

Building on Trust

Relationship coaching sharpens understanding between all types of partnerships

By Dr. Patrick Williams, Ed.D., MCC

Dr. Williams: Relationship coaching has emerged as a unique specialization within the coaching profession. How do you define relationship coaching?

Lisa Kramer: Relationship coaching is an ongoing professional relationship that helps individuals and couples achieve results in their committed relationships. Through coaching, clients define their vision of a fulfilling, committed relationship and then develop a plan to create that vision. Coaching provides clients with the support, structure, and accountability to successfully reach their goals within the relationship. Coaching also assists clients in identifying the roadblocks that interfere with moving forward. Through the safety and trust of the coaching partnership, clients gain clarity and awareness to address those roadblocks and make conscious choices in creating the relationship of their dreams.

How is relationship coaching different than marriage or relationship counseling?

When couples are in need of counseling, they are experiencing a breakdown in the relationship that

Author's note: As part of my ongoing effort to write about the alliance between theories of psychotherapy and coaching, this month's article centers on the growing niche of "relationship coaching." I recently spoke with Lisa Kramer, MSW, PCC, founder and president of Living with Intention. She is a life coach, coach trainer, mentor coach, and writer based in Villanova,

Pennsylvania. Kramer is the author of *Coaching with Intention*, the first in her Coaching Mastery™ series. The forthcoming *Loving with Intention*, a relationship-coaching manual for coaches and therapists, will be available in July 2005. Kramer is on the faculty of the Institute for Life Coach Training, and she is a graduate of the Coaches Training Institute.

requires healing. The healing process requires that the couple gain a better understanding about what occurred in the past and how that impacts the relationship today. They must uncover patterns of communication that may be destructive to the relationship and explore emotions that surface for both partners.

Couples who are good candidates for relationship coaching have a solid foundation based on love, commitment, mutual respect, and trust. They want to move on to the next step, finding ways to enhance their relationship or particular aspects of their relationship, such as finances, communication, work/life



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balance. Through coaching, couples create a shared blueprint of what they want for the relationship and then work with their coach to achieve the vision. These couples are motivated to make changes needed to achieve the vision. Couples who are in need of counseling must first do the healing work to achieve the trust and readiness required for coaching.

Is there a theoretical framework that grounds relationship coaching?

Yes. The Conscious Relationship Coaching Model that I developed is based on Dr. Harville Hendrix’s Imago Relationship Theory. Hendrix is the author of *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*, and *Keeping the Love You Find: A Guide for Singles*. According to his Imago theory, a conscious relationship fosters

maximum psychological and spiritual growth for both partners based on a mutual image (imago) of their ideal relationship. To become conscious, couples move through different stages in their relationship that Hendrix labels romantic love, the power struggle and finally, mature love. Understanding these stages helps couples to normalize their experiences in relationship, particularly when conflict emerges. Couples in need of counseling are so embroiled in the power struggle that they have difficulty working proactively on their relationship. Couples who would find success with coaching may indeed be struggling in certain areas of the relationship. But they recognize and focus on what’s working more often than on what’s not working. By capitalizing on the strength of the rela-

tionship, couples can move forward to greater levels of connection and communication.

Would relationship coaching be effective with couples that do show commitment but have some ineffective responses to life stressors?

Absolutely! However, it’s crucial that the coach determine at the outset if a couple is “coachable.” Important questions to ask include:

- What life stressors are impacting their relationship at present?
- How long has the couple been experiencing these stressors? (It’s important to know if the stressor is short-term or chronic. A chronic stressor may indicate that the couple needs therapy to address its long-term effects on the relationship.)
- Assess what attempts they may have made in the past to address these areas. Ask them what worked successfully and what did not.
- Ask them to identify the strengths in their relationship and in each other.
- Finally, get a sense from them of why they are pursuing coaching now? What issues are stirring enough to make them explore taking action?

What about couples who are in conflict or arguing in ineffective and potentially hurtful ways?

Fighting is a healthy aspect of any relationship. It’s the way in which partners fight that’s important. It is important for a coach to ask how couples fight with each other. Is there explosive anger? Does one

partner tend to withdraw for extended periods at a time? How open are they to learning and practicing new ways of communicating when they disagree with each other? Fighting, in itself, is not an indicator that a couple is not appropriate for coaching.

You talk about individuals and couples. Does that mean you can do effective relationship coaching with an individual? How does that work?

Well, relationship coaching is certainly more effective when both partners are involved. The process of moving towards mature love is the work of both partners, not just one. Both partners need to be engaged in coaching to create a conscious relationship.

On the other hand, it is possible for individuals to focus on their relationship without their partner. Coaching helps individuals gain greater clarity about their vision of a more fulfilling relationship and to understand the gap between their ideal and where the relationship actually is at present. An individual client can certainly take steps on his or her own to improve a relationship with some degree of success. However, I believe that ultimately it is the work of both partners to create a conscious relationship.

What are the typical goals or desires of relationship coaching?

Relationship coaching issues encompass all areas on the life wheel including parenting, communication and intimacy, finances, work/life balance, fun and recreation. For example, one couple I coached was experiencing difficulty in their relationship due

to finances. They had different views about spending and saving. Through coaching, they developed a financial vision that helped them each understand the other's perspective. They realized that neither was right or wrong—they were just different. By developing and implementing a plan, this couple was able to successfully move forward in this area of the relationship. That alone had a positive impact on other areas of their relationship.

Can relationship coaching be expanded to partnerships based not on love, but on, say, workplace needs?

The Conscious Relationship Coaching model is effective with life partners, business partners, work teams, and family businesses. Any relationship where there is a commitment to creating and working toward achieving a shared vision will benefit from this approach.

Could you give a brief example?

Imago theory and the Conscious Relationship Coaching principles apply to work-related partnerships or teams. I once coached a manager and a project leader who were at odds with each other and frustrated over their lack of progress. I applied the same principles I use with couples. I had them design their ideal working relationship and clarify their roles and responsibilities. By working out an agreement on their desired outcomes, they were able to transform how they worked together. Other team members noticed the difference. It is always about being purposeful and conscious and a willingness to communicate and compromise.



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Can relationship coaches be available as specialists for other coaches to refer to?

Certainly! Coaches working with individual clients can refer a client and his or her partner to a relationship coach to specifically address the relationship. I do not recommend that coaches work with couples if they have not been trained in relationship coaching. Relationship coaching is different because the coach must successfully design an alliance with the couple. Because the client is the couple, the coach must be effective in coaching both partners simultaneously.

What recommendations do you have for a coach who would like to expand into relationship coaching but has no formal training with couples?

I believe strongly in formal training. There are too many people calling themselves coaches who don't have training, and it has a negative impact on the credibility of the profession. Relationship coaching is different than individual coaching, and coaches need advanced training to do this work. In addition, new relationship coaches should hire a mentor coach to assist them in becoming proficient in this area. •

Dr. Patrick Williams, Master Certified Coach, ICF Board Member, and CEO of the Institute for Life Coach Training, speaks worldwide and writes extensively on coaching. He is the co-author of Therapist as Life Coach: Transforming Your Practice, and Total Life Coaching: 50+ Life Lessons, Skills, and Techniques to Enhance Your Practice and Your Life. His newest book on the law and ethics in coaching will be out fall, 2005.

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