

# Lessons From Health Coaching...

## Feeding a Fish vs. Teaching to Fish



...by **Paul Terry**

Coaching Luke can feel like chasing a butterfly: His mental process is beautiful to behold but supremely elusive. Sometimes he'll settle into a thought that seems like a conclusion, then flutter off — unaware of my devoted interest in pinning him down by helping him commit to a health goal. Luke is trying to live well with diabetes, high cholesterol, and obesity. As Luke sees it, setting health goals is complicated by his frequent interactions with the healthcare system. He's trying to decide about bariatric surgery. His food plan is influenced by his wife's diet since her own bariatric surgery. His mother's recent surgery is a barrier to his exercise plans because he travels often to see her. Luke complains of the difficulty in dealing with his unpredictable schedule as he navigates his medical providers while serving as his mother's and wife's advocate.

Rosamund and Benjamin Zander, in their superb book *The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life*, write about the need for those wanting to expand themselves “to be present, without resistance, to the world just as it is.” The purpose is to embrace contradictions, fears, and emotions without correcting them in order to “soar, like the far seeing hawk, over the whole landscape.” I'm mindful of this wisdom while listening to Luke. If I can't use motivational interviewing skills to come alongside Luke as he relates the layers of complications weighing on him, how can I help him peel them back?

Still, if I didn't know better, I'd suspect I was being “punked,” given how trying

Luke is making it to support him. I'm convinced, though, that what could be perceived as caginess is more likely a brittle blend of learned helplessness, confusion, and anxiety. Rolling with resistance is a tenet of motivational interviewing that I use often with Luke. Rather than conclude that he's incapable of commitment to healthier behaviors, I ask if he wants to explore his choices.

An ancient proverb accompanies my relationship with Luke: “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” For some, the catch of the day is a decision to work toward a specific and measurable new goal. Coaches seldom feel satisfied if they haven't helped their clients haul in immediate “nourishment” for healthier living. But we also need to give self-help skills that have less to do with today's short-term goal than with activating clients to be their own coaches over the long term.

Here's a milestone exchange I had with Luke 7 months into our relationship:

**Paul:** “It seems like you're feeling stuck. Got any ideas for getting unstuck?”

**Luke:** “I suppose we could talk through what barriers are in my way.”

**Paul:** “Tell me where you think that might take us?”

**Luke:** “Well, I know there are some I can manage and others I'd need help with. Like we talked about, my friends are always there for me when I let them be.”

**Paul:** (Long silence.)

**Luke:** “This is being stuck because I keep spinning my wheels rather than fixing the road I'm on.”

**Paul:** “What would the new road look like?”

**Luke:** (Long silence.) “Shorter.” (More silence.) “It's a solid road that's *not* paved with good intentions.” (We laugh together.) “A solid surface for me means not keeping my problems to myself for so long. And now I know you're going to ask me about who I could be sharing this idea with.”

I love when that happens. The more my clients are able to anticipate my questions, use positive self-talk and, essentially, show me they don't need me much longer, the more satisfied I am that I'm doing my job.

A relatively new tool that offers important insight into the connection between learning better self-management skills and making better health decisions is the Patient Activation Measure (PAM). The scale assesses self-care variables such as knowing where to find resources, taking control of health, and having confidence in handling health problems even when under stress. My research colleagues and I recently published new findings that increasing participants' PAM scores may not only play a key role in improving health practices, but also enhancing job satisfaction and presenteeism (staying productive at work even

while managing health problems).<sup>\*</sup> In this study, we recruited participants with the highest health risks into coaching. A surprising discovery using the PAM is that those with lower activation scores were more likely to enroll. This supports the goal that those who most need to learn to fish are indeed those most likely to take advantage of our offer to teach them how.

It doesn't matter whether a client has a chronic condition and we use that to work toward healthier habits or, conversely, they came to coaching ready to work on lifestyle and it turns out they also benefit from learning better ways to manage a chronic condition. In either case, the coach's goal is to meet them where they are to help them move toward where they need to go or, as pundit Auren Hoffman quipped in a clever twist, "Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime. Unless he doesn't like sushi — then you also have to teach him to cook."

I don't know yet where Luke needs to go to reach his health goals because, of course, he doesn't seem to know yet either. I do know that when Luke and I reach that point together, it will be without fanfare. Deciding when to end a coaching relationship is never easy, and I know this will be the case with Luke. Perhaps that's because it's often when what I know best how to offer is just the thing Luke no longer needs. 📌

<sup>\*</sup>Fowles, J., Terry, P.E., Hibbard, J., Min, X., Taddy Bloom, C., Harvey, L. "Measuring self-management of patients' and employees' health: Further validation of the Patient Activation Measure (PAM) based on its relation to employee characteristics." *Patient Education and Counseling*. Vol. 77 (2009), pages 116-122.

# The Multitasking Myth

While researching our *Feel Like a Million* ([www.iFeelLikeaMillion.com](http://www.iFeelLikeaMillion.com)) program, we confirmed that multitasking not only contributes to feelings of stress, it also has a severe negative impact on productivity. That unleashed a debate in our office among those who pride themselves at "being good at multitasking." The fact: no one is good at doing multiple things at once; one or all tasks will suffer.

Ask someone to type a message while you have a conversation with them. Without exception, they'll have to pause one of the activities to perform the other. And often they bounce back and forth, producing a less-than-coherent message or failing to grasp what you're saying.

Multitaskers are paying a mental price, says a new study in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Researchers conclude that heavy multitaskers — those attempting to email, text message, instant message, and carry on a conversation — are more easily distracted than those who engage in a single task at a time. In other words, their concentration and memory are worse, not better (the common justification for multitasking).

Multitaskers also prove to be *slower* at moving between tasks than those who maintain a more singular focus.

The lesson: slow down to speed up and remember more. 📌

## Tough Times May Be the Best Time to **Recruit New Participants**

Health promoters have long assumed that during stress at work or a difficult economic climate isn't a good time to go looking for new participants. That may be exactly wrong, according to a *Journal of Consumer Research* study by the University of South Carolina. It found individuals are more likely to try new things during times of upheaval than when things are going along as they always have.

Redouble your promotion efforts to see if you can take advantage of these challenging times to boost participation. 📌

If business is bad at your organization, it may be good for your wellness program.

