Adler, Coaching, Midlife Clients, and Career Transition

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Abstract

Little has been written about Alfred Adler’s influence on the coaching profession. This writer will attempt to explore not only Adler’s influence, but also specifically how it might apply to midlife clients exploring career transition. It is this writer’s objective to find out if career coaching is an effective alternative to psychotherapy for the target population of midlife career changers. Can coaching help midlife clients facing career transitions navigate this shift successfully? Coaching is a relatively new field, and is unregulated. This writer will explore coaching’s effectiveness with the target population, as well as an in depth study of how both genders might respond to coaching differently and why. Further exploration will involve those seeking to further their education to work in a new field, those seeking the path of entrepreneurship, and those in the target population who change careers due to job loss. The experiential project will consist of a proposed career coaching methodology designed by this writer and presented from an Adlerian perspective to a live audience.
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Adler, Coaching, Midlife Clients, and Career Transition

Presented for your consideration is the following question: Can life coaching help midlife clients facing career transitions navigate this shift successfully? This phenomenological study will help determine if life coaching is helpful to this population in facing this particular challenge.

History of Life Coaching and How it Relates to Adler

Literature on the beginnings of life coaching is almost non-existent. Scholarly consideration of the topic is ripe for research, but outside of the scope of this paper. The first mention of any type of coaching outside of the realm of sports was in literature related to business and human resource development (Hargrove, 1995; Whitmore, 1995). Walter and Peller (2000) daringly stated that psychotherapy should be called “personal consulting.”

In the realm of psychological roots, Adler is credited by Page (2005) with laying down the basis for the practice of life coaching. Adler believed that persons found happiness arriving from a sense of significance and belonging. Adler saw each of us as unique in make-up, and as the artist painting the canvas of our life. Page (2005) mentioned that psychologist-turned-coach Patrick Williams (2002) recognized Adler’s work as an antecedent to modern day coaching that “…frequently involved goal setting, life planning, and inventing a unique individual future, which are all common practices in modern life coaching” (Williams & Davis, 2002).

In addition to Adler and to some extent Jung, Gordon Allport, James Bugental, Kurt Goldstein, Karen Horney, Sidney Jourard, Prescott Lecky, Rollo May, and Fritz Perls influenced the move away from pathological psychology to a more positive focus (Williams & Davis,
2002). Their collective works laid the foundation for modern coaching as we practice it today. Although not officially credited, many of these practitioners seem to have been directly effected by the psychology of Adler.

   Humanistic psychology, pioneered by Abraham Maslow in the 1960’s altered the paradigm yet again by seeking wholeness, wellness, and forward movement, as opposed to the idea of the individual as sick or broken and in need of fixing (Williams & Davis, 2002). Shifting to a more purposeful living theory lead to the eventual emergence of life coaching as a practice.

   In the realm of personal development, no one person has been more influential than Anthony Robbins. For the past thirty years he has directly impacted the lives of more than 50 million people from over 100 countries with his best-selling books, multimedia and health products, public speaking engagements, and live events (Robbins, 2011). If Adler could be considered to be the grandfather of modern day life coaching, then Anthony Robbins would be his modern day grandson.

   This writer found that life coaching has emerged from three places: (1) Psychotherapy and Counseling, (2) Consulting and Organizational Development, and (3) Personal Development Trainers such as Anthony Robbins.

   Coaching is an unregulated field, and anyone can call himself or herself a coach at this point in time. As Grant and Cavanah (2007) warn: “To flourish, coaching psychology needs to remain clearly differentiated from frequently sensationalistic and pseudoscientific facets of the personal development industry while at the same time engaging in the development of the wider coaching industry” (p. 239).
Life coaches can be certified through the International Coaching Federation (ICF), and the majority of coaches practicing are certified through a recognized training program, and the ICF.

The profession of life coaching is still in its infancy, but there are types of life coaching which have distinguished themselves in the field. This writer will discuss two of these: The Co-Active Coaching method, and ‘Business Model You’, a career-coaching model.

**Co-Active Coaching**

The Co-Active coaching model is taught at The Coaches Training Institute (CTI). Laura Whitworth Kimsey-House founded CTI in 1992. Today, CTI is the largest in-person coach training organization in the world.

