

You're Certified, You're Ready, You're a Great Coach - What Happens Next? Ideas to Consider in Starting and Sustaining A Professional Practice

A New Professional Coaching Practice is a Start-up Business

When you begin to work for yourself as a professional coach you are starting a business. Start-up businesses typically require working capital to cover baseline living expenses and business investments, plus 18 months to 3 years of focused, sustained effort, a support network and business infrastructure, in order to begin to succeed as a business.

Different Criteria Apply According to the Maturity of the Business

Businesses evolve from start-up, to established, from established, to industry leader. It is nearly unheard of for an individual to graduate coaching school and immediately hit the interview circuit of business leaders in coaching. It takes time and dedication to build your business, your reputation and the results and contact network that may eventually proclaim you to be an industry leader.

Different expectations and criteria of assessment apply to different developmental stages of any business. It is very important to understand and apply assessment criteria appropriate to the stage you are in, to determine the success rate of your business. For example, if you expect a full client load to come from referrals as a start-up, and are only partially booked, you might assess that you are failing. It typically takes 4-7 years to run a client-based business purely from referrals, so being fully booked from referrals is not a valid measurement to apply to a start-up business

Start-up Businesses Require Financing

Start-up businesses incur financial risk and typically do not provide a full salary to the owner until becoming an established business 18 months to 3 years down the road.

In order to have an ultimately established and viable coaching business, you will need to keep it afloat during start-up stages. There are many creative ways to do this, which work around needing investment capital that you can afford to place at risk while you are ramping up. Subcontracting, retainer income, grants, loans, forming liaisons with other professionals, and splitting work time between coaching and other income-producing activities, are a few ways that people we know have accomplished this.

Working part time in another profession can be a critical success factor while ramping your coaching business. Coaching is not a service that one can "hard sell", and having your basic finances viable whether the potential client in front of you signs up or not, is crucial in the coaching sales conversation. You may opt to work in a profession related to coaching such as consulting, leading training classes, being a personal trainer at a gym, doing administrative, sales or support work for existing coaching companies, tutoring students or working in an H.R. department.

Alternately, you may decide to engage in unrelated work that offers the advantage of leaving sufficient time and energy available for coaching, helps you begin to form networks of potential future clients, or pays well for spurts of concentrated effort with breaks in between for client work.

Viability and Balance are Critical Success Factors

Either way, divvying your attention between your own business and other work commitments, is likely to require a new level of competence from you in balancing your life with work. For many people, the amount of time spent on studying for their professional certification has already strengthened the muscle of delineating time and energy for coaching alongside their existing work commitments or means of support.

What is important is to manage to have time and energy to build the business, while still being able to cover your living expenses along with key expenditures for the business (i.e. business cards, attendance at networking events, continuing education, internet access, etc.) At the start, this could look like one evening a week and a few hours on the weekend- working up to one or two days a week, and at some point being ready to transition to full time, or striking a sustainable balance that works for you, long-term.

Business Development Activities are Unavoidable

One of the main activities for the first couple of years of any new service-based business is business development; it is an unavoidable part of having one's own coaching business. Business development is for many people, not nearly as interesting, inspiring or fun as coaching is. It requires meeting lots of new people, perseverance, making offers, investing in and maintaining professional relationships, tolerating one's offers being declined, and ultimately faith in oneself and a passionate commitment to the offer we intend to make to others.

Options for Participation Exist

Spending the kind of time and energy in business development that owning one's own business requires, is not for everyone. There are many other options for participating in life as a professional coach. Some of these options are:

- adding a coaching element to work one already does, such as teaching, consulting, financial planning, legal services, healing arts, counseling, etc.
- sub-contracting with an established firm to coach clients on engagements where supplemental coaching staff are needed
- taking a job that has coaching as a main element such as an HR position responsible for executive development programs

To Develop Your Business, You Need to Develop Yourself

In order to develop your business, you will need to develop yourself. The Quadrants Model from James Flaherty, founder of [New Ventures West](#), is used as a reference here for considering domains of development; competence, networks of support, tools and practices needed by professional coaches to establish and maintain a viable business.

