For the past fifteen years, I have asked participants in my coaching workshops to list the characteristics of a good coach. Virtually every group, whether consisting of managers, HR professionals, new coaches, or seasoned coaches, places listening skills at the top of the list, followed by empathy and a genuine interest in the person, the ability to deliver honest, direct feedback, having integrity, and being trustworthy.

I then ask these groups to list the qualities of a great coach. These lists typically include comments such as “really gets the person to reflect,” “inspires people to want to change,” “takes people to higher levels,” “gets results,” and “has a passion for helping others.”

As the groups talk about what differentiates their two lists, they realize that their first list concentrates almost exclusively on traits and activities of the coach, whereas the second list highlights the person being coached and the outcomes that are achieved. Not surprisingly, workshop participants themselves are often so focused on the skills and techniques of coaching itself (“What am I supposed to do?”) that they lose sight of the higher goal, which is to support the learner (“What is this person trying to achieve and
how can I be most helpful to him?”). Through this simple exercise of exploring the difference between a good coach and a great coach, those attending the workshop often are able to find a more balanced perspective and become more intentional about their learning.

However, in all the years that I have asked these two questions, only three times has anyone mentioned the quality that I view as most important for an effective coach—an understanding of how people learn and develop. If the goals of coaching primarily include helping people learn new things, gain insight, be more effective, and improve performance, then it seems essential for coaches to have an understanding of how humans learn (Peterson, 2002).

Whether I am correct or the groups are correct or we are all missing some other essential variable, the research has not yet been done to answer this question definitively. In fact, very little is actually known about the knowledge or skills required to be a competent coach (Stober, 2010). Nonetheless, exploring how coaches can help people learn faster and better—and how coaches themselves can learn to be more effective coaches—can be a useful pursuit. This chapter explores what coaches can do to accelerate their journey towards great coaching by examining:

- What differentiates good coaching from great coaching
- Why it is relatively easy to become a good coach
- Why it is relatively difficult to become a great coach
- What is known about how experts in a variety of fields develop mastery and how that applies to coaching

**Definitions and Distinctions**

The terms *good coach* and *great coach* are used informally here, to some extent because the field of coaching has not yet converged on a clear understanding of what defines competence and mastery in coaching. For the purposes of this chapter, good coaching refers to the work of competent coaches who have successfully completed at least thirty coaching engagements. Great coaching refers to coaches who demonstrate mastery and deep expertise. Typically, great coaches have well over ten years of significant
coaching experience and have successfully coached hundreds of clients. They are highly versatile and generally successful even with difficult, complex, and challenging coaching engagements.

Using Dreyfus and Dreyfus’s (1986) five-stage model, good coaches are at level 3 (competent) and great coaches are at level 5 (expert):

1. **Novices** focus on accomplishing immediate tasks, typically requiring clear rules which they follow closely.
2. **Advanced beginners** begin to use the rules as guidelines, applying them in new situations, but are not able to handle exceptions or unforeseen problems.
3. **Competent** performers begin to create their own conceptual models of what they are doing and can handle more complex situations based on their experience.
4. **Proficient** performers have advanced beyond competence by experiencing a wide variety of situations and challenges and have developed the ability to see the big picture, monitor their own performance, and interpret underlying principles to adjust their behaviors as needed based on the context to effectively handle relatively novel situations.
5. **Experts** have such a high level of experience that they are able to identify and solve problems intuitively, with little explicit analysis or planning. They see underlying patterns effortlessly and they apply appropriate solutions, even to complex and unique situations, in such a way that they generate consistently superior performance. Lord and Hall (2005) note that expert performance is marked by the ability to see and interpret underlying principles instead of relying on heuristics or surface features, which is what most competent performers do. One of the ironies of this level of performance is that experts can be rather inarticulate in explaining how they arrived at a conclusion, a phenomenon explored in Gladwell’s popular book *Blink* (2005).

**When Expertise Makes a Difference**

This distinction between competent and expert coaches has implications for coach training, development, and certification, as
well as for how coaches are selected and matched to participants. Begley and Interlandi (2009) paint an interesting picture in the area of cancer treatment, which provides a useful analogy. They point out that for severe cancers, there is a very low survival rate regardless of the treatment or the expertise of the physician. For the relatively minor cancers, there is a high survival rate relatively independent of treatment. It is for the cancers that fall between these two extremes where expertise and judgment typically make a substantial difference in survival rates.

