

Coaching has to be sense-ible

By [Pamela Fickenscher](#)

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My ears perked up when I heard that Atul Gawande--my favorite surgeon/writer--has a piece in the [New Yorker](#) about coaching for professionals. You can read the whole thing online [here](#).

Gawande's piece skillfully lays out the benefits and barriers to coaching for professionals – people whose skills are already at a certain level but who want to keep learning and improving. As someone who is (almost) mid-40's, doing complex work that few people fully understand, I could relate at nearly every turn as he described the desire to improve. I was pleased that he names not only athletes, but also musicians (who are, after all small-muscle athletes) as examples of the ways that an outside set of eyes and ears can be invaluable to someone who already knows their business but knows they can also get better. It doesn't matter how *many* people are watching what you do; if the only feedback you get is "Nice sermon, pastor," you'll never know the real impact of your work, or what you could be doing differently. Hearing someone comment on your use of silence, your body language, or your pacing, however, makes a world of difference.

My own experience with so-called coaching in recent years, however, has been the very opposite of the sort of well-trained attention a professional coach might give. "Coaching" is now used as a catch-all for all kinds of relationships that lack a key element of coaching –namely physical presence. If you're a writer, an editor can be just about anywhere. But if you're an executive, a preacher, a teacher, or a musician, your coach has to be in the room to provide any meaningful feedback. They need to see how you're standing, hear the inflections in your voice, and sense the response of the people around you. Too much of what is called "coaching" is really just untrained

low-cost therapy – listening to you self-report about the way *you* see how things are going. If you're a leader, that's not the perspective you need.

Probably my worst experience with so-called coaching came through my health plan. Like everybody else in health care, our pension plan is trying to turn attention toward prevention – a laudable move. We were offered “health coaching” over the phone with someone assigned to us through Mayo Clinic’s wellness program. It sounded like a good idea, since I wasn’t making any headway by just reading more about good nutrition and stress control.

So I signed up and was scheduled with a “coach.” At the assigned time, I got a call from a person who asked minimal questions about me and my life, but launched into mechanically using my first name in every sentence. It was obvious she was reading from a script, the way a telemarketer does. Every statement I made was repeated back and then followed with a survey-like question. “You say you want to eat more fruits and vegetables, is that correct Pamela?” “Pamela, on a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you that you can achieve this goal?” It went on like this for 15 minutes, at which point I wanted to throw the phone across the room. What really irritated me was that I’d *agreed* to this torture. That and the fact that I really couldn’t blame the young woman on the line, who was probably some nice 22 year old with a college degree who now found herself stuck in a cubicle, staring at a computer screen and talking to strangers in exactly the way she’d been trained to do.

Granted, I don’t know what the alternative is, in the context of health, short of having someone read my food diary and observe me in my kitchen every evening. But let’s not call it coaching, because what I experienced in that phone call was not coaching. It was low-cost pep talk, at best. But I don’t want a pep talk from someone who sounds like she could just as easily be reserving a rental car for me on my next trip to Chicago.

So, yes, please, let’s have coaches. But let’s not pretend that this is a low-cost , low-relationship, low-risk affair. Real coaches have a lifetime of experience. Real coaches have license to

be bossy, irritating, and in-your-face because their success actually depends on your success. And to be coached, I have to be willing to let someone actually see me do what I do. It's worth a lot to have someone pay that kind of attention to your work, and it ought to be worth a lot to the institutions we serve to have genuine improvement and struggling and learning. I hope my surgeon has a coach. And I hope that someone out there might care enough to have their pastor be coached as well.

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