

My Coaching Experience

REAL TALK, REAL WORK, REAL SUCCESS!

My Coaching Experience, by Karon F. Greene

I didn't know what to expect, but I was excited and ready. It felt like a first date. We'd already met once before, and I had some idea of what I wanted out of the relationship, but I was oblivious to all of the sweat, tears and joy that were in store. I only knew that the anticipation of this first official conversation was almost more than I could bear. And when the phone finally rang in my NYC apartment that Thursday morning, I was suddenly overcome with an intense, barely identifiable feeling -- some combination of anxiety and enthusiasm. I knew I was about to experience a powerful transformation, but, was I ready? I was about to have my first conversation with my very own coach.

Coach? Yes, but not of the baseball, basketball or tennis variety. Although, some may argue, that climbing the corporate ladder, playing office politics and navigating the career field are very much indeed contact sports. But this was different. On the other end of the phone was Jylla Moore Foster, PhD, a professional coach I met at last year's MBA conference in Washington D.C. Professional coaches help lead us through some of our most challenging career issues to get results.

I had signed up for a one-hour session with Jylla just to go over my resume and general career strategy. I had picked her purely on instinct and was hoping to also get her thoughts on career fulfillment. But just 10 minutes into the conversation I knew I needed more time -- an hour would not be enough. I'll never forget the kneejerk question she asked me. "How much money do you want to make next year?" Without pausing to ponder, I blurted "About \$300,000" (yes, you're thinking, what a naïve number!). She was probably also thinking the same thing, (that's it? This woman is really undercutting herself.) Then she asked, "so what's your plan for getting there?" Enter the pause. I didn't have much to say because I didn't have a clear plan. All I knew was that I felt ambitious, but stuck. I had a good (flexible, reliable, secure) job at a large financial institution and it was an excellent place to grow. So for starters, I planned to stay at my job, excel at it, and save money while doing research on finding more career satisfaction. And then about a year later, voila! I would have fulfillment and all would be well. Really? The problem with that is that that's a great dream and desire, but not a goal, and certainly not a plan. That's when I realized I had to get serious and stick to specific tasks, yes, that were measurable too, so that I could move toward accomplishing clear goals. I needed a coach. But first I had to get to some dirty work. Did I say dirty? I meant painful -- as in kicking some very bad habits.

The biggest one for me was procrastination. Many of us are familiar with this "frenemy". She's always with us and constantly gets in our way. But we frequently call on her when we're bored or don't want to face a big challenge. This was the kind of relationship I had with procrastination. My particular ailment of "watching TV for relaxation". And this was one of the first things Jylla and I tackled; or should I say I tackled and Jylla monitored.

After the preliminaries of asking me my general goals and available time commitment to coaching, she got down to the big one: what was in my way? I was at first uncomfortable with this one, but I eventually admitted that it was my embarrassingly

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long hours of TV watching – upwards of 10 per week, appalling I thought, for an MBA grad who was looking for career fulfillment. Instead of forging ahead with reading, researching and networking, I was lazing on the couch with Boston Legal, America's Next Top Model, "Idol" and Grey's Anatomy, among others, that I am too ashamed to mention now. And worse, I blamed it all on that "good" job I had, because it also came with a high level of stress. But as far as Jylla was concerned, and I agree now, that was not a good excuse for wasting time. And so the obvious probing question that followed was, "what are you going to do about it?" The answer of course was clear, but not so practical for me. I thought I needed to watch TV, to relax, to unwind, in order to be ready for the next day of work. But the truth was, I was allowing, key word, allowing, TV to get in the way of my real goals and dreams.

This is when we got to work. Her strategy, and my first task were two-fold. First, set detailed and specific goals, with start dates, end dates and small steps for each. Then, cut back on TV on Monday thru Wednesday and watch only on Thursday (I couldn't miss Grey's Anatomy) as a reward for goals accomplished during the week. I was inspired, then I cringed. I was motivated, but this was difficult. But eventually I did it. And 2 wks later when Jylla and I spoke again, I had managed to watch only the 2nd half hour of Boston Legal 2 Mondays in a row, Grey's of course, and some re-runs on the weekend, bringing my average down to about 6 hours.

I don't want to mislead. This was by no means a 180 degree transformation in this short time. But it was a step in the right direction. I had big goals. A few were: completing my Toastmasters speech program (Speech #s 8, 9 and 10 left to go), networking with 5 people a month within my company and pursuing a promotion. And during this 2 week period, I was able to make 2 phone calls to set up lunch meetings, jot down an outline for my next presentation and share a recent project's results with my manager, not to mention going to the gym a couple times. Baby steps -- by moving a few hours of TV aside and rewarding myself with a few.