According to Henry Kimsey-House and Karen Kimsey-House (2011), coaching is chiefly about discovery, awareness, and choice. It is a way of effectively empowering people to find their own answers, encouraging and supporting them on their path as they continue to make important life-giving and life-changing choices. Co-Active coaching is a form of conversation with inherent ground rules regarding certain qualities that must be present: respect, openness, compassion, empathy, and a rigorous commitment to speaking the truth. According to Henry Kimsey-House and Karen Kimsey-House one of the easiest ways to see and understand the application of coaching skills is to view them within the five contexts of coaching:

1. **Listening**: Deep listening skills.
2. **Intuition**: Speaking from your intuition.
3. Curiosity: Being genuinely curious and eager to play with whatever shows up is at the heart of a Co-Active coaching relationship.

4. Forward and Deepen: All of the coaching skills are used to forward the action and deepen the client’s learning.

5. Self-management: Self-management is what we do as coaches to recover when conditions create less than a 100-percent connection. (p 11-13)

Co-Active coaching is a very holistic and natural approach to supporting the client through with which they present.

A niche within life coaching is career coaching. The following is a summary of what a career coach does based on the book: *Business Model You* (2012).

**Career Coaching: Business Model You**

Career coaching focuses on working with clients who specifically need assistance in the area of career development. According to Clark, Osterwalder and Pigneur (2012), in their book ‘Business Model You’ you can put together a simplified but powerful one-page method for reinventing your career.

The steps are:

1. **Canvas:** Learn to use a key tool for describing and analyzing organizational and personal business models.

2. **Reflect:** Revisit your life direction and consider how you want to align your personal and career aspirations.

3. **Revise:** Adjust – or reinvent – your work life using the Canvas and discoveries from the section on reflection.
4. Act: Learn to make it all happen by calculating your business value, and testing your model in the market. (p 19-223)

Summary

This writer found that the basic beliefs of life coaching could very well be traced back to the pioneering work of Adler with Individual Psychology. The forward-thinking, encouraging, and empowering philosophy of Adler is evident in Co-Active coaching in particular where discovery, awareness and choice are the three tenets that the process is based on. Adler saw the client as the expert on their life, and so do Co-Active coaches, and skilled coaches in general.

Although many contemporary psychologists have contributed to ideas, which have been embraced by life coaches, many have borrowed liberally from the foundational work of Adler. This writer found that life coaching has primarily evolved from psychotherapy, consulting, and the pioneering work of visionaries like Anthony Robbins who has touched the lives of more clients in thirty years than most of us will ever aspire to reach in a lifetime.

Co-Active coaching, taught at CTI is by far the most popular coach-training program on the planet. In this writer’s opinion, Co-Active training is the most empowering and thorough program available at the present time. There are certification programs available through Adler Schools in Canada with a campus in Arizona, and a Life Coaching Certificate offered at The Adler Graduate School in Richfield, MN.

Career Coaching is a niche of the broader category of life coaching. Career coaches assist clients in all aspects of career development. Clients range from high school students searching for college program advice to seniors facing what to do with themselves after retirement. Typically the client will pinpoint their passion and the career coach will help the client find a career path that fulfills that passion as in ‘Business Model You.’
An exploration of midlife clients follows. The term “midlife” itself is hard to define. Depending on which dictionary you use, you will get different results. After an examination of the recently published peer-reviewed scholarly articles this writer has defined “midlife” as the years between forty and sixty years of age.

**Midlife Clients**

Midlife clients are perfect candidates for life coaching. Life coaching is a substantial investment in you. Typically in the United States, coaching services will require a financial investment of six hundred dollars per month. Midlife clients are generally better positioned to afford this kind of investment.

Persons in this age group are questioning just about everything, including their career trajectory. According to Daly and Palkovitz (2004), men and women have different career pathways. Men have more standardized career pathways and tend to follow either orderly (traditional male career path: stable, continuous, and upwardly mobile) or high-g geared (start off high on the ladder and hop across firms in order to advance their careers). Although some women follow this path, women are more likely to follow other kinds of career paths: delayed entry (an extended period outside the labor force early on): intermittent (frequently exits from and re-entries into the work force), and steady part-time (Moen & Han, 2001).