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| <p>Quadrant 3 <i>Language, Culture and Relationship</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Succinct and connected (to self and other) narrative of your work and your offer. • Network of personal and professional support of a paid professional coach. • Language, public identity and relationships of a paid professional coach. • Skill in connecting with others and speaking to their concerns. • Ease and familiarity with the “dance steps” and subtleties of engaging in conversations for relationship, possibility and action, with prospective clients or referral sources. | <p>Quadrant 1 Individual Experience and Consciousness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self identity of a paid professional coach (comes out of practicing the declaration to yourself and others, and actually getting paid for your work real-time). • Skillfully working with the inner critic. • Connection to one’s own passion and intention to contribute to the well being of others through coaching. • Awareness of the value of the coaching process. • Tolerating uncertainty, risk, potential failure, and the discomfort of being a beginner in a new profession. |
| <p>Quadrant 4 <i>Environment and Tools</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environment: Office space, desk, bookshelves, etc. • Tools: Computer, desk, phone, program presentation format, business cards, calendar, address book or database, reference documents, etc. • Infrastructure: Accounting systems, insurance policies, business license, Time in your schedule to work on/in your business. etc. | <p>Quadrant 2 <i>Body and Behavior</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practices and physical capacity, embodied knowledge, of a paid professional coach. • Self development practices, such as reading, yoga, martial arts, working with a coach, sitting practice, attending continuing education classes. • Professional practices such as doing weekly bookkeeping, creating quarterly goals, participating in professional associations etc. |

“I’m a Coach” –Declaring Your Offer (a.k.a Finding Your Niche)

One of the first things most marketing resources will direct new coaches to do, is referred to as “finding your niche” and preparing your “elevator speech”. Many coaches get completely stumped by this idea of a niche, wondering how to integrate what interests or matters to them with an offer that seems marketable and professionally legitimate, especially in terms of their track record of previous experience or client list. How to say this in 30 seconds or less without stumbling or sounding like a canned phony is the next challenge.

Our approach to this dilemma is to ask a different question. Our question is- what concern of others are you passionate about addressing in your coaching? What breakdown are you passionate about helping to resolve? What suffering are you passionate about easing? What possibility are you passionate about opening?

When you speak about a concern that you are passionate about addressing, it is naturally compelling and engaging, for the other person and you. It immediately takes the conversation into the realm of advocating for the clients you help, rather than advocating for your own professional identity.

No “elevator” speech in the world, no matter how carefully crafted, can match the power of speaking from the heart about something that deeply matters to you.

That being said, it can be helpful to design a one-sentence answer that you practice and become comfortable with saying, to respond to a question about what kind of work you do. It can be very helpful to re-interpret your past client work in light of your declared offer, to be able to say with conviction that this is the work that you do and be able to give examples if asked. It is also completely legitimate to speak about the concern you are passionate about, your intention to work in that area, and give a progress report of your process as a start-up gaining experience in the field of your choice.

Let your initial answer land, and listen for an invitation to say more. For example:

Q: What kind of work do you do?

A: I’m a professional coach. (Pause. Breathe. Stay connected.)

Q: What kind of coach- like a sports coach, or a life coach?

A: I work primarily with _____(client types) on developing _____ (sample domain of competency) in _____ (sample domains of focus). I do this by _____(short description of approach). This works kind of like _____ (metaphor that you guess will connect for the person).

Approaches to coaching are varied and complex, it is a long (and for non-coaches, potentially boring or even obtuse) conversation to explain what coaching is, the approach you are trained in, your philosophy of why it is the best approach etc. If someone is interested in what coaching is and how it works, this can be a great conversation to have. It is just a longer answer than most people are prepared to hear when they initially ask what kind of work you do.

Create A Narrative You Are Comfortable With

For many of us, at the start when we don't have a viable business, or when we are paying our bills through another profession, it feels a little bit like a lie to say "I am a professional coach".

