

Ep #172: Should New Coaches Offer Free Coaching?



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Hey, this is Lindsay Dotzlaf and you are listening to *Mastering Coaching Skills* episode 172.

To really compete in the coaching industry, you have to be great at coaching. That's why every week, I will be answering your questions, sharing my stories, and offering tips and advice so you can be the best at what you do. Let's get to work.

Hey coach, so I have something fun to talk about today. I realized I can't believe I've never talked about this, which is to offer free coaching or to not? As a new coach, does it make sense for you to offer free coaching when you're first starting out or should you go straight to paid coaching?

And I want you to think of this kind of as just an open discussion. I am not, I think you'll see by the end of this episode I'm not going to say like, here's the right answer because, of course, say it with me, it depends is always my answer, right? I'm just going to give you an argument for why it could be really useful and then tell you some things that if you do decide to offer free coaching, things to look out for.

So the reason this came to me, I am part of a Voxer series with a coach who asked me and a bunch of other kind of influential coaches in the industry, and actually I don't know that it's just coaches, many service providers. It's really cool, it's like all for charity. I should have looked up the details before I hopped on.

We can probably put a link to it, I believe it will still be for sale. It's like \$21 and you get to basically hear all these back and forth interviews between her, the coach that's running it, and a bunch of other service providers talking about kind of how would you do this if you were to do it over in the beginning of your business?

I think it's \$21 to have unlimited access and all the money goes to charity, which I think is so fun. It's such a good idea, right? So creative. I've never heard of that. I mean maybe other people are doing it, but it's the first time I've heard of it. I had to learn how to use Voxer before I went back and forth with her. I was like, am I doing this right?

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So this is something we touched on and it was like a rabbit hole we went down and I was like, oh, this is so interesting. I've never really talked about this. And I think maybe in the beginning of kind of this niche of me helping coaches with their coaching skills and really going down this path, I think in the beginning I don't know if I really had as much of a clear – Like now I've just coached so many people on this that I just feel a lot more clear about here's why you would do it and here's why you wouldn't.

So let's just discuss. So this is a question that a lot of new coaches have. And if you're a new coach and you're like, no way, I'm going straight to paid coaching. I've already signed clients, whatever, this is certainly not for me to change your mind. If you are a new coach and you've been trying to sell coaching and you haven't had success doing that, this might be very helpful for you. Not to make you think like, oh, I have to go backwards and it's going to be confusing because I've already been trying to sell coaching and now I'm going to offer free coaching.

I'm actually going to give you some ways to do it that isn't just taking on a bunch of free clients. And if you are just, maybe you just joined The Coach Lab, you're just learning to coach or you have gone through other coach trainings or coach certifications and you're just learning to coach and you might be thinking through this yourself. I know some coach certifications require certain hours of coaching. Most of them that I know of don't necessarily specify whether that's free or paid.

So again, I just want to be really clear, I don't have a strong opinion one way or the other. Full disclosure, when I started my business I did not offer free coaching. At least not in the like, I'm going to take X amount of clients for X amount of time. I didn't do it like that.

I did coach people in my life, like just kind of asked them, you know, I would hear them talking about something, maybe like someone in my family or one of my good friends. And I would just say like, oh, I'm a life coach and I help people with this kind of thing. I would love to practice. Do you mind if we just do a free session? So I did some of that, but mostly I did just go into paid coaching.

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So just in case you're listening and you're like, oh, well, that's not what you did. Why would you think this is a good idea? I just like, you know, transparency. But looking back, I don't know if I would have changed the way I did it, but maybe there's a chance I would have, or at least some of the other ideas I'm going to give you besides just offering free one-on-one coaching. I may have done more of those things to just be coaching more hours, like to just be coaching more, in the coach energy.

So here are reasons that I think offering free coaching is great. One, I think it puts you in real life coaching situations, right? Where you're coaching real humans in the real world, like really trying to decipher is this going well? Is it not? I think it helps you increase your confidence, right? Just the more you do something, the more confident you're going to feel doing it.

I know we really want to fight against that and be like, no, no, no, the more I learn about something, the more confident I'm going to feel doing it. And that just isn't true. The more you do something, the more you repeat it, the more confident you're going to feel. That's just fact.

