YOUR BIGGEST GAME

Life coach takes people from heart’s desire to leadership

By DENNIS SPARKS

JSD: What exactly is life coaching?
Ellis: Life coaching provides an opportunity for individuals to look at all areas of their lives, determine what they want in all these areas, and then have the coach assist them in developing realistic action plans to accomplish those goals. While this is a multi-year process, within just a few months clients usually report significant improvements in their lives. Our goal is that our clients have an unbiased partner, an advocate who doesn’t have an agenda other than that of the client. For many of them, this will be the first time they have had a partner with no ulterior motives.

The theory behind life coaching is that as people step back and spend a few hours a month looking at what they want and multiple ways to achieve it, they become more effective and have a much happier life. The reason The Brande Foundation provides this service for the leaders of nonprofits is because we believe it will make their organizations more effective.

JSD: Explain how it is that if leaders get what they want, their organizations become more effective.

Ellis: The most effective leaders have great lives. As people become happier, their ability to lead and to think creatively improves. Most of us know this intuitively. If you’re burned out, if you’re unhappy, it’s hard to do well in your work.

CHANGES THAT OCCUR

JSD: What kinds of changes occur in clients over the months or even years of life coaching?

Ellis: Through life coaching, people learn to be happier. They learn the skills and habits of happiness, of living life with more joy, more smiles, more excitement. People also learn to celebrate more. I think that many people, including leaders, are not aware of what wonderful lives they are living and how great their organizations are. Leaders often focus on what needs improvement, which is fine. But sometimes that focus hides how wonderful things already are. In life coaching, we assist people to up their level of celebration, their level of appreciation.

Other benefits include improved health and vitality. Of course, life coaches are not medical doctors, but we assist people to improve their health and thereby improve their ability to...
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Contribute. We might assist people to change their diets, exercise more, schedule those important visits to doctors, or better manage their stress.

One thing that often happens as a result of life coaching is deepening intimacy between clients and all other people in their lives. I believe that this occurs because as people’s lives improve, they start to communicate more fully with the people around them and the result is deepened intimacy at home, at work, and in their communities. When I go home and I feel better, I have more to give. And communication is an act of giving. I’m giving when I’m listening fully and when I’m revealing a part of myself that I otherwise might not reveal. The consequence of that communication is deeper relationships.

With some clients, life coaches also get involved with their finances because money is not working well in their lives. Some long-term clients of mine report that they have cut their expenses so much that they now spend way less than they are making, their net worth has improved dramatically, and they are much more financially independent. They are not wealthy, but they have reached a point where money is not a major concern in their lives.

**A COACH’S TOOLS**

**JSB**: What tools do life coaches use to assist clients to produce those kinds of results?

**Ellis**: First, life coaches are trained to listen in a unique way. Most people who consider themselves good listeners have to take a lot of steps toward more powerful and effective listening to become a great life coach. Clients often start by saying that they don’t know what they want and don’t have real passion for anything. The kind of listening that a life coach does goes beyond the surface message and surface feeling to assist people to really get clear about what they want — their desires, their passions, what makes them smile, what makes their hearts sing.

Next, the life coach brings the skills of problem solving and facilitating action plans. Life coaches help clients come up with multiple ways to get to an end result. Most people stop thinking when they come up with one decent solution to a problem or one decent path to a goal. What the life coach brings is the encouragement to continue thinking beyond the first solution or the second or even the third so that the client comes up with at least half a dozen or a dozen solutions to every problem, a dozen paths to reach every goal. The reason for developing multiple pathways is that seldom does the first path work. Consequently, the client has already created a second path, or a third, or a fourth, or a 10th path. This multiple-path approach helps people get past their resignation about not being able to achieve the goals that are important to them.

**COACHING BY TELEPHONE**

**JSB**: The vast majority of life coaching is done over the telephone, not face-to-face. How are such profound benefits achieved given the limitations of that medium?

**Ellis**: I began telephone consultation with people in 1981. It was so effective that by 1983 I had six full-time consultants working for me providing this type of telephone coaching. We had multi-year
relationships with people over the phone all over the United States and Canada. Sometimes this would go on for two to five years before we would ever see them. In the beginning, we wondered if we could establish over the phone the kind of trust and interpersonal relationship we wanted. What we discovered was that for most people it was even easier to work on the phone. For them, the anonymity of the telephone makes this kind of personal and professional growth work safer and even more effective because it is easier for them to open up and reveal who they are.