Similarly in coaching, some situations are relatively simple and straightforward (for example, a motivated learner, supportive environment, and straightforward development needs), so that even a beginning coach is likely to be helpful. Some situations are so complex (for example, multiple stakeholders with different expectations, highly political environment, or overwhelming business challenges that others have failed to overcome), so urgent (for example, there is simply not enough time for the person to develop what is needed), or so unfavorable (for example, a hostile, competitive environment where the boss or others are setting the person up to fail, significant substance abuse, or cognitive impairment) that the odds of any coach being successful are small. However, there are a number of situations that may be beyond the capabilities of a competent coach that an expert coach might handle quite capably.

Client Coachability

Focusing on the more difficult end of this spectrum, several authors have described what they refer to as uncoachable people. Goldsmith (2009), for example, provides four indicators: they don’t think they have a problem, they are pursuing the wrong strategy for the organization, they’re in the wrong job, or they think everyone else is the problem. Naficy and Isabella (2008) suggest that people with a fixed mind-set, who are forced into coaching, who lack trust and openness, or who feel manipulated by performance management in the guise of coaching are all uncoachable. Bacon and Spear (2003) propose seven levels of coachability, with the least coachable being those who are
narcissistic, arrogant, impatient, resistant to feedback, defensive, or lacking in self-insight. Rather than simply labeling such individuals as uncoachable, it is more helpful to discuss under what conditions coaching might be useful and what type of coach, with what level of expertise, might be effective (Peterson, 2010).

The unfortunate irony in these discussions is that the people they describe as uncoachable are often the very people most in need of professional coaching. In contrast, the people that Bacon and Spear (2003) describe as most coachable are self-directed, insightful, motivated learners who are so committed to their own development that they may rarely need a coach. The real consideration is that the “coachability” of the person often depends on the coach’s ability. Not all coaches are qualified to work with difficult or complex coaching situations, although some expert coaches are well qualified to work with narcissistic, defensive, distrustful, and difficult people (Ludeman & Erlandson, 2004; Mansi, 2009).

**Easy to Be a Good Coach**

Given the proliferation of new coaches entering the field (Liljenstrand & Nebeker, 2008) and that there are virtually no barriers to entry, there is some concern regarding the quality of coaching that is being delivered (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007; Platt, 2008; Sherman & Freas, 2004; Thomas, 2006). Certainly it is important for the credibility of the field to maintain minimum quality standards through improving training, coach supervision, and certification processes (Carroll, 2007; Hawkins & Smith, 2006; Lane, Stelter, & Stout Rostron, 2010).

On the other hand, there appear to be a surprising number of reasons why it is relatively easy to become an effective coach, especially for anyone with a solid base of intelligence, maturity, emotional intelligence, and basic social and communication skills (Bluckert, 2006). For one thing, people from a variety of backgrounds, such as human resources, training, consulting, management, and education, possess relevant knowledge and helping skills that readily transfer to coaching (Schein, 2009). Many simple components, such as the following, which require virtually no
coaching experience or training, can potentially contribute to effective coaching (Peterson, 2010):

- Creating space and time for reflection (Burke & Linley, 2007) so that the person can step back from the situation and look at it more objectively.
- Offering an external, independent, objective perspective, especially if the coach takes the time to listen carefully to the person’s situation.
- Identifying development goals and preparing an action plan.
- Sharing useful ideas, tips, tools, and models.
- Facilitating an accepting, positive, supportive, encouraging relationship (O’Broin & Palmer, 2007; Uhl-Bien, 2003). The therapeutic literature, for example, indicates that the relationship itself is often a significant factor in determining outcomes (Lambert & Barley, 2002; McKenna & Davis, 2009).
- Providing follow-up conversations that foster a sense of accountability, especially if the person makes a commitment to the coach to pursue a specific action (Goldsmith & Morgan, 2004).
- Simply asking the person what would be helpful to him or her and responding accordingly.