Also, it really gives you true proof of concept, right? So if you learned to coach somewhere, you might get it on a conceptual level, right? You might understand what coaching is intellectually. You might be able to explain it really well. You might be able to talk about it all day. You might have lots of personal examples of how coaching has changed your life. But when you are in coaching sessions and working with real humans on real problems, real life problems, it really allows you to see, oh, this is working. Like, wait, what? I mean, I knew it would work, but also it's like really working.

It also maybe, possibly takes some of the pressure off of wondering if it's working, because maybe if you're not charging your clients for their sessions, you might be more willing to examine if it's working well and if it's not.

I get this a lot in The Coach Lab where coaches, it's very clear to me they're just really scared to ask or to find out if the coaching is really working, right? And I'll ask them like, oh, well, is it working? How do you

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know? Are we moving in the right direction? And they're like, oh, I don't know. I mean, they said they hired me for this and they're not really getting that result, but they're getting these other results, and I don't know if that's okay.

And my solution for that always is like, oh, have you asked them? Maybe now those are the results they want. Maybe they've changed their mind. Or maybe they're also wondering why you haven't asked them. But as a new coach, maybe the free coaching would allow you to be a little more flexible in that, to allow you to like, yeah, I'm totally new at this, how's it going? Are you making any changes? Are you creating results from the coaching that we're doing?

It also allows you to talk about, like in your sales and in your marketing to talk about real things that happen in real coaching sessions versus relying on, again, just shifts you've had from coaching or talking about it in a more conceptual way. I think it can really create not just more confidence in your coaching, as I mentioned, but also just confidence in talking about what you do. Confidence in your marketing. Confidence all around.

Another reason that I think it's really great to offer free coaching is I've been in lots of coach trainings and coach certifications and all the things, and one proponent of them is usually peer coaching, right? And they'll usually assign you a peer and it's just like you have to do however many sessions and maybe record them, maybe turn them in. Maybe they're going to be critiqued. Maybe not. I've seen it done in so many different ways.

And I do think this is really useful, right? It's like just kind of getting your feet wet. Maybe it's the first time you've done it. And it's really useful to have someone that knows what's going on in it with you, right? They're a peer and they feel you when you are, if you're nervous or if you are fumbling with your coaching or whatever, they are probably like, oh, well that's okay. We know, we're both learning.

But that's very different because they're also likely to help you, right? So let's say I'm a marriage coach and I'm peer coaching someone, but they

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don't want marriage coaching, because that's usually how it happens in groups like this. Normally what happens, it always makes me laugh, is it's a bunch of brand new coaches coaching each other on their brand new coaching businesses. A lot of you might be laughing right now, I'm sure you've seen this.

But you're like, I'm a marriage coach. So you're not actually, first of all, you're not actually practicing what you want to coach on. And yes, if you can coach on one thing, hopefully you can coach on anything using the same tools, but I do really think it's different. Especially if you feel much more confident coaching on relationships versus coaching maybe on your business, which you might be struggling with as well.

The other thing that happens is they will start to help you, right? So if they see you're fumbling, they might offer, like they might jump in and kind of take control of the coaching session or they might start to add another thought or kind of direct, like, I know what's supposed to happen next, so I'm just naturally going to – It's almost like they're coaching themselves and then they're just sharing with you their findings out loud.

Now, this is all beneficial. It's all great. Do all of the practice. I'm not saying don't do this or that it's bad that this happens in programs. But what I am saying is taking on free clients in your niche or as general coaching clients, if that's what your niche is, or whatever it is. Just taking on clients, doing the work you want to do, even if it's for free, it's just going to feel a lot, lot different than someone who knows exactly what's supposed to be happening and who is kind of only half in their coach mind and half in their client mind, right?

I see this happen all the time. I'd like evaluate coaching, and I don't evaluate coaching like in this moment. I'm not doing it but I used to in my mastermind. And I had to eventually make a rule that they couldn't turn in coaching that was peer coaching because it was never a good sample of how they actually coached.

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I could just see them helping each other and guiding each other and kind of coaching themselves out loud to the other person. It just created a really interesting dynamic. I've seen hours and hours and hours of it to the point that I was like, okay, this isn't useful for anyone in that specific situation.

