

Do You Need a Life Coach?

The Life Coaching Handbook: Everything You Need To Be An Effective Life Coach by Curly Martin (Crown House Publishing Limited 2001, reprinted in various years up to 2007) ISBN 978-1899836710. Paperback 204 + vii.

This book is written for people who wish to become life coaches. Inevitably it contains a lot of information about what life coaching is; so it also for people who wonder whether they themselves need a life coach.

The author turns out to be a woman, though usually 'Curly' is a male nickname. She says she is an excellent coach and has a 100% success rate. She assures us that life coaching improves all aspects of life for both the client and the coach. I will concentrate here on the client.

The client needs to change, and the life coach assists in this. There are 'towards' clients and 'away from' clients. The object of the former is to advance on some desired goal and achieve it. The object of the latter is to retreat from some predicament and escape from it. A 'towards' client seeks to pass an examination, or achieve a weight loss, or conquer an addiction. The 'away from' clients have different problems. As Curly says, they want to move away from their current job, partner or life. How can the life coach help either of these types?

Curly says the role of the life coach is to lead clients out of their weakness and empower them to change. It is the coach's job to help identify the obstacles to change and remove them. The coach needs to get results – 'results, results and nothing but results'. Then clients will change into 'successful, confident people'. So Curly says.

There is an important caveat. The clients must be allowed to find the answers for themselves. The coach must work as a catalyst helping clients to achieve their own way forward. Often the client is running an old pattern of behaviour which no longer serves them. 'Then you show them ways of changing this pattern' says Curly. 'This discovery is a great release for the client and one of the joys of coaching.'

A method Curly favours is the Milton H. Erickson model of artfully vague language. The coach says something vague and the client fills in the outline. For example the coach says 'I'm curious about how you think I can help you'. This reverses the true position, which is that the onus is on the coach to explain how he/she can help the client. The client struggles with the answer, having been deluded into accepting the major premise that he/she really does think the coach can help. The method, says Curly, has 'great advantages for a coach'.

Curly has a cavalier way with the English language. Take the word *metaphor*. It has a precise meaning, contrasted to *simile*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says a metaphor is a figure of speech 'in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable'. Curly wants to widen this meaning:

'In Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), the word 'metaphor' incorporates long or short stories, allegories, parables, similes, poems, jokes and quotes . . . In order to get fast results, reorganise your clients' metaphor language.'

It is not 'your clients' metaphor language' that Curly is talking about here, it is the Queen's English. It is certainly unprofessional, and confusing to clients, to play fast and loose with that.

Curly advocates the I CAN DO method, as follows-

Investigate

Current
Aims
Number

Date
Outcome

Curly gives us an example for a client who wishes to lose weight. The client is asked questions spelling out the above formula.

I What is your reason for wanting to lose some weight?

C What is your current weight?

A What weight do you wish to be?

N What successful methods of weight loss have you heard about or experienced?

D By what date do you want to be your ideal weight?

O How will you know you have succeeded?

All this can be done over the telephone - it is not necessary for the coach to meet the client. Curly says:

‘Encourage your clients to send you an email at least 24 hours before each coaching call, with their current goal status. This gives you advance insight to the shape and direction of each call and uses coaching time effectively. Clients adore this process because it holds them to their commitments and, by writing down their achievements, they become more tangible.’

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So do you need a life coach? Curly’s book raised doubts in my mind.

Obviously it will cost you money to employ a life coach. Curly is vague on amounts charged: ‘Pricing will depend on the current marketplace’. Clearly you need to incur this expense only if you lack the willpower to achieve the desired change on your own and by yourself. Curly’s answer here would be that it can help to have an expert to help you work out just what change is needed, and then assist and encourage you while you work at it.

But is the life coach really an expert? Curly says this is an emerging profession, but admits there is as yet no accepted qualification. She writes:

‘There are currently no formally recognised professional qualifications for life coaching. This means that anyone – a carpenter, a tarot reader, a doctor or a preacher could put a sign outside their door, BEWARE OF THE LIFE COACH, and then start to advertise and practise life coaching . . . At present there is no governing body for life coaching and it is up to us as individuals to ensure that we do not bring this wonderful profession into disrepute.’

But is it really a profession? In my book *Professional Ethics: The Consultant Professions and their Code* (Charles Knight, 1969, pp. 36-38) I wrote:

‘The public looks for a hallmark bestowed by a trusted professional body, and evidenced by entry on a register or members’ list . . . The professions naturally set much store by the concept of the ‘hallmark’. That they are not alone in this view is shown by the submission made to the Monopolies Commission by the Consumer Council . . . The Council considers it an admirable policy that professional advisers should be competently trained and the public protected from charlatans by a controlled entry system.’

Life Coaches undertake work that is highly sensitive. I mentioned above Curly’s statement that she shows clients ways of changing an old pattern of behaviour which no longer serves

them. Elsewhere she speaks of values and belief systems developed in childhood which no longer serve the client, 'nevertheless people still judge and act by these obsolete principles'. She urges clients to make a big effort and burst out of old constricting values. She says (in italics for emphasis) *You choose to believe your own beliefs. Therefore you can choose to change them.*

This contradicts what she has admitted earlier. We do not 'choose' to believe our beliefs. We are led to them by teaching and experience. (Believers would say we are led to them by God.) Suddenly to try to scrap them and adopt a new value system is fraught with the danger of breakdown.

Curly says it is the coach's duty 'as client guardian' to prevent a breakdown in the client's health. She has as an epigraph to the book the following slogan:

*Life coaching is about transformation –
from a caterpillar into a butterfly.*

That may sound all right but these are dangerous waters. Curly says it is easy to become a life coach; but it is not easy to become an expert in human emotions and psychology. To qualify as an expert psychiatrist or psychologist requires years of training.

After reading this book I had the troubled feeling that Curly and her like are playing with fire. I shall not myself be signing on as a life coach client.

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5 September 2007.