Ireland, life coaching is still an unregulated business, although international accreditation is available, and advisable to seek out. Anyone can call themselves a coach, although there are accredited courses that can be done to get a recognised qualification.

The Association for Coaching is an international association which has had a presence in Ireland for 10 years. “Even from five years ago in Ireland, we are seeing a growing appetite and demand for coaching,” says chief executive Katherine Tulpa. “It’s growing because it’s working. In businesses for example, executive levels have been coached, and they see the effectiveness of it and want to use it for lower levels. A recent ICF study showed over 80 per cent of companies are using coaching in some form. Personal coaching works in the same way.”

In 2012, the International Coach Federation (ICF), which offers voluntary accreditation to coaching schools, and functions as a coaching self-regulatory organisation, found there are 47,500 life coaches in the world – 15,800 of which are in North America, charging an average of €350 for an hour-long session. It is likely those numbers have increased significantly since then.

‘Ideology of our time’

“I believe the growing uptake of life coaching is symptomatic of the ideology of our time,” explains Colin McDonnell, clinic director of Psychotherapy Dublin. “The function of Government and religious institutes as agents of instruction has long been on the wane. What operates instead is a *laissez faire* ideology. This is freeing in a sense, but in another way utterly terrifying. Is there anything more frightening than a complete lack of direction?”

“Another aspect of this neoliberal mentality that operates are the demands to produce and enjoy. Be the best you can be. Find happiness. We’re uncomfortably familiar with these mantras that are regurgitated in many places and many forms.”

Tulpa says the difference between coaching and therapy “is that coaching is working from a place of healthy people that actually want be more successful, have more fulfilment, or seek better performance in business or in life. On the other hand, counselling or therapy tends to help someone

through an issue like anxiety or mental-health area.” So while therapy may be more about helping prescribe a course of action, coaching does the opposite and seeks examination. In other words, it seems you are not paying for answers, you are paying for questions.

Hard work

Niamh Ennis spent a year training, and says finding the answers ourselves is far more important than being told what to do, despite the fact that clients might not be initially prepared for the hard work. “The homework can surprise people,” she says. “They come to me because they think somebody else can do the change, and they want me to give them all the answers, But if I did that they wouldn’t own it. Would you go to a personal trainer and expect them to do the workout?”

According to Ennis, fear is the single biggest obstacle to making important changes in our life, and she believes getting people beyond that fear, and showing them how to make sustainable change in their lives is possible.

“The vast majority of my clients come to me because they feel in a rut and have no idea how to move past it, or some come with specific goals of changing their careers, or their lifestyle. No matter what change they want, the tools required are mostly similar.

“I see them come away with greater clarity and confidence now that they have had the courage to commit to whatever changes they need to make. I get them to dig deep and fully understand why they really want change. Once they do this piece, the rest falls into place.”

Coaching, then, seems to be the option for those who want to move forward, rather than deal with the past, although that in itself can be challenging.

“To coach is, of course, to train or tutor and is inherently linked to performance,” says McDonnell.

“From the very beginning of a coach-client relationship, there is a demand to perform in operation which feeds into this new ideology of always striving for betterment. A super-driven, super-fast training course aimed at wringing performance out of a person and promising to plug the gap of our limitations. It pressures us to become ‘a better version’ of ourselves.”

Diligence

If coaching is the road you choose to take, given the intimacy of the relationship, the investment required, and the lack of regulation, finding the right professional needs thought.

“When choosing a coach, make sure you ask for their code of conduct, complaints procedure and accreditation,” advises Tulpa. “Make sure you talk to a couple of references and make sure you meet with them and have the chemistry you need to work with them. Like any professional, make sure you do your due diligence.”

Whether it’s business or pleasure, it will require some investment, financial and time. “A great coach will always tell you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear,” explains Ennis. “It’s amazing how often the opposite occurs.” Homework obligatory.

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