In addition, there are a number of other techniques that require minimal experience or training and yet can also enhance the effectiveness of coaching (Peterson, 2010):

- Asking questions that challenge assumptions and help reframe issues.
- Asking questions that encourage the person to clarify his or her goals and values and think about possible courses of action.
- Offering feedback, either directly or by seeking third-party feedback from interviews or multirater surveys (Levenson, 2009).
- Encouraging and providing opportunities for behavioral practice.
- Using simple coaching formulas such as the GROW model, a popular tool that consists of four steps: Goal setting, Reality checking, Options for action, and What is to be done (Alexander, 2006; Whitmore, 2009).
There is an additional factor inherent in the coaching process that makes it relatively easy for even novice coaches to achieve positive results. Coaches have the opportunity to get immediate feedback on their progress, through the other person’s verbal and nonverbal cues, and adjust their approach, timing, language, and pace to more effectively meet the person’s needs. If a coach’s first attempt to be helpful misses the target, he routinely gets a second and even third chance to find something that works. This opportunity to learn and adapt in real time increases the odds that the participant will leave the session with at least some new insights and ideas.

Although this adaptive approach generally enhances outcomes, it makes it challenging to conduct definitive research on coaching, because it is more difficult to determine whether a given outcome is the result of one specific technique, some combination, or perhaps even the unique sequence of techniques that was used. Coaches, participants, and even trained observers may recognize that a specific technique was utilized but be unable to accurately determine its specific effect, if any, because of the unique context and the presence of so many other variables.

Easy to Remain a Good Coach

Once coaches reach a point where they are reasonably successful, they may be satisfied with their level of competence and not be motivated to advance beyond that level. Some consultants, for example, see coaching simply as one aspect of their broader consulting work and not as a specialty area that requires constant improvement. When it is a matter of weighing the options and consciously choosing to invest one’s development efforts elsewhere, remaining at a basic level of competence makes perfect sense.

However, several factors may make it relatively easy for coaches to choose to remain merely good rather than seeking continual improvement. Some coaches reach a point where they value the relationship to such an extent that they are reluctant to challenge the client’s perspective, raise sensitive issues, or discuss negative or difficult feedback. Other coaches enjoy a particular tool or model so much that they focus their practice around the methodology, rather than around meeting the client’s needs. Even the best tool
may not work in every situation, and coaches thus limit their own growth by such a narrow focus.

An even more insidious trap for some coaches is that it is so easy to place blame elsewhere when the coaching is not effective. Rather than asking themselves what they could have done differently to achieve a greater impact, coaches may point to the participant’s low level of motivation, the organization’s half-hearted support, or the lack of clear feedback and accountability from the boss. The fundamental attribution error can easily be a factor when coaches convince themselves that they did everything they could and simply place the blame on the participant or the circumstances. Given the complexity of most coaching situations, it is often easy for the coach to find supportive data and to ignore potentially disconfirming information. Conversely, of course, people tend to attribute success to their own efforts and to overestimate their personal contribution to successful endeavors, so coaches can easily conclude that their approach is highly effective. (See Kemp 2008a, 2008b, and Chapter Seven in this book for a discussion of these and other potential biases and heuristics that may be at work in the coaching process.)

**Difficult to Be a Great Coach**

In contrast to the proposition that it is relatively easy to be a good coach, it appears to be much more difficult to become a great coach. In a general sense, it is difficult to become a true expert in any complex endeavor (Colvin, 2008; Ericsson, 2006). Typically, the development of expertise in a complex activity such as chess, competitive sports, musical performance, or medicine requires at least ten years of experience or ten thousand hours of regular practice (Ericsson, 2006).

**Experience Is Not Enough**

Significantly, mere practice or repetition is not sufficient to develop expertise, and numerous studies across a variety of domains report that years of experience do not necessarily correlate with performance. In some cases performance may actually decline with
additional experience after the end of formal training (Ericsson, 2006). What seems to differentiate those who continue to improve in performance with additional experience is engagement in what has become known as deliberate practice, a focused effort to repeatedly practice and improve specific, well-defined behaviors at an appropriate level of difficulty (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993). As Colvin points out, deliberate practice requires a great deal of effort and simply “isn’t much fun” (2008, 71). Deliberate practice and specific implications for coaching are explored in more detail later in this chapter.

