

Out of the Box Coaching Newsletter

Coaching and school, by Clarence Thomson

No matter what content we learn, we learn the system. If you went to school for any length of time, you learned, most of all, how to go to school. This may seem obvious, but it's so unconscious that our approach to most problems may be the one we used in school. Our culture absorbs this by assuming IQ equals intelligence, when in reality IQ is only really effective at predicting how well we will do in school. If we have abilities that work well in a classroom and library, we call that "smart," or "intelligent." If we have abilities in music, we don't say that. Instead we call that a "talent," which is a much more circumscribed notion. It is possible in the United States to be considered a stupid musician. It's highly unlikely one would be considered a stupid mathematician.

I tutored an 8th grade lad about 3 years ago. I told him how to succeed: "Show up on time, be organized and learn to follow the rules carefully." He went from flunking to the honor roll. Who knew it was that easy?

So now you're coaching or being coached. Your subliminal expectation is apt to be academic. The coach knows some stuff you don't; she's going to tell you and you're going to follow her instructions.

I have good news and bad for you. The good news is that she won't do that. The bad news is that you're apt to be disappointed. Teacher knew the right answers, why doesn't your coach?

Coaching in one narrow sense has an agenda opposite of the school's. In school you're pressured to do most of what you're poorest at doing. If you can't do multiplication, you'll take (of course) "remedial math." If you can't get chemistry, you will do the course over. But if you're a talented poet, you already know poetry, so why don't you take more earth science. You know the drill. Are you aware that drill has been drilled into the structure of your thinking?

Now your coach says something off the wall like, "Well, follow your bliss." (Love that term, it's so treacherous). You're caught off guard. You know, from the 6th grade on, bliss is going to get you into trouble and besides, you don't know what bliss is. Surely it doesn't mean "doing what I want."



No it doesn't. But it is an interesting coaching maxim because coaching is not how to bring all your talents "up to speed." Coaching is about helping someone become who they really can be and that's usually about helping them to better what they already do well. So if you love to work with your hands, then do that kind of work. If you have perfect pitch, get off the phone that's irritating your fine auditory equipment and join the band.

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The usual caveat that rises within our schooled thought is, “but I have to be realistic.” I have more news for you. There is no real world. I wish there were, it would make it easier to find my way home, but there is only the world I perceive. And I make a lot of that up. The Enneagram is a wonderful tool for coaches to determine what world the client has discovered. When clients want to be realistic, I get extremely curious about what’s real and what’s not real for them. The inner rules of a One or the anxiety of a Six is just as real as the goals of a high-achieving Three.

In school, reality was defined for you. Your success was in modifying your desires and inclinations (“delayed gratification”) so met their goals and received their grades.

Now the coach will do something entirely different and slightly dissonant. You are now the norm. Your goal is the one that counts. Your talent is what you’re encouraged to employ. You are assigned the task of modifying your world so it fits you instead of the other way around.

In the beginning this may be threatening. Not much self-denial or discipline or struggle here, you may think. I now have more news: this is harder and more bracing than going to school. Now instead of learning where Libya is (so you can follow the news), you have to acknowledge where you are. Much harder. No maps.

It’s hard for the coach, too. The coach must enter your world. This requires a degree of selflessness admirable in a Zen monk. The coach has to guide you in a world you own. So don’t be surprised when the coach listens more than talks, suggests and probes more than directs and – this is the good part – you get to grade your own paper. You grade yourself – that’s the coach’s ideal.

So when you read a guru writing “Follow your bliss,” this is not schooled wisdom. This is asking you, and helping you, to exert your finest and most sophisticated efforts to discern the best application of your finest talents to bring you as close to possible to getting what you want. That’s not selfishness if you do it right – that’s bliss.



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