Reassessment of career goals often happens during these years. Some are completely satisfied and content with where they are in life, but many are not. Existential questioning frequently leads to a feeling of discontentment. Life coaching assists clients in a very pro-active way to tackle these questions, providing a sort of treasure map between where the client is currently, and where the client wants to be.
Men and women in this age group have some goals in common, and some that are very different. This writer will explore some of the unique characteristics and challenges faced by clients according to their gender.

**Men 40 to 60-years-old**

According to Palkovitz and Daly (2004) Midlife is a period of work adjustment for men when they face the effects of job duration on their sense of purpose and well being. Coaching is a term that men feel comfortable with. They associate it with sports, and it doesn’t carry the stigma that therapy does. Men in this age group are usually well established in their career, but many feel that opportunities are passing them by. They went to college to become a lawyer because the family pressured them into a prestigious and profitable career, but it wasn’t what they dreamed of doing themselves. At midlife many men assess where they’ve been and make critical decisions about where they want to go. Career satisfaction is a major player on the canvas of a man’s identity.

**Women 40 to 60-years-old**

Women in this age range are for the first time in history holding their own with men in the corporate setting. Unfortunately with this age group many women still went to college to find a husband, not a career. Still other women in this age group chose to be stay-at-home moms while their husbands pursued well-paid careers.

According to Dare (2010), when considering key transitions in women’s midlife years, it is apparent that particular experiences such as menopause and the departure of adult children, are, if not always welcomed wholeheartedly, at least, managed relatively well, and with a good degree of equanimity. As this research suggests, more daunting challenges facing women in midlife are likely to be associated with divorce and the aging and death of parents. These
transitional events have the potential to impact women financially, physically, and emotionally, both during their midlife years and as they move into the next stage of their life.

**Summary**

This writer discovered that persons between the ages of 40-60 face existential issues, which often lead them to seek life coaching or therapy for guidance and support. These issues are variable depending on the individual, but typical questions are: Where am I going? What is really important to me? Am I satisfied with my current relationships? Am I fulfilled in my career path? What have I accomplished? What will I do for the rest of my life? Is my spiritual path in alignment with my current values? How might I make a difference in my community and/or the world? What will my legacy be?

Career paths are frequently re-evaluated at midlife. Although men and women have different reasons for deciding on more passion-focused career paths at this time, it is highly unusual for people in this age group to be completely satisfied in their current path.

Career and life coaching is more palatable with men than therapy, because coaching is something they are familiar with because of sports. The supportive environment involved in a coaching relationship is well suited for women as well. According to Newton and Stewart, (2010), women expressed themes regarding personal identity included, for example, statements dealing with traits or stable characteristics: “I lack confidence in myself.” or “Do what I’m doing now, but with better organizing skills.” To this writer it would seem that coaching would be helpful for women facing these issues. Although lacking confidence in oneself could be considered an issue for therapy, it would easily fit into the coaching category unless pathology was detected by an ethically, well-trained coach.
The next issue to explore will be a few different types of career transitions. Although there are many situations that one might face falling under this heading, this writer will focus on the white-collar employee transitioning to entrepreneur, and the white-collar employee transitioning from job loss.

**Career Transition**

According to Sperry (2011), Adler noted that how an individual approached work was related to that individual’s lifestyle convictions. He emphasized the importance of work, which he referred to as both occupation and vocation, as a venue for demonstrating social interest or self-absorption. (Adler, 1964). Sperry considered those with a “calling orientation” work for a sense of purpose, not for financial reward or advancement.

Sperry also noted that between one third and one half of employees in a wide variety of occupational endeavors indicated that they have a calling to their work (Wrzenieski et al., 1997). This is good news for career coaches, or for anyone working on vocational development for those in career transition. As the Co-Active model, and Adler agree: the client is the expert. As Sperry (2011, p 170) further points out: “… individuals who have a general commitment to make a difference and strive to do their best are likely to manifest social interest in the process.”

Again, the Co-Active model, Business Model You, and Adlerian theory seem to gel in their perspective. Career transition is a major life stressor for anyone. Let’s take a look at how it effects two specific groups: White-collar employees deciding to become entrepreneurs, and those forced out of work because of job loss.

