

# Personal Coaching for Professional Women: A Transformational Experience

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Whether one is a coach, or considering hiring a coach, one of the key questions to be answered is, "What are the benefits of hiring a coach?" In my recent doctoral research study, "Personal Coaching for Professional Women", this question is answered from the perspective of the professional (working) women who have been coached for four or more months by an International Coach Federation (ICF) Master Certified Coach (MCC) or Professional Certified Coach (PCC).

Specifically, this study asked the questions, (1) "What are common reasons professional women hire a coach?", (2) "What goals and benefits do they perceive they have achieved as a result of the coaching experience?", and (3) "What factors in the coaching experience contributed to the achievement of desired goals?". A second purpose of the study was to determine the extent to which the data supports the findings in the recent research study conducted by Dr. Brenda Wilkins (Wilkins, 2000).

As noted by Dr. Wilkins, one of the major goals of coaching is to help clients learn, change and achieve goals as a result of coaching strategies. In my study, I identified psychological research that provides the foundation for many of the motivational strategies utilized in the coaching profession. More importantly, this study identifies the client's perspective on how a personal coach helped them meet their goals. As a result, this study provides a valuable resource for coaches, those considering hiring a coach, and coach training institutions as they continue to develop their coach training programs.

## The Approach

The approach that was used in this grounded theory study was telephone interviewing of twenty-six professional women coaching clients who were referred by their coaches. The coaches had been made aware of the study by means of an RFP on the ICF website. The interviews consisted of twenty-four open-ended questions written for the purpose of generating client perceptions of the coaching experience. Clients were assigned numbers for the purpose of preserving anonymity. In addition to asking why they hired a coach these clients were asked to identify what the coach did and what they did that helped them achieve their goals. One of the primary distinctions between the Wilkins study and the present study is that Wilkins developed a coaching model based on interviews with coaches. The present study used coaching clients to determine the extent to which client perceptions agreed with the perceptions of the coaches interviewed for the Wilkins (2000a) study.

## Interview Questions

The interview questions used in the present study were:

1. Why did you obtain the services of a coach (hire a coach)?
2. In what way, if any, did the fact that you are a professional woman affect your decision to hire a coach?
3. How were you coached (how frequently, length of call, cost)?
4. What were the goals you identified at the beginning of the coaching experience? (Identify the life area goals applied to)
5. In what ways, if any, did your goals change as the coaching experience progressed?

6. To what extent did you discuss purpose in life with your coach and use that concept to shape goals and actions?
7. In what ways do you perceive the coaching experience as having been beneficial. (What did you learn?)
8. What were the actual changes/outcomes that you experienced during the coaching process as related to your stated goals?
9. How did these changes impact your life (goal attainment, self-efficacy, stress level, quality of life)?
10. What changes/outcomes did you hope for that did not occur?
11. In what way, if any has the coaching experience impacted your personal life?
12. In what way, if any, has the coaching experience impacted your career?
13. What measurable or observable changes have occurred in your life as a result of the coaching experience?
14. In what way, if any, have you formally or informally incorporated things learned in the coaching process into areas of your life such as career, health, finances, relationships, fun and recreation and/or spirituality?
15. What measurable goals did you have during the coaching process?
16. How did you evaluate the attainment of these goals?
17. What did the coach do (challenge, support, empower) that helped you identify or achieve your goals?
18. What was the most helpful thing your coach did during the coaching process?
19. How would you describe your coach?
20. Based on your description, which of these factors were most helpful during the coaching experience?
21. What do you consider to be the most significant thing that occurred during the coaching experience that led to behavioral or attitudinal change?
22. How did the change occur?
23. What did you do that contributed to this change?

What advice would you have for professional women considering hiring a coach?

### ***Wilkins' Coaching Model***

Based on her research findings, Dr. Brenda Wilkins developed The Coaching Model. This model has three main theoretical constructs which are Purpose, Process and Relationship (later referred to as "People" (Wilkins, 2000b). These constructs are considered to be the primary causal factors in assisting coaching clients to learn, change and achieve goals. According to Wilkins (2000b),

**Purpose** reflects clients' core values and priorities. Clients set goals that align with their values and priorities. At the core of all goals is the assumption that clients can and must strive for optimal learning and development. Coaches can help clients define and clarify these goals.