I want to provide a caveat here: Some people prefer face-to-face time. We have a budget for that type of meeting. It’s optional, but we see a majority of our clients face-to-face during the first year and sometimes in the first couple of months of the coaching relationship. Either the client comes to a workshop we conduct or we meet for a day or two in our offices, their offices, or in some central location. For instance, I worked with a man from Bangladesh. We not only spent hours on the phone, but we also met in Salt Lake City because he was there, we met in Bangladesh because I was there, and we met in Washington, D.C.

All of those were one-on-one meetings in which we did the process of life coaching during a concentrated period of time.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

**JSD:** Life coaching is usually not the first thing that comes to mind when school leaders think of professional development. Given the scarcity of resources for staff development in school districts, why would school systems invest in this process rather than workshops or conferences?

**Ellis:** Traditional leadership programs typically focus on what the leader does or what the leader can get others to do so that the organization reaches its goals. The focus in life coaching is on what leaders can be, on how leaders can improve themselves such that the people around them are more likely to be effective in a more natural way. When I think of the best leaders — the Martin Luther King, Jr.s., the Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the John F. Kennedys — I think of people who drew others to them because they were so clear in their own hearts where they were headed that folks wanted to go there with them.

A major focus of life coaching is career because the people we are coaching spend more of their waking hours at work than they do anywhere else. We talk about the client’s ability to manage and lead and to improve the motivation, the involvement, and the energy of their staff members. Clients learn how to establish multi-year and even multi-decade vision and goals both for themselves and for their organizations.

**JSD:** How do you know that this really works?

**Ellis:** We get letters from both the people who’ve received life coaching and those around them who have noticed its effects. Organizations have grown in size, their budgets and staffs have increased, and leaders’ effectiveness in the world has improved. Someone might say that that’s coincidental, that that would have happened whether or not the leaders had life coaches. Of course that’s possible, but I don’t think so. I think it’s happened because the leader’s life has improved in every area.

**NSDC INVOLVEMENT**

**JSD:** Describe your aspirations for the NSDC/The Brande Foundation partnership that plans to provide life coaching for principals and superintendents who lead schools with high concentrations of low-income and minority students.

NSDC and The Brande Foundation team up

More than 500 principals and superintendents in areas with underserved children will benefit over the next few years from life coaching provided by the National Staff Development Council and The Brande Foundation.

The two organizations are collaborating to develop the knowledge and skills of 28 NSDC members who will offer life coaching to principals and superintendents in schools and districts serving primarily low-income and minority children.

The NSDC coaches are engaged in about 65 hours and more than 12 days of training and development to prepare for life coaching. The Brande Foundation is providing the training and life coaching, while NSDC has committed staff, and individual members of the coaching team have volunteered their time and financial support to make this dream a reality.

Dave Ellis, founder of The Brande Foundation, and his colleagues are sharing their extensive experience to help NSDC’s coaches determine their goals, identify multiple paths to accomplish them, apply strategies for success, and gain the skills and strategies necessary to coach others. Through training and coaching, NSDC’s coaches are learning how to deepen their relationships and create powerful strategies to achieve their goals. Working with their life coaches, the NSDC coaches will focus their attention on both personal and professional goals.

The ultimate goal of life coaching for these principals and superintendents is to help the individual become a more effective and creative leader, which translates into organizational improvements that will benefit children.
Ellis: For the last 20 years, the group of nonprofit leaders I have worked with most has been educators. They’ve been teachers and administrators, primarily in colleges. The kinds of shifts these people have made in their classrooms and administrative work is similar to what I expect will occur with the principals and superintendents in this project. They are likely to be happier, more relaxed, more energetic, more open, more generous, and much more productive.

When I work with the leader of a hunger organization in Washington, D.C., or an environmental group in San Francisco, I affect that person and the 100 or 200 people in the organization he or she leads. But in education, we not only affect through the principal or superintendent the employees in that school district, but we reach students as well. That additional benefit is really exciting to me. When we work with school administrators, these leaders return to their schools or districts and the effects of what they have taught themselves are transmitted to those they directly or indirectly work with, and then this very quickly spreads to all the students. That’s my dream — that we will very quickly be making significant differences in the lives of millions of students around the United States.