**White - Collar Employee to Entrepreneur**

This writer found that with an economy, which is very volatile, White-Collar employees are exploring the option of going into business for themselves. DeMartino and Barbato (2003)
found that dissatisfaction with a current occupation, along with a positive view of self-employment, drove many individuals to consider entrepreneurship. The authors also found that a higher proportion of women became entrepreneurs in order to balance work and family, while a higher proportion of men sought wealth creation. (p.816). With the global market connected so efficiently through the Internet, it is quite easy, with the right guidance to set up your own entrepreneurial ventures while lounging in your pajamas.

Kirk and Belovics (2006) found that the midcareer entrepreneur is much more focused in the areas of strategic planning, problem solving, administration, and personal management. Isachsen (1998) believes that many entrepreneurs are highly focused and committed individuals who question the status quo. These individuals also crave the freedom to be creative in their work and thrive on the challenges of discovery and uncertainty. They are also goal-oriented, creative risk takers who are devoted and committed to their personal and professional objectives.

Mallon and Cohen (2001) put women entrepreneurs into two categories:

2. Change triggered by dissatisfaction and disillusionment with their last organization.

The entrepreneurs in waiting had always cultivated an entrepreneurial spirit, and moving from a corporate environment was quite natural for them. The “change-triggered” group was sick and tired of the corporate world and became inspired to start up a venture where they made the decisions. This writer believes that both groups would be well served by coaching because positive, forward thinking, and focused are all great qualities in a prospective coaching client.
Job Loss as a Career Transition

Job loss is a particularly stressful career transition for many people. As Latack and Dozier (1986) states: “For managers and professionals, job loss breaks the psychological success cycle.” (p. 377) Latack and Dozier go on to say that: “… career growth is more than just surviving the loss and finding another job. It means finding another psychological success job and concluding that the career gains of the job loss transition outweigh the losses.” (p. 380)

Career coaches can help the bewildered individual make sense of it all, and find the positives in the situation. Working with the person’s strengths, and by doing personal assessments like the Kolbe-A Index to find out the person’s inherent nature would be crucial to coaching the person to career success. A coach is there to help you to attain your own goals, whether it is to find your passionate fit for a career, or to encourage an individual to go back to school for an advanced degree in a field that has always fascinated the client.

Summary

Louis (1980) defines career transition as the period during which an individual is either changing roles or changing an orientation to a role already held. With this definition in mind, this writer believes that coaches can play a key role in guiding an individual in both categories. Career coaches can ease an individual into a changing role, and executive coaches have been working inside Fortune 500 companies for years assisting clients in changing their orientation in terms of job performance.

Adler spoke of how an individual’s approach to work was based on the individual’s lifestyle convictions. Sperry elaborated that those with a “vocational calling” are working for social interest. Again, Adlerian principles and the precepts of coaching converge because those
with a “vocational calling” would be well served by a coach who would support the individual’s passion while spreading the concept of social interest.

This writer found that entrepreneurship is a risky venture. Skilled coaches can hold the hands of individuals exploring this option. Most coaches are themselves entrepreneurs, having set up their own practices, so they are well positioned to help in this kind of endeavor. The very qualities a coach looks for in a client are required for entrepreneurship such as being goal-oriented, creative risk takers who are devoted and committed to their personal and professional objectives.

Individuals facing job loss are dealing with a major life stressor. Career coaches look at job loss as an opportunity to grow. Based on assessment tools and inventories of the clients strengths, this writer discovered that career coaches are uniquely positioned to make this experience positive and fulfilling for the client. The opportunity to follow the client’s passion into a brand new career path seems to be very rewarding to clients and coaches alike.

**Final Summary**

This writer found that the basic beliefs of life coaching could very easily be rooted in the work of Alfred Adler in Individual Psychology. Adler’s forward thinking, encouraging, and empowering philosophy of life reflect the basic tenets of coaching. Adler saw the client as the expert on their life and coaching principles reflect this same thinking. This is particularly evident in exploring the issues faced by those in midlife facing career transition.

Adler spoke of how an individual’s approach to work was based on that person’s lifestyle convictions. This writer discovered that those with a vocational calling are working towards social interest. Adlerian principles and the precepts of coaching meld because those with a vocational calling would be well served by a coach who would support the person’s
passion. Doing so would further the client’s social interest because the individual would be contributing to the greater good of the community by finding his niche.

