

Book Review

By Esther Cavett

Success as a Coach: start and build a successful coaching business

Stephen Newton (2013). London: Kogan Page.

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In the straightforward style characteristic of the whole book, the author starts the first chapter with the following explanation of the book's remit: "This is not a book about how to coach. It is a book about how one can make a reasonable income through coaching" (p. 5). Accordingly it was not written for those coaches whose main motivation is to "make a difference" without necessarily making a living from it. The author writes in the context of a world where coaching training and services have increased exponentially in the last few decades. Any aspiring professional coach would do well to read it; more experienced coaches could use it as a way of checking whether they might run their businesses more efficiently and effectively. We may choose not to follow his recommendations to the letter, but if so we will be doing so knowingly rather than through ignorance of some important aspect of building a successful business, which is the core focus of this book.

Appropriately, the author is an experienced business coach whose own interests lie in assisting business owners and other professionals acquire clients and assisting leaders move from aspirational strategy to operational delivery, and he has had management experience himself.

Despite the unashamed focus on profitability, the author recognizes that behind every financially successful coaching practice there is almost inevitably a passionate individual or group of individuals doing work they believe in, for the benefit of their clients and to a high standard. What is provided by this book, which is familiar from the general "How to start a small business" shelves of any bookshop, is the mechanism for converting a passion into a viable livelihood. Of course if you Google "how to start a coaching business", you will find reams of such information about quick and not so quick fixes specifically for coaching. The special attraction of this book is that it is self-contained: the author is confident enough about his approach to spill the beans of what he believes are the essential features of a successful practice. He does not try to draw you in to be coached about setting up a coaching business, as seems to be the approach of many others.

The book divides into eleven chapters, with detailed content pages and index which make it very easy to navigate. There is no bibliography and there are relatively few references in the text, which seems to be the preferred style in many Kogan Page business publications. The first chapter sets out the author's overview of the coaching industry, including sections on buyers of coaching, fees and return on investment. He cites research from 2009 showing that, of 400 business coaches surveyed, 25

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percent earned less than £5000 from coaching per year. Some of these people, if they are still in the business now, may be particularly glad to read this book, if indeed their motivation was to earn a viable income.

Notwithstanding that the espoused purpose of the book is to help a coach make a living, the subject of fees is not tackled until chapter seven. The preceding chapters are concerned with building a successful business designed to generate those fees. This ordering subliminally underlines the fact that the business of coaching is actually extremely hard work, even if equally rewarding. Thus chapters two to five look at how the coach needs to focus on targeting audiences who will yield the right kind of clients, what “marketing collateral” needs to be created (website, written bulletins or blogs, speaker engagements or taster sessions and so on), and how to run a client meeting in such a way that the client perceives the value for money being received.

Chapters six to eight home in on the subject of value—value in the eyes of the client, how to decide on your fee rates and structuring a successful coaching engagement. The fees chapter will be the most thought provoking for the relatively inexperienced. It looks at the coach as income generator—what is important is not what you earn but what it costs you to do so. This includes actual financial commitment but—easily as important—also use of time. To run a successful practice, the author proposes that only one and a half days of a five day week are actually taken up with client coaching delivery; the others are for administration, marketing, sales and development, including networking. As the author says elsewhere: “Money can be borrowed; time cannot, nor can it be recycled. Once an hour has been used it cannot be regained or re-used” (p. 35).

The last three chapters look respectively at the various legal structures a coach can use for doing business (sole practitioner, partnership or company), the concept of “strategic client leadership”, where the ideal is to identify a number of clients where the long-term commercial fit is excellent, and finally a chapter on choosing the right systems, aims, business operating principals and core systems from the beginning. Why didn’t this chapter come at the beginning of the book? Perhaps, though the content is vital, it is somewhat dry, so the author chose to beguile his reader in the preceding chapters before explaining the real “nut and bolts” which have to be put in place for a successful practice.

The balance of topics in the chapters is practical and extremely helpful, but one area I would have preferred to be more marked is that of coaching training and certification. This is mentioned briefly in the first and last chapters. He makes the point that qualifications do not guarantee high quality, merely adequate quality, with which I concur; however, it could be said that without regulation the coaching industry can never really become a profession. A professional is generally accountable to a regulatory body, and subject to an ethical code. Breach of the ethical code leads to sanctions, and being “struck off” means a professional cannot practice. As a professional in another field prior to joining the coaching world, I know only too well the fear in one’s stomach which held me accountable to my clients and colleagues. It was a game changer. The author of this book notes that sports coaching is more highly regulated possibly due to the risk of physical injury. The ethical codes of major coaching bodies generally protect clients against other forms of injury, such as breach of privacy and a coach coaching beyond his or her competence, for instance coaching someone who is mentally ill. My preference is for such points to be underlined even at the risk of seeming to state the obvious. His justification for not doing so is presumably the practical bent of the book. My justification for labouring this point is that even if a coach is coaching essentially for love not money the responsibility to the client—and indeed liability risk (and thus need for adequate indemnity cover)—is essentially the same.

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Overall, the book is well presented and engaging in a crowded market. Those new to it would be far safer buying this, including downloading the author's free accompanying materials, than searching the internet for salvation from such websites as "You have no experience but want to be a coach. Here's what to do". Other coaching business books available take a more responsible approach than such sites (see Brown-Volkman, 2003 and Levinson & Neitlich, 2012), but there is a special kind of anxious generosity about the book which is the subject of this review, where the author bends over backwards to help the novice avoid costly mistakes and blind alleys, assisting "minimising the impact of chance on your business in favour of predictability" (p. 3). Hopefully, this book will not be too surprising to a successful practitioner in a mature practice; others may find in it reassurance they are moving in the right direction and helpful guidance as to where they could make some adjustments to achieve the right business model, if that is indeed what motivates them.

References

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