

CHRISTIAN COACHING

A magazine for coaches who make a difference

Fall 2015

Pastor and Coach: Wear the Best Hat

Oct 22nd, 2015 | by Janice Lee Fitzgerald, ACC | Category: [From the Current Edition](#), [Subscribers Only](#)



“Pastor, I need an appointment for pastoral counseling. I’ve got a big problem at work.” It was a common enough request for me as a pastor to receive on a Sunday morning. We scheduled a time and I prayed to be able to provide all of the Christian caring and Spirit-led good advice that I could. I sat back with my pastor hat on – and quickly realized that I was wearing the wrong hat!

Pastor Hat

Jim was visibly upset as he described the ongoing downsizing occurring at his company. Up until now his division had been spared layoffs and forced terminations. Although some of the department’s work had been moved offshore, there was a new project on the horizon that he was looking forward to being a part of. But now a supervisor had suggested that he meet with the HR department to request an early retirement because there was the possibility of further downsizing in the very near future. “I don’t want to leave the company and I hadn’t planned to retire yet. What should I do?”

Wearing my pastor hat I would definitely urge him to pray for guidance. I would probably ask what his wife thought he should do. I might suggest he meet with his financial advisor. But I wasn’t sure that what he really needed was advice. What if what he really needed were some powerful questions to help him discern his best way forward?

Coach Hat

Faced with Jim’s question, I responded with a question of my own. I asked, “I think my professional coaching skills might be of use. Can I put on my coach hat?”

With Jim’s consent I explained the differences between coaching and pastoral counseling. It was important that I not begin coaching Jim without his knowledge. Not only would I have breached the ICF Competency which requires that the coach and client “*reach agreement about what is appropriate in the relationship and what is not, what is and is not being offered, and about the client’s and coach’s responsibilities*” – but I would have risked irreparably damaging our pastoral relationship including Jim’s trust in me and his willingness to seek and receive pastoral support in the future.

Pastoral ministry is a sacred calling. So much so that many pastors never think of taking their pastor hat off when serving people in their faith communities. Those of us also trained as coaches often practice coaching during separate times with separate clients. Truth be told, some of us are guilty of shyly admitting in pastoral circles that “I have a small private coaching practice on the side” and take great care to ensure that coaching doesn’t intrude into our more full time ministries. We may proudly wear our coach hat in group or team settings and never think about the possibility of wearing it when we minister to people one on one. Lest we unintentionally deprive members of our faith communities of the benefits of professional coaching, I believe it is time to keep our coach hats close at hand, ready to don when appropriate opportunities arise.

Wearing the Best Hat

To help you know the right hat for a given situation, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does she primarily need a listening ear and prayer support?
- Do you have access to resources or knowledge not readily available to him that could meet his needs?
- Is she too distraught right now to do the work of coaching?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions it may be best to keep wearing your pastor hat. Meanwhile, if you answer “yes” to these following questions, it may be time to switch to your coach hat:

- Does he have the knowledge and resources to answer the questions he is bringing to you?
- Is she ready to do some problem solving for herself?
- Does he trust you enough to suggest switching hats?

Have professional coaching written into your pastor job description so that you can wear your coach hat in the context of your pastoral work. This coaching is considered “Internal Coaching” by the International Coach Federation and can be included on your coaching log while maintaining pastoral confidentiality. Ask a church board member to provide you with a letter listing the dates and hours that persons were coached which states that “Because it is the policy of our church to not provide a list of names of members who participate in church activities to outside agencies, we are unable to disclose the names or contact details of the persons who were coached.” The church board member’s name and church email address are the ones that appear on your ICF log for verification

Finally, be sure to establish a coaching agreement before putting on your coach hat. Don’t hide your light under a basket: Offer your best – whether it be pastoral care and counseling or coaching.



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