**Process** reflects the coaching strategies of (1) consciousness raising, (2) supporting, and (3) challenging. The client-customized application of the strategies, in combination with the focus on purpose, creates a unique environment for learning.

**People** reflects the unique coach-client relationships. Whether a single coach-client partnership or a team of coaches and clients are working together, the emphasis is on developing relationships that support learning and change. The coach will be client-focused and the relationship egalitarian.

## **The Transformational Coaching Experience**

While current data supports all aspects of the Wilkins' Coaching Model, new findings, based on the experience of coaching from the perspective of coaching clients, adds another dimension to The Coaching Model. That dimension is experience-based outcome, or what I am calling, "The Transformational Coaching Experience".

Wilkins makes the observation that coaching is a transformative process where coaches support learners aspiring to and acquiring new levels of learning, development, change and achievement. Almost unanimously, the professional women interviewed in my research study affirmed coaching as a vehicle for transformation and change. The Coaching Model defined by Wilkins (2000a) provides the constructs shown above (Purpose, Process, People (relationships) which must be present in order for learning and change (transformation) to occur.

The word "transform" refers to (1) changing form or outward appearance, (2) changing the condition, nature or function of, and/or (3) changing the personality or character of. Interview data in the study supports the concept of coaching as a transformational experience due to the emphasis on change and the level of consciousness required for change.

Coaches help their clients move forward toward transformation and self-actualization as they support their clients in defining goals, identifying barriers to achieving those goals, and challenging them to move in the direction of more creative solutions. The transformational experience of coaching is facilitated by the non-judgmental stance of coaches and the use of questions which are emotion-neutral.

One of the keys to a transformational coaching experience substantiated by client interview data is the importance of a playful attitude and having fun as a way to enhance the creative process. Several clients interviewed described their coaches as fun, or having a great sense of humor, which freed the client from old rigid rules, attitudes and beliefs. These clients were encouraged by their coaches to try new behaviors and new ways to think about things.

Perhaps the hidden gift of coaching is healing. The art of using the power of our minds to heal comes through the ability to notice when people are stuck in an unproductive mindset, to become aware of the mental movies that are limiting their creativity, and to make new choices (Borysenko and Borysenko, 1994). The two keys to inner healing are awareness and choice. Data from the majority of professional women interviewed validate the fact that a major outcome of the coaching experience is the awareness that one is always at choice, and that through choice, one designs one's life.

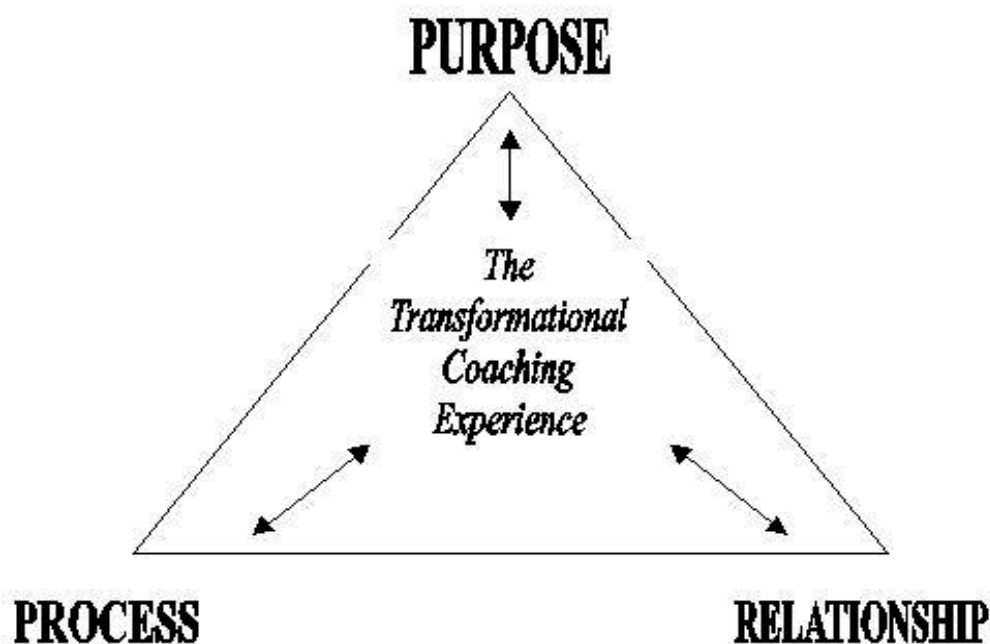
Giving clients the keys of awareness and choice are among gifts coaches bring which result in a transformational coaching experience. The review of literature and current data support the idea that coaches can help client's achieve transformation by strengthening their intention to change, helping them be aware of where they are stuck in negative, non-productive, self-