This writer found that although many contemporary psychologists have contributed to ideas that have been embraced by coaches, Adler’s influence is evident in these more contemporary theories. Although often uncredited, many have borrowed liberally from Adler’s foundational work.

This writer discovered that coaching has its roots in psychotherapy and consulting, and through visionaries such as Anthony Robbins who has touched the lives of millions with his coaching techniques. Anthony Robbins could easily be considered the modern day grandson of Adler, considering that Adler is considered by many to be the grandfather of modern day coaching.

Co-Active coaching is by far the most popular coach training method on the planet. There are others including several Adlerian Coaching Certificate programs, including one offered at the Adler Graduate School in Richfield, Minnesota. This writer would also highly recommend the Robbins-Madanes Strategic Intervention Institute taught by Anthony Robbins and Cloe Madanes.

Career coaching is a niche in the broader category of life coaching. Career coaches assist clients with all aspects of career development. This writer found that clients range from high school students planning a college career track to retirees looking for ways to contribute in their community.

After doing some initial homework to pinpoint their passion and strengths, clients work with coaches to design a sort of treasure map to take the client from where they are now, to
where they would like to be. The career coach will support the client in all phases of integrating the new information, and will typically give the client homework to complete between sessions.

This writer discovered that coaching is an unregulated profession, and that anyone can just call himself or herself a life coach without any formal training or certification. Most coaches are certified, and follow the ethical guidelines of the ICF, but it is best to inquire about a coaches training background before signing on with a coach. An ethical coach would have no problem sharing their credentials with you.

This writer found that midlife clients, between the ages of forty-to-sixty face existential issues that might lead them to seek out a therapist or coach for guidance and support during this time. Clients in this age group are generally financially secure enough to pay for coaching, which typically will run a client six hundred dollars per month. Since an individual’s career path is often a source of distress, coaching is available to smooth the way.

Although men and women differ somewhat in why they hire coaches, both men and women seem to benefit from the interaction. Men are more comfortable hiring a coach than a therapist because of the stigma attached to therapy. Men are also familiar with the coaching concept from viewing or participating in sports. Women benefit form issues ranging from lack of confidence in themselves in changing careers, to wanting to be better organized in their current careers and lives.

This writer was interested in exploring clients moving from the corporate world to entrepreneurship and also those facing career transitions due to job loss and how coaching might assist in these transitions. Both situations are very common concerns of midlife clients and merited further exploration.
The jump to entrepreneurship is a risky venture. There are certain traits and characteristics found generally in those individuals that succeed. The midcareer entrepreneur is much more focused in the areas of strategic planning, problem solving, administration, and personal management, and many entrepreneurs are highly focused and committed individuals who question the status quo.

These individuals also crave the freedom to be creative in their work and thrive on the challenges of discovery and uncertainty. They are also goal-oriented, creative risk takers who are devoted and committed to their personal and professional objectives. These are the very qualities that coaches look for in successful clients, so a coach would find much reward in working with these individuals, and the clients would be well served by hiring a coach. Most life coaches set up their own practices, so they are uniquely positioned to help a client evaluate whether they have what it takes to be successful as an entrepreneur. This writer found that coaches do not set up goals for a client; they just support their client’s goals.

There is no guarantee that a person’s business will be successful just because they hire a coach. A coach is there to keep the client accountable to the goals that the clients set for themselves, and assist them in reaching their goals. The client is ultimately responsible for follow through.

Individuals facing job loss are faced with a major life stressor. An ethical coach needs to evaluate their client for signs that he or she might need therapy, not coaching during this transition. If no pathology is noted a coach may proceed with assessment tools such as the Kolbe-A Index, and also discuss the strengths of the client.

Why the client lost the position would yield clues to strengths and weaknesses that the client could capitalize on in a new venture. If the client wants to stay in the same field, the
coach could assess with the client what went wrong, and focus on finding a more ideal situation. If the client wants to return to school to obtain training towards an alternative direction a coach also could support this.

At the beginning of this paper this writer asked a simple question: Can coaching help midlife clients facing career transitions navigate this shift successfully? This writer’s conclusion is yes based on the facts presented in this paper. This writer was somewhat limited in finding relevant material on life coaching, because of the fact that this new profession is still in its infancy. Further limitations were the lack of research done in regard to job loss.
References


