

# How I became a coach

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My name is Lee and I am a Life Coach. I realised recently that I have been a closet coach for a very long time although I didn't know it. It is time for me to come out. My style of coaching, my understanding of the process of coaching and my beliefs about the necessity of coaching, have all been built up over the last 33 years as I have developed as a human being. This article is my story of personal development through the worlds of philosophy, management, psychotherapy, self-help, meditation and many self development courses, to what is ambiguously called Coaching. This is a personal journey and I make many claims. I am an individual and the following is only an expression of my thinking.

The process started for me by studying philosophy at Stirling University in October of 1991. Until then, I had been attempting a BA in Business and IT at Paisley technical college. The idea had been to just get away from my home town and into a college somewhere, not necessarily to study business. I had disappointing school grades which led to a somewhat less than salubrious college, and involved me becoming embroiled in a whole underworld of non-educational activities, none of which should be mentioned here but all of which were central to my ability to understand my clients on more than one level.

Lee is the Managing Director of **Authentic Living**, a personal development company offering coaching services and developmental workshops. She has a BA and MA in Philosophy and a Certificate in Counselling and Psychotherapy. She has also trained as a Life Coach with the Coaching Academy. She has nearly a decade of experience as a manager in a corporate environment as well as intimate experience of a wide range of personal development programs from meditation retreats to fire walking. She is passionate about authenticity and believes that there is a need for society to change its values and focus on socially responsible business if the human race is to continue to exist on this planet. Her secret agenda is to help as many people as possible wake up to what they are truly capable of and thereby transform the way we all live.

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The move to Stirling was facilitated by my stint as Vice President of the Students Union – this gave me access to the principal of Paisley College who acted as my reference for my application to university. I sought to study philosophy and psychology, as working with drunken students in the so called 'Summer of Love' 1990 had awakened my interest in what makes us tick as human beings. I figured that, rather than work it all out for myself, I would go and see what had come before me.

I started with joint honours in psychology and philosophy but quickly decided these subjects were incompatible at a fundamental level. I was attending lectures on abnormal psychology one hour, learning about which drugs were given for what psychological conditions, only to attend a lecture on the nature of the mind immediately afterwards. It became clear to me that we did not have a fully formed view of consciousness and it seemed a little rash to be attempting to authoritatively claim that certain chemicals were best for the treatment of psychological conditions. There was a mind/brain identification assumption at work in the model that I could not accept at face value. Thus I changed my degree to pure philosophy to see if I could get a handle on what I considered to be the prior questions of the nature of the mind.

My philosophy BA exposed me to many differing viewpoints and subjects but by far my favourite was ethics, the study of how we make moral decisions and how we act together as a community for the benefit of all. Or, as is often the case, how we deal with peoples'

actions when they damage the integrity of the group. There was a whole area of philosophy devoted to the study of consciousness but I found it most interesting when actively expressed in how we interact with others.

Four years thinking was not enough for me so I successfully applied to do an MA at the University of Leeds continuing the theme of ethics. Once that was complete I continued with a PhD, under the heading of Aristotle's Moral Education. Whilst I was doing all this studying I had to pay the bills, which brought me into the world of management.

I was an accidental manager and this lasted for nearly a decade. I started by running a small skateboard shop in Leeds in 1995, whilst I was studying for my MA. It had never been my ambition to lead people or to throw myself into the world of retail. It more happened because I am an efficient person and I looked like the best candidate for the job when the current manager left. Thus began my education into what motivates people in a practical sense. How was I to get everyone on my team to do the things that needed to be done? I quickly worked out that by allocating responsibility to people they were more inclined to take care of things and work harder. This was a revelation to me. Simply telling them what to do did not necessarily get the results that one may have expected.

My management career grew as I studied. I moved from the small skate shop to a large US book and music retailer. I more fully explored this inclusive method of management. I examined how to motivate people, how

to enable them to shine in their role, to live up to what they were capable of. I know now, I was coaching them. I used questions rather than direction, I encouraged rather than told.

Being a manager does not directly lead to a profession in coaching. There was still the outstanding issue of the nature of the mind. What really made people tick? With philosophy not answering my questions and my PhD abandoned, it was time to take another look at psychology, though from a slightly different angle.

