

Distinguishing Coaching with "The Bicycle Story"

By MCC Michael Stratford

This story is useful in explaining the difference between Coaching, Consulting, Mentoring, Parenting and Therapy. Please know that this is a generalization. There are lots of gray areas in this, and it is meant to be a very simple way to explain the differences. Let's take the example of learning to ride a bicycle.

Consultant: Studies the mechanics of riding the bike. Teaches you the laws of physics, how the bike is propelled, what is necessary for balance, and the laws of motion/propulsion. A consultant tells you where to sit and where to put your feet and when to pedal. They may even offer or suggest a training program to upgrade your bike. Then he/she leaves. Consultants are necessary experts.

Therapist: Discusses the basis for your fears about riding and the consequences of falling. Discusses if your parents rode, and why that might be important. Explains why it is important for your self-esteem or psyche for you to learn this and be successful. Therapists are very useful to unwire whatever baggage may be impeding your potential to ride.

Parent: Buys bike for you. May put on training wheels and take them off when they think you are ready. Runs by the bike holding on until you have balance to continue and then cheers you on as you go off riding into the sunset. Occasionally will threaten to take away riding privileges if you don't comply with ground rules.

Mentor: Shares with you their experience/expertise of bike riding. Gives you tips on "drafting" and the most effective way they've found to ride. Models the way they think you should ride, gives you strategies about things like changing tires quickly in a race, how to get the most speed for your effort, what the best bike is to buy in their opinion, and how to negotiate gravel at the bottom of a hill. Teaches you their version of proper maintenance, warns you of dangers of riding in traffic, and tells you how to avoid them. Sometimes holds an "I know better than you since I've been there before, so you'd better listen to me" hierarchical position.

Coach: Listens to your desire to try riding. Asks you if you need instructions on how to ride and asks where you might get them. Asks if you like the color/kind of bike you're about to ride. May even help you pick the bike up and help you get onto it. Runs alongside the bike, "checking in" to see if you're enjoying the experience and asks what might make it more fun. Will help you discover what you need to take care of yourself when/if you fall. When you stop, the coach might ask about your experience and what was valuable, and whether or not you want to pursue mastery of bike riding. If you do, the coach asks you how you might devise a plan whereby you can attain that mastery. If you don't, then the coach may ask you if you want to continue riding casually or if you want to devise a plan to sell the bike.