Relationship Between Coach Actions and Client Outcomes Is Not Always Clear

A second reason it is difficult to become a great coach is that developing expertise in any arena generally requires significant diligence, concentrated effort, and clear, specific feedback. It may even be more difficult in coaching, because the process takes place over an extended period of time, honest and systematic feedback is rare, and it is difficult to connect any particular coach behaviors—or even particular coaching conversations—to specific outcomes that occur months later. There are also many other events and activities occurring at the same time as the coaching is taking place, and pinpointing the causal link between coaching activities and distal outcomes is problematic. Further, some feedback on immediate outcomes may be misleading. For example, a client might express great appreciation for a coach’s thoughtful advice on an issue, but take no action on the basis of that input. So a coach may reasonably assume that the guidance was useful, when in fact it was not.

In contrast, many of the endeavors for which expertise has been studied, such as musical performance, sports, and chess, operate under more clearly delineated and self-contained conditions. A sports coach, for example, will typically have a clear grasp of the rules of the game and detailed knowledge of the player skills and behaviors that contribute to success. There is a clear connection between player’s activities and performance on key metrics, including scoring and winning (for example, see Lewis,
2003, in reference to baseball), and feedback is relatively immediate. Players are used to rehearsing specific behaviors during practice sessions and often receive detailed, immediate feedback on how they are doing.

In executive coaching, the rules of the game are less than transparent, the “games” themselves are lengthy, there are far more players on the field at any given time, with ambiguous and evolving roles, and players can enter, leave, or change in the middle of the action. Although at a global level there is little question that coaching can be an effective means for enhancing performance, sorting through all of this complexity to determine the value of any of the coach’s actions is difficult, and coaches who are not diligently pursuing a goal of achieving expert levels of performance are likely to remain at the level of competent performer.

Requires Diverse Skills and Broad Knowledge

A third reason is that coaching, especially executive coaching, draws on many different skills and domains of knowledge, requiring a significant investment of time plus a level of curiosity and commitment to self-development that not all coaches have. The competency model developed by the Executive Coaching Forum (2008) is illustrative. They suggest that even a competent coach should be familiar with a wide range of topics within these four areas of knowledge:

- **Psychological knowledge**, including an understanding of personality, motivation, learning and behavior change, adult developmental theories, stress management, emotional intelligence, feedback, gender differences, and social psychology.
- **Business acumen**, including an understanding of basic business practices and financial concepts, management principles and processes, strategic planning, information technology, global business dynamics, and human resource management.
- **Organizational knowledge**, including an understanding of organizational structures and functions, organizational design, organizational culture, team effectiveness, leadership models,
systems theory, consulting theory and practices, business ethics, and leadership development.

- **Coaching knowledge**, including an understanding of executive coaching models and theories, coaching competencies, specific coaching practices (such as managing confidentiality, assessment, goal setting), various roles of a coach, coaching research, the history of coaching, and developing oneself as a coach.

Their competency model also includes two other detailed sections: the specific tasks and skills required for six phases of the coaching process (building and maintaining relationships, contracting, assessment, development planning, facilitating development and change, and ending formal coaching and transitioning to long-term development) and nine categories of general attributes and abilities:

- Mature self-confidence
- Positive energy
- Assertiveness
- Interpersonal sensitivity
- Openness and flexibility
- Goal orientation
- Partnering and influence
- Continuous learning and development
- Integrity

On a related note, in the fall of 2009 I surveyed fifty leading experts on professional coaching to get their recommendations on the three to five essential readings in the field. There was little consensus on the top choices, with only a handful of books receiving recommendations from three or more experts. However, the range of topics that people viewed as essential included, in addition to coaching per se, leadership and leadership development, management skills, consulting, counseling and therapy (including approaches to treating addictions), positive psychology, storytelling, strategy and strategic thinking, emotional intelligence, change management, phenomenological psychology, facilitation skills, the inner game of tennis, and
organizational culture. Clearly, a field in which experts view such a wide range of topics as fundamental provides a certain challenge to anyone wishing to attain a level of mastery.