My first brush with psychotherapy occurred in Brighton in 2000. I had moved there to run another branch of the book company and found myself in a position of unpopularity and isolation that was new to me and frankly disturbing. After seeking several alternative ways of dealing with the loneliness inherent in the position, I sought out a therapist. I knew nothing of the distinctions between the schools of psychotherapeutic thought; I only knew that I wanted to have someone to talk to about my feelings and to help me deal with them in a constructive and positive manner. Out of the yellow pages fell my first therapist, a psychoanalyst Spanish woman old enough to be my mother.

I found the process of therapy interesting, as it was a completely unknown quantity. I couldn't understand the need for me to lie on the couch. I wanted to interact with this woman, to see her and be seen by her. I worried that she was not listening. We ran through my deepest fears, my thoughts and feelings

towards my family, my secrets, my desires. We looked at the patchwork that was my life and the rag doll that I had become. We made a fundamental assessment of my life to date.

After one year of therapy, I moved to Kingston upon Thames, thereby ending the psychoanalytical process possibly a little early. Out of the experience had grown my desire to become a therapist myself. I had found the process extremely valuable. It had helped me understand myself as a whole being, rather than as the set of disparate personalities vying for expression I had experienced myself as before. I was also missing education, having left my PhD unfinished when I moved from Leeds to Brighton. Work on its own, no matter how challenging, was not enough to occupy my mind and my seeking spirit. I enrolled on the Foundation in Counselling and Psychotherapy at Regents College.

I was particularly drawn to Regents College because of its Existential approach and the relationship with philosophy, my first love. On this course I learned the valuable skill of listening, something which I had not previously been trained to do as a manager. I learnt about boundaries, about the importance of interventions, of the nature of holding a space for the client to explore who they are. Though I enjoyed and was challenged by this year, there was something missing. I had gone to therapy myself because I wanted to know how to deal with my life and the issues surrounding me, in a better way. I wanted to function more effectively, more successfully. For me, my life was about taking action, about moving forward.

In September 2002 I discovered the massive and very lucrative world of large scale personal development. A friend had done a course that weekend called the Landmark Forum and invited me along to his 'evening session'. I gladly agreed as he seemed so damn happy and who doesn't want a bit of that? I had just started my course at Regents College and this gave me the security I needed to undertake the Landmark course. After all, I knew about the importance of the 'ongoing process' of therapy. My concerns about the 'quick fix' method would be dealt with in the context of the group therapy aspect of my course and my own ongoing therapy.

By this time I had spent a further year in therapy with an Integrative Counsellor and then due to UKCP requirements had changed to a registered Existential therapist. What I found in the self-development course was something that all my therapy, education and management training so far had not given me – the concept of personal responsibility. What the course was suggesting was that I am responsible for the world as I experience it, as I am creating it in my mind. I have complete control over my responses to the situations I find myself in and can choose, on a case by case basis, the content of my version of the world.

I continued to run with my management day job, my therapy training one day a week, my own personal therapy and my self-development courses. I walked on hot coals, I looked at NLP, I read self-help books and I delved into Eastern thought. I became

transformed in my relationship to the world. I took responsibility for my thoughts and feelings and I planned what I was going to do next.

So it was that I came to understand that there was a thing called coaching. I worked on a community project and was given a coach to support me. Coaching seemed to differ from therapy in fundamental ways. The coach helped me take action in the world. She was not particularly concerned with how I was feeling or how my past influenced my current behaviour. The truth for her was that I was free to choose whether I behaved in my normal way, my programmed reaction, or adopted a new approach. It was a matter of consciously choosing to react to situations in the way that was most useful at that time.

As I developed my management style and finished my foundation course, I realised that I did not want to be a psychotherapist or a counsellor. I wanted to inspire people. I wanted to help people see what was possible for them and their lives. I wanted to help them overcome the boundaries that they impose on themselves; boundaries that their families or friends may have been complicit in creating and maintaining. I wanted to help them move forward.

I started to understand a fundamental difference between therapy and coaching. In my mind coaching became future oriented and therapy past oriented. Therapy looks at what has gone into making you the way you are. Coaching looks at who you want to be. That is what I wanted for myself and

what I wanted for my clients. All the understanding in the world is useless if it doesn't change anything. Coaching took me right back to my first philosophical question - how is one to live?

