

## **Coaching Physicians to Be Their Best**

Medicine today challenges physicians to work harder, work faster, and produce better results. Piles of documentation required and 15-minute office visits erode time available for patient relationships, which provide satisfaction to most physicians. The result is higher frequency and level of physician dissatisfaction.

Physicians know how to find a trusted financial advisor, yet traditionally had few places to find counseling on careers and personal quality-of-life issues. Everyone needs guidance to reach new goals and be at the top of their game! Financial advisors have experienced the benefit of coaching for over 10 years, yet for most physicians, coaching is a new experience.

A trusted financial advisor is in the unique role of knowing when coaching may be the best prescription for winning at the game of medicine. Knowing when and how physicians seek coaching prepares you to evaluate this approach to support and develop physicians.

### **Challenge of Change for Physicians**

The pace of change in medicine is accelerating. What was known yesterday isn't enough. Facing opportunities and challenges in the current healthcare environment, 50% of physicians plan to make changes to their practices, and 77% are pessimistic about the future of the medical profession, according to doctors responding to a Deloitte Center for Solutions survey. If finances were not an issue, over 60% of the physicians in the survey stated that they currently would retire.

In a professional environment of uncertainty, it can feel nearly impossible to stop and make sense of the world in which we live. Personal lives and even asking what world we want to create can fall by the wayside. Physicians are looking for strategies and solutions to remove obstacles and achieve their desired goals and results practicing medicine.

Coaching can address the challenge of change. For example, one physician commented, "The most important thing I learned from you was to focus on what I wanted."

### **Rationale for Coaching Physicians**

Dr. Atul Gawande, a surgeon and journalist, wrote about his coaching experience in the article, "Personal Best," in the *New Yorker* in 2011. He points out that professional athletes at the top of their game have coaches, as do the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. For decades, sports coaches have examined how training in mental skills helps athletes improve performance and satisfaction. As elite players know that mastering the mental edge means the difference between good and exceptional, they invest significant attention to mental training.

Medicine can be compared to both a sprint and a marathon. Physicians sprint through an intense daily schedule and also are expected to maintain high levels of performance over time! Like success for an athlete, success in medicine requires pushing beyond current limits.

Coaching provides a solution in a place of safety in which physicians can explore, reflect, and make decisions about change. A goal-oriented, confidential, collaborative partnership, coaching helps physicians reach their full potential – as individuals and as physicians.

## **Situations When Physicians Desire Coaching**

Physicians seek coaching when they encounter challenges that they probably didn't learn to solve in medical school. The following everyday challenges have little to do with clinical skills, and everything to do with whether physicians love their roles!

- Friction/chaos in their practices
  - Need to manage and maintain staff
  - Seeking efficient, innovative solutions
  
- Change in their roles and/or responsibilities
  - Trend in shifting from practice owner to employee in a larger organization
  - Promotion to new leadership position without training in leadership skills
  
- Dissatisfaction with career
  - Reduced sense of personal accomplishment, lack of boundaries and overwork
  - Stress, due to high responsibility and little control over patient outcome

## **Common Topics Explored in Coaching Physicians**

The topics physicians explore in a coaching relationship are as individualized as the physicians themselves. As I reflect over my past 10 years of coaching, the quality of life and performance improvement topics that physicians typically seek fall into four categories:

- Leadership
  - Motivating and inspiring others
  - Delegating and negotiating
  
- Communication Between Peers, Administration, and Staff
  - Effectively resolve conflict
  - Partner with administration to reach goals
  
- Change Management on Personal and Team Level
  - Physician identity to find appropriate role and setting
  - Develop and get results from a cohesive team
  
- Career Development and Planning
  - Skill expansion in areas of passion and trends
  - Developing peers and staff

## **Structure and Practice of A Coaching Relationship**

Coaching is helping people to help themselves. The coach's role is to facilitate clients to uncover their own answers, rather than provide a one-size-fits-all solution. For each situation, the logistics of a coaching relationship are customized to the client's needs. At the initiation of the coaching relationship, the coach and client clarify the big picture of success. With clear outcomes in mind, each subsequent meeting is in support of the bigger vision. Coaching accelerates the client's progress by providing greater focus, honest feedback and awareness of choices.