Requires Hard Work and Delay of Gratification

A fourth reason why it is difficult to become a great coach is that certain parts of the coaching process are relatively easy and generally result in immediate, positive feedback, making them rather seductive in nature. Thus they may dominate a coach’s attention, preventing her from working on the difficult and less rewarding aspects of coaching that are part of the broad repertoire of skills and tools which characterize expert coaching. For example, asking powerful questions, giving feedback, and offering advice are relatively quick, straightforward behaviors that can provide tangible value to the participant. When they are on target, they can have an immediate impact and, rather significantly, the coach is perceived as the direct source of their value.

Other parts of the coaching process, in contrast, are slow, tedious, and often frustrating. Translating insights into action in the real world, for example, is much more difficult, as is working through the process of changing old habits and replacing them with new, more effective behaviors. In these instances, the credit for a successful outcome is much more likely to be attributed to the diligence and hard work of the participant. The coach’s efforts to support this type of change, even when skillful and clever, are much less likely to be viewed as of equal importance. So coaches who feel good about the highly positive feedback they receive for their insightful feedback and advice may have little interest in pushing themselves to engage in the tedious and awkward parts of coaching where they may get little reward, but which are nonetheless absolutely essential for lasting results.

Developing Expertise in Coaching

There are many excellent books, workshops, training programs, and university courses available for those interested in learning the basics of coaching and achieving a level of competence. However, the key to developing expertise in coaching is likely
to be found, as it has been in so many disciplines, in deliber-
ate practice. Shadrick and Lussier (2009, 295–296) provide a
detailed discussion of nine characteristics of deliberate practice
in order to describe what it is and to help differentiate it from
other types of training and practice.

• Repetition. Task performance is induced by presenting specific,
designed tasks rather than waiting for these task demands
to occur naturally, so that the behavior can be repeated and
improved.

• Focused feedback. Task performance is evaluated by the coach
or learner during performance against some target. There is
a focus on elements of form that are critical parts of how one
does the task.

• Immediacy of performance. After corrective feedback on how the
task was performed, there is immediate repetition so that
the task can be performed again to better match the process
of experts or some other desired standard.

• Stop and start. Because of the repetition and feedback cycle,
deliberate practice is typically seen as a series of short perfor-
mances rather than as a continuous flow.

• Emphasis on difficult aspects. Deliberate practice explicitly
focuses on more difficult aspects of the performance which
might be encountered rarely in the real world.

• Focus on areas of weakness. Deliberate practice can be tailored
to the individual and focused on areas of weakness. Allowing
practice on one’s weaknesses in a relatively safe environment
and at an appropriate level of difficulty is much easier for
most people than attempting it in actual performance con-
texts, where they may (appropriately) gravitate toward relying
on their strengths.

• Conscious focus. Expert performance is characterized by many
aspects being performed with little conscious effort. Once
a behavior reaches this level of automaticity, it is difficult to
improve it without significant conscious effort. By focusing
on specific aspects of a performance, deliberate practice
allows one to modify and adapt mental models one aspect at
a time. After a number of repetitions attending to the desired
element to ensure that it is performed as desired, the learner
may resume performance while focusing on the overall situation rather than on just the particular element.

- **Work versus play.** Characteristically, deliberate practice feels more like work and is more effortful than casual performance. The motivation to engage in deliberate practice generally comes from a commitment to improve in skills.

- **Active coaching.** Typically it is easier to engage in deliberate practice with the assistance of a coach who monitors performance, assesses adequacy, and controls the structure of the practice.

Coaches can apply many of these principles in structured deliberate practice in at least three ways.

**Specific Learning Goals**

First, in actual coaching conversations, coaches can consciously focus on specific learning goals, try new techniques, and vary their approach from what they’ve done in the past. They can also seek immediate feedback from their clients. For some skills, such as asking questions, they may even have opportunities to repeat a certain type of question with slight modifications to test which is most effective. They can deliberately focus for short periods of time on their weaknesses before moving back to areas of comfort and competence. By being deliberate about how they balance new behaviors with areas of proven competence, they often will have the opportunity to test several different approaches with each client. Of course, because of the variability in client needs and situations, coaches must be alert to the possibility that a given behavior might have been effective or ineffective with a given client for some particular reason.

