

Semi-Directive vs. Client-Centered Coaching

Lessons from Health Coaching

“Hi. I’m Paul, and I’m a workaholic,” I said — doing my best to sound pitiable and ironic.

“Hi, Paul.” My health coach Tracy paused on the other end of the line. I heard her sigh and sensed her wry smirk. “You know, Paul, real recovery begins with actually admitting you have a problem.”

There are several reasons behind my being a participant in our company health coaching program. For one, it’s simply a time-honored professional tenet that those who provide services also should use them. The story about the cobbler’s kids without shoes is not intended to be paradoxical; it’s flat-out sad. I asked Tracy if she’d be my coach because she’s experienced, smart, and imperturbable. That she came to StayWell’s health coaching center with

a background in counseling psychology and worked as a wellness specialist at a chemical dependency treatment facility also interested me.

Motivational interviewing grew out of studies aimed at improving addictive disorder treatment, and I knew I could learn from her. But Tracy also is a great coach for me because the health improvement I work on most often is moderating my work pace, even though I view working hard at something you love to be a positive addiction. How’s that for ambivalence?

Truth be told, as much as I think having a personal health coach is an awesome workplace perk, I wouldn’t want to coach me. I spend more of our coaching sessions asking Tracy why she asked me something than I do actually answering her questions. Still, don’t think for a minute that knowing what



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motivational interviewing technique is being used makes the experience less valuable. Indeed, feeling what it’s like to be on the answering end is as humbling as it is edifying. Here’s an encounter with Tracy that often comes back to me:



Tracy: Who do you think controls the decision to work longer hours or extra days? I know for most people, myself included, technology makes it very easy to blur the lines between work roles and personal life because we’re accessible through technology at all hours.



Paul: That the BlackBerry® became known as “CrackBerry” underscores the powerful pull of instant gratification. A lot of humor is rooted in some sad reality. (I pause to reflect on my answer; Tracy has learned to give me space for this.) I suppose that answer is a deflection?



Tracy: It might have been, but at least you didn’t answer my question with one of your own this time. That’s good progress! I’ll admit that talking about control issues can be daunting. How about we talk about boundaries instead? Who is pushing for you to reply to work emails at 9:00 PM on a Saturday night?



Paul: What if I'm *pulled* to it? No pushing needed. If I self-identify as being of service and there is reinforcement value in being put to good use, where's the harm? (Another pause.) Except, I suppose, the opportunity cost issues we've discussed.



Tracy: Right. Time working is time not spent on other life challenges. Also consider this: being needed and of service to others is a wonderful thing, but to continue giving out those resources to the extent you do requires replenishing that reservoir or it can have a negative impact on you. We see this with caregivers and healthcare professionals all the time. I wonder if it's time to play out some "what if" questions again? I know how much you value efficiency, Paul. You've agreed that you're never done in your line of work. When you create a boundary, it's a way to acknowledge that working more or working harder will never result in being done and that achieving some balance in your life is a priority. But it's also a way to bolster productivity because less exhaustion means you're less prone to error. So taking breaks and doing other things are actually investments in being more productive when you are working.



Paul: So "what if" I spend less time on something I'm good at and that I love to do? (I do love to test Tracy's imperturbability regularly.)



Tracy: Such a *feeble* attempt at playing an insufferable precontemplator! You may discover that you're really good at some other things, so let's frame it a bit differently. How about: "what if" you made more time for something you don't excel at now but wish you did? I realize it's very gratifying to focus the majority of your time on something you do really well, but to continue evolving as a person and a professional, how will putting all of your eggs in one basket help you grow? I love Anais Nin's notion that "Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage."



Paul: I may be insufferable, but you're downright wicked. Ok, I have my assignment for the weeks ahead. Do I really have to call you back again?

Motivational interviewing is distinguished from Rogerian (person-centered) therapy because it is both client-centered *and* semi-directive. I've noted how different health coaches tend to err on one side or the other of these precepts; I'm not surprised that, in my case, Tracy tends toward being directive. She's learned that, for me, self-reflection too often is a form of deflection. She also knows that resolving my ambivalence about working long hours is my job to resolve, not hers.

As I write this column, Bobby "Blue" Bland comes up on my music playlist. According to the music genome project experts, he arrived because of "classic soul qualities, minor key tonality, string section beds, orchestral arranging, and electric guitar riffs." Tracy is a great coach because she has the capacity to adapt, quietly and companionably, to client foibles and preferences. She's like the music experts who analyze the thumbs-up or thumbs-down on Pandora radio playlist songs and adapt accordingly. It didn't take her long to sense that I'm willing to confront my

ambivalence about work/life balance, but that my rationalizing shares some things in common with her addicted clients. I've come to deeply admire Tracy's ear for key tonality. She hears my deflections even if I turn the volume way down. And I can count on her for electric riffs in response that simply can't be ignored.

Yes, Tracy, I have been playing out some "what ifs." I'll get back to you with answers soon. But maybe not on a Saturday night. 🎷