Having a narrative about your work that is authentic for where you are at, can be very freeing and lend you the authentic sense of being a professional that is important to begin to embody. If you are serious, the fact is that you are in start-up mode with your coaching business until you get established. The first couple of years require a lot of investment in business development. It is responsible and professional when starting a new business to cover the bills at least partially through another line of work.

Coaches with significant cash reserves, highly developed sales skills or a built in consulting client base, can short-cut this part of the process, but many of us are not in those categories.

Experiment with how it feels to say, in one or two sentences, something like the following:

I am in the midst of starting up my coaching business and continuing to work in _____ (field) to support that transition for the next _____ (months/years) while I develop my client base and cash reserves.

Conversations With Potential Clients; Build Relationship First

Imagine you are at a party and you meet someone for the first time. They walk up to you and after saying hello and learning your name, ask how many children the two of you should think about having together. It's obvious in this exaggerated example that the invitation is coming ahead of other conversations that many people would consider important to have covered first.

Many coaches have the idea that if they are a good coach, if they have a persuasive "pitch" about their work, that people they meet will be interested, trusting and ready to sign up as clients fairly quickly into the conversation.

In real life, it is often a long process where the relationship is built over time before a professional engagement occurs. Sometimes, someone is really ripe to get started and things happen much more quickly. Other times it can take several months or more before a prospective client commits. Three helpful distinctions to make are:

Conversations for relationship: Building trust and discovering potential areas of mutual interest.

Conversations for possibility: Exploring possibilities around a given topic of mutual concern.

Conversations for action: Specific offers, requests and invitations are made and responded to.

Becoming an astute observer of which of the above types of conversation you (and the other) are in, is really helpful. When you are meeting someone for the first time, or talking for the first time to them about the work you do, the conversation is not as likely to be in the realm of action as far as making a commitment to work together.

Meeting and Greeting; Apply Realistic Expectations To Your Assessment

Assess your “meet and greet” conversations based on whether you connected, *not* on whether someone signed up to be a client. If you build some relationship and exchange contact information – terrific! If you are able to create an opening for future conversation, about your work (or theirs) or coaching in general, the conversation has been a raging success.

Develop Relationships As An Ongoing Practice

Enter contact data to your address book or database. Follow up. Keep people posted about talks you are giving, educational or cultural events you are attending that they might find interesting, etc. Make lunch dates. Become curious. Be sensitive to openings for coaching and stay in building relationship and learning about the world of the other person, until there is an opening to make an offer to coach them. The background of a coaching relationship as defined by New Ventures West, is mutual respect, mutual trust and mutual freedom of expression. That is the foundation you are building in which a formal coaching relationship may show up.

Put space in your calendar to meet people for tea or lunch at least once a week. Continue to develop relationships with people, particularly those who have expressed an interest in your work, or with whom you are interested in forming an alliance of some kind with, for a paid project, or perhaps a pro bono one that will help you build your professional identity. Be willing to see where the connection leads without directing it too much, or jumping into making an offer to work with them before there is clearly an opening for that arising.

Setting Achievable Goals; Take the Step Before the Step

Setting achievable goals is important, because how we build up confidence is by meeting the goals we set. Bigger is not necessarily better, in the case of goals. Achievable, grounded, a bit of a stretch; these are the goal differentials where we can build confidence.

If the next step towards a goal seems hard to take; try backing up a step, or two, or more, until you see the step you are currently, actually taking and can see that the next step is the one right in front of you.

So often, our assumptions about where we are starting from are many steps ahead of where we actually are. The trouble with this is that the next step seems huge and daunting, and in fact, if it encompasses several steps we haven't yet taken, it will be so.

For instance, a goal to have 10 conversations with potential clients a week. That is a fine and reasonable goal, once one is ready to take that step. If we have never had one conversation, aren't in situations where we are meeting people, or are not familiar or comfortable having a conversation for possibility of paid coaching work, then assigning ourselves to do 10 a week is going to feel impossible. If we manage to do one against a goal of 10, it won't feel like progress, but rather, like failure.

The step before the step isn't always directly business-related. Sometimes it means that we schedule a vacation, a day off or a lunch break to regenerate. Sometimes it means that we ask for support, research how something is done, or spend time setting up infrastructure to help us.