destructive thinking, and asking the questions which allow clients to see an opportunity for change. Clients interviewed reported that their coaches always believed in them and believed it was possible for them to accomplish their goals. Data resulting from clients interviewed for this study certainly give rise to the possibility that it is the attitude of coaches who look at their clients with a passion for the possible that lies at the heart of the transformational coaching experience.

## The Client's Perspective

Analysis of data in this study supports the addition of the concept of the Transformational Coaching Experience to Wilkins' Coaching Model. Information regarding the coaching experience as producing transformation and change from the client's perspective was not available in Wilkins' (2000a) study since only coaches perspectives were available. However, in this study, the vast majority of professional women interviewed stated the hoped for change (transformation) did occur. Thus, this author proposes an additional component to the Wilkins Coaching Model as shown below:

### The Transformational Coaching Experience



### *Factors Contributing to the Transformational Coaching Experience*

If coaching is to create a transformational experience in the lives of coaching clients, it is important to identify the factors in the coaching experience which contribute to significant change and produce transformation. Clients in this study have identified some of these factors.

#### 1. Why clients hire a coach (Purpose).

As described in the Wilkins study, most of the professional women interviewed indicated that they hired a coach as a result of dissatisfaction with the quality of some aspect of their lives, and the hope that a coach could help them make the shift from where they were to where they wanted to be. A vision of the life they wanted was described by 19% of clients interviewed. This vision for life as it could be became the foundation from which goals were identified. Client #5 stated, "My goals for hiring a coach were about

defining what my purpose was, personally and professionally. It had to do with quality of life. It was about fine-tuning." Client #19 said, "I had fulfilled my career and financial goals, but I had lost my family in the process. Achieving your career goals is meaningless unless you have the people you love there to share it with." Client #5 stated, "As a business professional, my goals were very ambitious, and I wanted to achieve them faster. I wanted to start and build my own business, and hiring a coach made sense to me. One client made reference to needing help getting focused at work, while still another client stated that she didn't think of hiring the coach, but rather, her employer did. The employer "footed the bill" for a coach for each employee. Still another client reported, "I hired a coach because I knew the best could get even better with the help of a coach."

As predicted in the Wilkins study, the goals of clients for hiring a coach tended to fall into three primary categories: task, balance, and self-actualization.

## **2. Attitudes and Actions**

The achievement of client goals required specific attitudes and actions on the part of both the coach and the client. Clients described these actions and attitudes. A few of these descriptions are shown below. Others can be found in the appendices of this research study.

## **3. What the Coach Did That Helped Clients Achieve Their Goals**

Client #6: The most helpful thing my coach did was to listen. It was more than hearing. It was getting behind what was being said, thinking about it, and giving it back to me. Holding a mirror back to me.

Client #11: My coach gave me the skills to evaluate myself and my life, and to see what is keeping me from being the best that I can be. I recognized that a person like a coach is essential for self-evaluation. My coach also made me aware of resources for change (articles, trainings, etc.)

Client #12: The most helpful thing my coach did was asking pertinent questions. It wasn't her telling me what to do. It was her asking me and guiding me.

Client #13: My coach validated me, supported me, challenged me, and gave me a reality check.

Client #15: Openness and honesty in the relationship with my coach certainly were factors contributing to change.

Client #20: The most helpful thing about the coaching experience was the consistency of having a regular process and a regular place to check in.

## **4. What the Client Did That Helped Them Achieve Their Goals**

Client #6: What I did that contributed to change was that I was smart enough to hire a coach. The coach is the key. Plus, I had the desire, a huge need, and the courage.