The main points Jylla kept reiterating to me over the next couple of months were 1) it is important to always be aware of the consequences of each action – ask yourself, is this helping me accomplish my goal? And 2) always focus on doing the activities or "chunked" goals that are part of the bigger dream, but never lose sight of the large, overarching dream you have, or you could run the risk of just doing things with no real purpose.

For the next several conversations, Jylla would repeat these messages, in one way or another, as I trudged through my various goals, while fighting my battle with procrastination – a phrase she did not particularly like because it should not be a struggle. But it was my reality nevertheless. And even with my TV victory, I continued to run in to time related roadblocks.

Another one was unexpected interruptions. These were things like, a girlfriend calling to talk when I was in the middle of working on a plan, or a social event on Friday night, which would undoubtedly eat into my Saturday morning schedule. For a while, I gave in to these things and it left me quite frustrated when I had no time left to accomplish part of my plan. When I voiced this to Jylla, she was reassuring yet stern. Instead of berating or criticizing me for not reaching my goal that week, she noted I needed to allow space in my schedule for flexibility or to move things around. But also, I needed to keep my focus. Certain interruptions required my immediate attention, but for

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certain others, as we all well know, we can just say NO. The truth of course is that life happens and there are always distractions, but we always have the choice not to acquiesce to a distraction. Discipline is critical.

And this was one of the key lessons I learned from coaching. It was not an experience that was always smooth and blissful, and filled with weekly successes. I had some setbacks too, where I would go for an entire month not accomplishing anything significant. Sometimes I was tired and I gave in to it. And the tears would come, followed by a bit of self pity. But then I would have an upcoming conversation with Jylla and start thinking about what I would report. I had to have something to say. And it would be a kick in the pants for me to shift my thoughts. It was at these times I would realize the important asset that a coach is – to hold me accountable. With just me, I would just wallow in the excuse. With a close friend, I would just tell them, “I’ll do it next week”. But with a professional coach I was accountable. I had to be responsible for my time as well as hers. I had one of these “lulls” back in January, when I wasn’t motivated to do much. And at our next conversation, it was the sternest I’ve heard Jylla’s voice. She said, “Black women don’t get tired.” It was sharp. But it was a reminder that being tired is not an excuse. A powerful message.

Aside from the motivational messages, the probing questions were a key tool Jylla used to get me to take action. In that January conversation, after making her point about the strength and resilience of black women, she asked: Is your goal important enough for you to sacrifice the time? And later, “what will you do next time to not let “something” get in the way?” My answer was of course, yes, and I would focus on why the goal was important to me – for example, feeling more fulfilled.

This fulfillment was key – it was the reason I wanted to talk to a coach in the first place. And I learned the process was not an overnight one. She forced me to confront myself, she asked all the hard questions, and she was adept at helping me prioritize for a more efficient path to my goals. As president and CEO of Crystal Stairs, Inc, Jylla brought over 20 years of corporate and consulting experience to the coaching experience. She always had suggestions and ideas I hadn’t thought of. She drilled down. She forced me to make my changes my responsibility. And most importantly, she helped me understand that excuses are not reasons for delay, but roadblocks to eliminate to get to my goals.

For me, coaching was about more than just eliminating bad habits. It was a way to share and explore my goals in an objective way, while finding the motivation and fire to achieve them in a brisk and enthusiastic fashion. The process may not always have been rosy, but I believe everyone can benefit from this kind of conversation, reflection and exploration. Whether you’re seeking a promotion, changing careers, need to boost sales or need an objective ear for a challenging management issue, a coach can be helpful.

My proudest accomplishments this past six months are my reduced TV watching, my ten networking conversations I’ve conducted and my #8 and #9 Toastmasters speeches done, with #10 coming up soon. And I am still a work in progress. I still watch TV. But now, I can prioritize and take my goals in small steps. And when I hit a setback, I can reshift my focus to what’s important – my purpose. I can now look in the mirror and see a strong, confident, bold, resilient woman looking back. I see a woman

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who is able to work through all obstacles and challenges – the one I created and the ones I encountered.

This relationship was one of my best investments. And to think, I almost did not have it. I remember Jylla had asked me at the beginning of our sessions, “Are you coachable?” At first I didn’t understand why this was an important question. I thought, of course I am! That’s why I want these sessions! But Jylla probed and I ranked my answer on a scale of 3 out of 5, meaning sort of. This prompted her to probe some more. For me it meant I wanted the changes I desired, but that I was also aware of my shortcomings. And I didn’t understand her concern around this. But I get it now. With all of the challenges of reflection and honesty, I realize now how important being ready for coaching is. You have to be willing and ready to put in the work. It is the most important ingredient. The sweat is required, and the tears are inevitable, but the joy is guaranteed. I will always be proud of the decision I made to start this relationship, and as long as I have goals to accomplish, I will never have to experience a breakup. My full life of accomplished dreams, and more to come, are not going to wait on me forever. Time to put down the remote and get a move on.

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