Thus coaches need to systematically experiment with a given behavior across a range of different clients and situations in order to understand fully how and when it works. For example, a coach might systematically try to see how long, and under what conditions, clients can continue to generate options in a brainstorming exercise. Coaches might vary the type of questions they ask, the tone of their questions, and the amount of silence they provide. Such an activity is not necessarily measured against some specific
criterion of excellence, as Shadrick and Lussier suggest, but on the basis of whether or not it seems to generate more and better responses and perhaps even greater client satisfaction with the process.

**Focused Practice and Rehearsal**

Second, coaches can work on certain skills and behaviors in solitary practice and rehearsal, such as generating a list of questions to pose to a particular client in order to elicit a deeply thoughtful response. Coaches can project how the client might answer each one and then test the best two or three in a later session with that client. In the spirit of deliberate practice, it is important to recognize the difference between merely generating a list of possible questions versus actively examining each question, repeating it in different ways to find the right tone and style, and comparing and contrasting different questions to gauge their appropriateness and fit in different circumstances.

**Client Feedback**

Third, coaches can schedule practice sessions with their own coaches, supervisors, or peers in order to work on specific skills. Although someone who is an expert on a particular technique might be optimal, even a relative novice can offer useful feedback on how effective a question, comment, or technique is from his or her personal perspective. The ultimate usefulness of such feedback, of course, rests on their similarity to the target client.

**Self-Reflection**

McGonagill (2002) provides a somewhat similar perspective in his discussion of the coach as reflective practitioner. Although he does not incorporate all the elements of deliberate practice, he highlights several critical aspects, including the role of specific learning goals and of conscious effort and attention in developing oneself as a coach. His approach adds some complementary elements to the literature on expertise in that reflective coaches are focused not just on their core practices, but on their vision, values, and
assumptions. A common theme in virtually all of the literature on expertise and mastery (for example, Leonard, 1992) is the notion of self-awareness and self-discipline in the pursuit of excellence. In that spirit, I close this chapter with recommendations for a practice of self-reflection.

First, consider four basic directions of reflection:

- **Look inward**: What is most important to you? What values matter most and how are you manifesting them in what you are trying to achieve?
- **Look outward**: What matters most to others? What expectations do they hold that you need to address in order to be successful at your endeavors? How do they perceive you?
- **Look back**: What have you been trying to learn and what new things have you tried? What has worked well and what hasn’t worked? What have you learned?
- **Look ahead**: What will you do differently? What do you need to keep learning? Where are your opportunities to try new things?

Second, consider reflection at six different levels of learning and development, corresponding to six natural time frames.

1. Daily (for about one minute): What new thing did I do today? How did it go? What one thing will I do differently tomorrow?
2. Weekly (3–5 minutes): What kind of progress did I make last week? What do I need to focus on this next week?
3. Monthly (5–10 minutes): How am I doing on my learning objectives? What do I need to do to keep learning? How will I get meaningful feedback?
4. Quarterly (10–15 minutes): How am I doing on my development? What is most important for my success going forward?
5. Annually (1 hour):
   - Where do I stand relative to what matters to me? What really matters to me? Where do I want to be a year from now and how do I get there?
   - What do I need to do to manage my learning more effectively? What do I need to do to make sure I’m not missing something important?
6. Decadely (Every 5–10 years or so, consider a personal retreat for a day or a quiet afternoon):
   • Who do I want to be? What values do I want to live by? How am I doing?
   • What do I need to do in the next five years to accomplish what matters most?

Conclusion

This chapter argues that it is easy to be a good coach. Many simple coaching tools and techniques can be quite effective in helping others grow and develop. At the same time, it is rather difficult to become a great coach and consistently perform at a high level, especially in the face of challenging and novel situations. To do so requires a clear commitment to learning, diligent practice, regular feedback, and disciplined self-reflection.

Regardless of whether you aim to be a great coach, a good coach, or simply seek to keep growing and learning on whatever path you are on, the words of Michelangelo offer some useful advice: “The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that our aim is too low and we reach it.” Even to aim for a basic level of competence may be inadequate. For one thing, the number of practicing coaches continues to increase (Liljenstrand & Nebeker, 2008), creating a more competitive environment where even competent coaches must find ways to differentiate themselves and stand out from the crowd. Even more importantly, the science and practice of executive coaching is advancing rapidly and the bar for competent performance is continually being raised. Only those coaches who are self-reflective, intentional about their learning, and continually seeking to improve are likely to thrive.

References