Stay Connected To Yourself as A Coach

Your skill or value as a coach cannot be assessed according to your skill in starting or running a client based business. Along the way to working full or part time as a coach, many great coaches do a fair amount of work that is not coaching. It is very important to stay connected to oneself as a coach, to our vision, our self-identity and our expertise. It is also crucial to distinguish between coaching and running a business. These are separate domains of action, requiring different skills and in which different standards of assessment of proficiency apply.

Peer Support is Key

One important way to stay in touch with yourself as a coach is through frequent conversations with someone whom you can count on to be encouraging, candid and helpful. In these conversations it is important that you be able to speak openly about your vision, your doubts, your successes, failures and ideas.

Conversation with a supportive colleague will help you stay connected with the sense of you own commitment and expertise. Providing support to another flexes your coach's listening skills and can be similarly inspiring. As coaches, conversations with colleagues are not extra, they are necessary and central to the health of our relationship to our coaching.

Keep Client Work Ongoing

Another extremely important way to stay connected to oneself as a coach is through coaching others. Trades, pro-bono work, mentoring and reduced cost work for non-profits are ways in which clients to work with can be found, during the early stages of business or even later on, during quieter times.

One way to manage this is to allot one pro bono space in your practice at all times. This allows you to stay connected to coaching even in times where you do not have paying clients, while limiting the amount of work you make yourself available to do for free. This is helpful in fielding requests for reduced cost coaching, and also may lend a more professional feeling to the no-charge work that you are doing.

Coaching is inherently inspiring. In my experience, nothing is more validating of both one's commitment and one's competency in coaching than being with a client, designing a program for them, preparing for a session, or reflecting upon and documenting a session you have just conducted.

Alternatives to Pro-Bono; Trades and Discounts

As an alternative to pro-bono work, having the client pay a discounted rate or trade a service is a good way to have them engage more fully in their program and to begin to establish (internally and publicly) that your time and energy are worth the fees you charge.

I recommend structuring the trade rather than time:time, as dollars:dollars per usual work charges. Other ways to set this up are to receive gift certificates for services that you can use yourself or give to others, or to receive post-dated checks to be returned as trade sessions are scheduled.

I also recommend that you start the trade with yourself receiving, so that the client is in effect "paying in advance" in some regard. Show the full cost of the program on documents and invoices, as well as either the discount you are granting or the exact terms of the trade. You may want to call out a cancellation policy so that if they

cancel work they are trading you, that they take on the responsibility of paying for a substitute to do the work they had promised to do at that time.

Carry Business Cards

It seems obvious, but I have missed countless opportunities to hand someone a card with my web site address and contact information, many times over the past few years in my start-up business.

I now have cards stashed in all handbags, beach bags, briefcases, computer case, gym bag, dance class bag, camera case and car. This is not overkill. This is being prepared to be gracious and professional when someone strikes up a conversation with me about my work, and seems to be interested in finding out more.

Having a card handy allows you to stay in the connection with the person rather than searching for a pen in the moment that the opening appears. It also opens an opportunity to ask for someone else's card, when you offer one of your own. This is helpful for following up later, making referrals, etc. If you are hoping for referrals yourself, it is important to begin to pay attention to opportunities to make referrals to others within your own network of help.

Take on 1 Hard Thing A Week

Entering a new profession and starting one's own business can be filled with activities that are unfamiliar, uncomfortable or just plain hard in some way for you. If you establish the habit of doing at least one of the hard things each week, it will help you to become familiar with that aspect of your business, and build the "muscle" of moving through the discomfort, or resistance. Once familiar, each activity you try is likely to not seem so hard anymore, or take so much energy to do the next time.

Keep the Faith

Starting a business is challenging. Feedback in the form of full bookings goes up and down. It takes time, commitment and support to get established. IT IS POSSIBLE. Having the opportunity to do the work you love, is a worthwhile reward for the challenges along the way. Perseverance furthers. You have our heartfelt support and encouragement in your journey.