Then of course there is the question of accreditation. Coaching does not require five years' training. I could just *be* a coach, in the true existential sense of the word, right now! There are many coaching schools offering training in the UK, (though not as many as offer therapy and counselling training) but there is not yet any recognised accrediting body. I found myself being asked by my therapy peers if coaching was a 'real' profession. How could it be if you didn't have to go through a lengthy training process? How would the public know if they were getting a 'real' Life Coach as opposed to a charlatan?

What does it mean to be a 'real' Life Coach? How do we affect change in our clients' lives? When I first started, one client came to me with a gambling and debt problem. She sat opposite me and intensely launched in to a description of what a mess her life was, that she has been gambling for 25 years and didn't know what to do about it. My mind screamed, 'I'm not a counsellor! I haven't had the "proper" training! I don't know anything about addictions. I can't help this person! I felt as though I had been misleading the public. How did she think I was going to help her? I knew no theory for this client so I made a decision to *be* myself.

I asked her to tell me about the situation. I know that coaching is basically about two things, raising awareness and increasing personal

responsibility. What was her real situation? How much debt was she actually in? How was she contributing to this on a daily basis? What actions could she take to reduce it?

I didn't know how to help her stop gambling but I did believe that she could do it. Perhaps I believed she could do it because *I didn't know any better!* I also knew that somehow what was needed in the situation would arise and the answer would become clear. Five sessions in and she informed me that she had just lived through her first week in 25 years without gambling. I was dumb struck! 'Fantastic' I said. 'What made that happen?' She told me that as we had been walking from the station to the place we were having the meeting the previous week, I had been sharing my story about having stopped drinking alcohol. I mentioned it in passing. I was being me, without particularly thinking about the effect this was going to have on her. She said 'I thought that if you could give up drinking, I could give up gambling.'

This is coaching. This is not theory. This is change taking place in the relationship between the client and the coach. This is the power of belief in the person, belief in what is possible for them. I'm not scared to say that I was deeply moved by what had occurred. I am deeply moved by the power of coaching, by the force that my belief in my clients can have. For some of them, I am the first person that has ever believed they can succeed.

At the time of writing my client has not gambled for six weeks. This is an unbelievable shift in her world. It has

also produced a shift in my world. Coaching involves great responsibility. To be a coach is to be engaged in a dynamic process with another human being. It is a privilege to be able to contribute to a person's growth.

It is not for me to say what my clients should be aiming for. It is not for me to say which goals they should pursue and which not. I am there to believe in them and support them. My clients set the agenda for the coaching sessions and I help support them in reaching their goals. There is an assumption from the coach that the client knows what is best for themselves.

There is a belief fundamental to my coaching and that is that we create our own reality. Our thoughts and feelings are what determine the world around us *as we experience it*. If my client believes that they cannot stop gambling, then this is true. If I can help them see that they can stop, this becomes true. As people are coached, their concept of what is possible in their world shifts. Their self-imposed limitations are removed and their future is revealed anew.

Of course, as a human being I am up against the same limitations. It is not easy to be a coach. I am also creating my world as I go. I have days when I am uncertain about myself, about what I am doing. When that happens I experience a wonderful sense of peace as I realise what I have to do for my clients is get myself out of the way. I am there as a mirror to reflect the clients possibility back at them, not to impose anything. I do not need to know what to do. I only need to be. It is in the being that the coaching takes place.

I stopped therapy recently. I had been talking about the challenges of my business. My therapist said 'It's painful when fantasy gives way to reality.' Whose reality are we talking about? We each live in a reality of our own making, with a shared base through family, culture, nationality or media, for example. Who is to say whose reality is more real than another's? Surely our role as facilitators of dreams and mid-wives of possibility is to encourage our clients to explore the limits of their reality? We spend so much of our time burdened by someone else's version of the truth. It is time we created our own.

I see my responsibility as a coach to create my world on a daily basis. I see it as my responsibility to ensure that my clients remain open to their role in the creation of their world. This is not to say that the unpleasant never occurs or that it is to be ignored but rather, that we take responsibility for that too.

Coaching, thus conceived, leads to a person fully engaged in their world, creating it and co-creating it with their loved ones and colleagues. If this is what is possible I feel that it is my responsibility to coach as many people as I can. Imagine a world where we all took 100% responsibility for that which is around us? What would we create? How different would the world be to how it is now? Coaching is about helping people find an authentic expression of themselves. If we can do this, we can create a world that is an authentic expression of humanity. This is my secret agenda and the reason that I coach and will always continue to do so.

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