Client #11: What I did that contributed to change was that we identified that I was ready to make a change, but needed the skills to do it. The motivation for change came from within. The coach gave me the skills to make the changes and then I implemented them.

Client #13: How I contributed to change was that I did the work!

Client #15: What I did that contributed to change was bring my problems to the table when I needed help, being honest, listening to suggestions, and trying to implement those suggestions. It's not something that happens to you and then you are a different person. It's a process.

Client #20: The thing I did was that I kept going. I took some step to further the action. That is what the client has to do - - take the steps or decide to take a different step. That is one of the hallmark differences between coaching and therapy. Not that therapy

patients don't take action, but often therapy is about exploring the meaning of things, and not necessarily about doing anything.

### ***Changes (benefits) Experienced As a Result of Coaching***

The following are a few paraphrased statements of professional women coaching clients interviewed in this study. It struck this researcher that of equal importance to the actual words spoken by the clients regarding the benefits of coaching was the excitement, intensity of voice, and passion with which responses were given. The statements below are representational of those found in Appendix D (benefits of coaching) and clearly demonstrate that when all components of the Coaching Model are in place and operational, the coaching experience has a high probability of facilitating transformation and significant change in the life of the coaching client.

Client #8: As a result of coaching, changes have occurred in all areas of my life.

Client #9: My coach and I talked about values and purpose in life. . . I have a different outlook now, and I'm in a totally different place.

Client #20: I have experienced huge changes and outcomes as a result of coaching. I started my new business, and I moved from there to focusing on my personal life and my family life. I am more personally and professionally fulfilled than I have ever been at any other time in my life.

### ***Advice From Professional Women To Others Considering Hiring A Coach***

When asked their advice to other professional women interested in hiring a coach, the consensus of opinion seemed to be "Just do it!" Below are some representational statements given in response to the request for advice for other professional women considering hiring a coach. Others may be found in the Appendix F of this study.

Client #2: Don't be afraid to hire someone, and once you make the decision to seek support for your endeavors, I would suggest you interview a couple of coaches. Look for someone with whom you are compatible.

Client #3: Just do it! I can't imagine anybody who couldn't benefit from that kind of a partner in life. If for no other reason than taking a closer look at life. A life well examined is a life worth living. It is important to take stock. A coach will make that process very efficient.

Client #5: I would give professional women the same advice I would give anyone. Definitely do it. Find the right coach for you. Have a complimentary coaching call. Word of mouth is great, but you need to see how your rapport is, if you connect with that person, if you trust them, if you can speak freely, and feel heard. Ask them to challenge you, so you get a sense of how they would do that and how they would be with you.

## **Conclusion**

In his book, *Real Magic* (1992), author and lecturer, Wayne Dyer, suggests that, "Deep within you is a unified field of limitless possibilities. When you become competent at going to this wondrous place, you will discover an entirely new realm of human experience where all things are possible. It is here that real magic takes place."

According to Dyer, in this place of real magic limits do not exist, one seems to be in exactly the right place at the right time, one makes synchronistic "unbelievable" connections with others and is capable of meeting exactly the right person to help him or her on his or her path at exactly the right time, and one's purpose in life becomes very clear. Dyer states that human beings have the ultimate awareness of choice and can choose to function at a lower level of

awareness and "simply exist", or soar to new and higher levels of awareness, allowing themselves to transcend their environment, and literally create a world of their own - - a world of real magic.

This researcher believes the coaching process, described by Wilkins (2000a) and validated by data in the present research, provides a vehicle to facilitate the process of creating real magic as described by Dyer. That process is being called the Transformational Coaching Experience.

The interview data in this study, coupled with the awe, intensity, and passion with which professional women described their coaching experience, validate the observation of Wilkins (2000a) that the purpose of coaching is to seek to develop clients to their fullest potential. This researcher believes the coaching profession as it is emerging, and as shown in both in the Wilkins' data and data from the present study, is a gift to the world as it goes about its business of developing clients. Thomas Leonard made the following observation to this researcher: The human spirit thrives on inspiration, not motivation. A coach helps you discover that which naturally inspires you." When coaches and clients are inspired and "at purpose," there is a high probability for the emergence of the phenomenon referred to by this writer as a Transformational Coaching Experience and for the occurrence of significantly changed lives.

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