



Fully qualified coaching psychologists can offer a valuable resource both for companies and individuals

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# LABELLING BOUNDARIES

## PAULINE WILLIS

Codes of practice developed to support the coaching industry state that coaches must “on-refer” to appropriate sources of support. But coaches cannot manage boundaries effectively unless they grasp where coaching touches existing professional domains like psychology and understand which complementary services are offered.

As many coaching practices have been either explicitly or implicitly adapted from what are essentially “psychological approaches”, the boundaries between psychology and coaching are not always clear.

This fuzziness, along with what amounts to the misrepresentation of the psychology profession in much coaching literature by authors choosing to focus almost exclusively on one of psychology’s sub-domains, makes the boundaries even harder to manage.

When coaching is compared with psychology, it is often compared with only the sub-domains of clinical psychology or clinical psychotherapy, which are certainly not representative of the whole profession. This is misleading, as most psychologists do not work within clinical settings – they work in organisations, educational settings and in the community to support “mentally healthy” people to achieve work and life success.

The key difference between non-psychologist coaches and psychologists is that psychologists possess doctoral-level qualifications in psychology and draw upon the professional knowledge base of “psychology” explicitly in their coaching practice.

In the UK, where psychology and related professions are, at present, unregulated, some coaches who are not professionally trained in psychology also use the terms psychology or psychologist to describe either their

professional background, competency or their service.

These coaches could be giving the wrong impression that they are formally qualified or experienced as a psychologist, although where I have seen misleading literature, it has generally been because coaches are trying to highlight the fact that they either use or take psychological approaches into account within their practice and not because they are trying to intentionally mislead.

In the CIPD’s *Coaching and Buying Coaching Services* guide, Jessica Jarvis advises HR professionals to “watch out for the cowboys” and make sure that any claim to specialist knowledge or competence in an area like psychology is backed up with relevant

qualifications and professional accreditations.

Until psychology is brought under statutory regulation, which is imminent, buyers of both “coaching psychology” services and training must be careful to ensure that the services offered in the name of “psychology” are actually what they present themselves to be.

The key mission of the British Psychological Society (BPS) is to “take psychology to society”. Regulation of psychology is to ensure that the public are protected from “self-styled psychologists” – it is not about preventing others from using the rich and valuable

knowledge base of psychology. So, there will be creative and mutually enhancing ways to support the appropriate use of psychology and psychological tools by non-psychologist coaches within coaching practice – and psychologists will support this.

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