

Coaching: regulating the profession

So, it would appear that the debate around regulating coaching continues – reinvigorated, in part perhaps, to Government plans, recently announced, to reduce bureaucracy and red tape across the business world.

Not only have we seen the demise of a number of quangos and executive agencies in recent months, Vince Cable, business secretary, has also announced further action to help rejuvenate businesses, hoping to stimulate growth by cutting “excessive regulation”. His “star chamber” will provide momentum for new legislation and a “challenge group” will be tasked with generating alternatives to what is perceived as an already overly-regulated United Kingdom.

In principle, both the CBI and FSB (and most unions) are in support of these initiatives and, indeed, welcome the general thrust towards more flexibility and common sense.

So how does the push for less bureaucracy affect the coaching profession?

Coaching has been around in business for many years of course. Over the last 10 years in particular there has been mounting interest and comment around the monitoring of coaching by a regulatory body. The general consensus is that Coaching professionals have a personal responsibility to ensure they are adequately trained and qualified, as well as a professional responsibility to clients and peers in the coaching space to develop and maintain levels of competence and credibility. Like many other professions, self-governance seems to be the favoured position of this professional responsibility.

From a personal perspective, I have (sadly) met a few people who have been ‘qualified’ in Coaching (and the closely related discipline of NLP) and are now practising with clients in a manner that I would judge to be at best variously knowledgeable about Coaching & NLP concepts and at worst unethical and dangerous. Fortunately, my trainings to date have all been with Master Trainers with an acute sensitivity to the ethical and ecological dimensions of working with people as they go through sometimes significant changes in their lives. For me, coaching (and NLP) is all about congruency, authenticity and ecology – mine *and* the client’s.

So will regulation provide a framework whereby ‘best practice’ can be promulgated? What are the benefits of regulation? What exactly should or could be regulated? Who would benefit? Should coaches welcome external regulation or push for self-regulation? And what, ultimately, are the aims of bringing coaching (with or without NLP) under such control?

I guess that there could be a number of reasons why regulation could be helpful. It could help to:

- set benchmark standards and define competencies against which coaching professionals can be measured
- bring maverick and ‘below standard’ coaching practices into line or purge the existing supply base to only those that meet the standard
- protect this growing and increasingly competitive marketplace
- give weight and credibility to the profession by publishing standards and protected titles
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However, counter-arguments abound:

- self-regulation (SR) inevitably will generate more paperwork

- given the current trends in this burgeoning career, with many setting up as multiple types of coaching titles (Portfolio Coaching??), surely people will simply deselect themselves from protected titles and do their own thing
- the appetite for regulation from within the profession itself is low; is coaching doing any harm out there? Probably not, so why would we need to be regulated at all?
- would regulation stifle the evolution of the profession or somehow put unhelpful barriers in front of clients?
- are we in danger of heralding in the over-engineering of “professionalising” coaching?

It seems generally acknowledged that the likely external regulator will be the HPC (Health Professionals Council). Within the coaching community, there is certainly more enthusiasm for SR. Professor David Lane, Research Director of the International Centre for the Study of Coaching at Middlesex University, spoke last November at AC UK’s debate on the subject. He seemed to lean towards SR within a model whereby professional coaches and researchers work collaboratively to initiate and manage the emergent knowledge and practice base. Coaching is, after all, multidisciplinary and covers an extremely wide range of applications and techniques. The AC UK itself takes a position supporting SR, ensuring ongoing and open dialogue with relevant government bodies.

So where does all this leave coaches in terms of their emerging art? As far as the protection of clients is concerned, there seems little evidence that a lack of regulation is harming them. Most select on the basis of their level of confidence that their coach will actually help them get the results they want. It’s a grown-up process without the need, it seems, to have government legislate for an individual’s or Company’s choice.

Nevertheless, there is still a push from various influential parties to keep the regulation debate alive. Coaches need to engage with the debate, recognising that ground-swells happen (Malcolm Gladwell, we thank you!) Otherwise, coaches might find themselves on the receiving end of unwelcome news.

While BPS, HPC and others remain enthusiastic for regulation, coaches who take their careers seriously (engaged with their own ongoing learning, being supervised by mentors and getting qualified by reputable training federations and alliances) continue to build credibility and expertise. Clients are the ones who let us know if it’s working for them. Perhaps they are the ones we should all be listening to a bit more?