Typically, a coaching relationship will last 3 to 9 months. A client will meet with their coach as often as once a week or as little as once a month. Coaching can be done in person, on the telephone, or using available technology.

## **Cost of Coaching**

Hourly rates for executive coaching range from approximately \$250 to \$500 an hour. Leadership development programs during a 3-month to 9-month contract range from \$4,000 to \$12,000.

## **Financial Benefits of Coaching for Physicians**

Research from the consulting firm, Manchester USA, reports that executives from Fortune 1000 companies who experienced executive coaching for periods of six months to one year estimated the financial payback from the experience. The average response was that executive coaching resulted in hundred thousands of dollars in savings, which was six times the average cost of the coaching. Although ROI figures specific to physicians are rare, salary ranges of physicians and beneficial financial impact to their healthcare organizations are comparable.

## **Other Benefits of Coaching for Physicians**

The secret to high-level performance isn't working harder; instead, it's all about working smarter. Effective coaching provides physicians with a confidential thinking partner and a safe place to talk openly about challenges and opportunities in medicine. Similar to eliciting top performance by athletes, a combination of vision and a plan for the desired outcome in medical careers yield the best performance by physicians.

Numerous physicians report that coaching positively impacted their careers as well as their lives by helping them to:

### **Make better and faster decisions.**

When an objective and a strategy are clear, decisions come easy. Talking through actions before implementation improves the chances of efficiency and success.

### **Gain clarity on goals and roles.**

Coaching allows physicians to step back from daily operations to evaluate their current situation and determine a meaningful course of action.

### **Facilitate improvement on competencies.**

The focus in a coaching relationship is not only on improved behaviors, but also on many competencies, such as self-management, interpersonal skills, leadership attributes, business concepts and success principles.

### **Experience a more successful and fulfilling life.**

Coaching opens new opportunities to acknowledge the physician's power and choice and to consciously use it.

## **Example of a Successful Coaching Relationship for a Physician**

A well-respected woman physician who is an informal leader in her community was feeling overwhelmed and not seeing options. She approached me to explore coaching as she had many roles, responsibilities, and interests and multiple sclerosis symptoms motivated her to make more effective work style choices. In our first session, my goal was to assess what was most important in the career of this physician. Her professional dream was to be a faculty member for medical residents, because she wanted to help other physicians be their best. Her focus was love of teaching and dedication to patients. Clarity about her long range goals and her personal priorities became the basis for her short-term goals and choices.

As the positive outcome of a coaching relationship, the physician saw new options and recognized value in developing leadership skills to have more influence and balance her strenuous hospital schedule. Based on how a potential new role at her hospital aligned with her personal and professional goals and strengths, the physician accepted a high-level leadership position.

## **Benefits of Coaching for Healthcare Organizations**

In healthcare, consultants often are called in when there are inefficiencies or serious management problems. For that reason, people may have the impression that executive coaching is employed only with problematic individuals. However, executive coaches usually are called into the organization to assist physicians for whom senior management has respect for their leadership potential. Organizations today need and are motivated to support the development of effective physician leaders. In my work with physicians, coaching is particularly helpful in supporting the transition from a clinical to an executive role. The benefit to the healthcare organization includes:

- Heighten engagement and productivity
- Improve individual performance and reduce under-performance
- Motivate and retain good staff

## **Resources on Coaches to Physicians**

Coaches that specialize in working with physicians can be found through the following professional organizations for physicians:

- American College of Physician Executives
- National and state medical societies

Alternatively, you may contact the following coaching organizations:

- International Coaching Federation: [www.coachfederation.org](http://www.coachfederation.org)
- Physician Coaching Institute: <http://physiciancoachinginstitute.com>

In addition, the author can help you find information on coaching and recommend coaches for a good fit with physicians. It is time to embrace coaching in medicine!

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