Another one is, although the person you're coaching may not actually be your best ideal client, they might know people who are, right? So if you're doing free sessions with someone, they might say, oh my gosh, I know, like even if they don't end up paying you money, I might know people who need to do this work. They're going to love this, this was incredible.

It's also a way for them to tell you that it was incredible and you get to believe them, right? Like this work changed something for me, shifted something for me and you, as the coach, get to believe it.

So now let's shift to the things you want to, if you choose to coach for free, the things you want to just be aware of or maybe decide ahead of time. The biggest thing that you want to decide ahead of time is exactly what does the free coaching look like? How many sessions is it? How many clients are you taking on for free? And sticking to that, because I have seen kind of on the flip side of this, I have seen coaches kind of get stuck in it.

Like they don't know how to move from free coaching to paid coaching. Or they start coaching someone for free and they don't say like it's four sessions or however many. And so then what happens is it just kind of goes on forever and they don't know how to end it or say, okay, now I charge for coaching if you want to continue. So that's one thing to be aware of, decide exactly what it's going to look like ahead of time.

Another thing is to really be unattached to the clients you work with for free are the people that are going to pay you money. So if you said it's free coaching, like really, truly feel in your bones this is free coaching, it's X amount of sessions. I don't expect anything from them after that. Otherwise it could put you in a very kind of graspy place and it'll start showing up in your free sessions.

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I coach people on this all the time. And then it'll make your coaching weird and you'll be in a really big hurry because, oh my gosh, I have to create this huge result for them so that they want to hire me. You really just want to cut the cord between that free client is for sure going to be a paid client.

And you also want to consider that not all free clients are really, truly the best coaching clients. Sometimes they can be the hardest to coach. Now, not always, sometimes they're really in it and they are all about it. They are ready to go. They show up ready to go. They're excellent clients.

But sometimes they're doing it maybe as a favor to you because you've asked them or some sort of, you know, it's free, why not? They feel obligated. There are lots of different reasons that people would say yes, or they just don't have the commitment of paying the money, so it's easier for them to just kind of put it off like, oh, that's okay. Sometimes they're more likely to not show up for sessions.

This is just what I've found. This is not 100% true, but I think it's important to mention this because so many of my clients come to me with this and they think it's a them problem. And so I just want to make it really clear that it's not. Free clients often won't show up to sessions or they will consistently reschedule. They won't do the work in between. They kind of give up halfway through. They're not fully committed. It's almost like they're more like pretending in calls like, oh yeah, that's cute and then don't even think about it again until the next call.

There are just so many ways that it can not perfectly mimic a real client relationship. So just consider that. Now, some of them truly are the best ever clients. And so I am not saying that that is true for all free clients. Also, you just don't want to, you know, if that is happening, you want to make sure that it doesn't rock your confidence in your coaching, or have you thinking that you're not doing a good job or like this is how all clients show up, because it's just not true.

What else? Let's see. Let me check my list here. I think those are just the main things. It's just deciding ahead of time what it's going to look like,

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knowing that free clients may show up differently and then just not making it mean anything about yourself that you're coaching for free, right?

I hear this a lot in the industry, and every time I do, I bristle against it. When people say things like, oh no, you have to charge. You have to charge your worth. People couldn't possibly know these are your first coaching sessions. I couldn't have a more opposite opinion around that.

First of all, first of all, when it comes to charging your worth, and if you're a coach that says this to your clients, I love you and I just want you to consider this. What does that even mean? Now, if what you're saying is you need to learn to charge money for services in general, right? Like you have to learn to feel comfortable charging for your work, great.

But the thought that we have to charge our worth, and obviously we are worth a ton, so that cost must be very high. I just couldn't agree less. That's just not a thing, right? It's like charge what? My worth as a human? That's impossible. I'm infinitely worthy. As are you, as is everyone. So just be conscious of that. If that's a thing that you teach, or it's a thing that you've heard from a coach that you're like, yes, I have to charge my worth, just really question.

Again, there are reasons to learn that. I just think sometimes it's framed incorrectly. Sometimes it's more like charge for your work. That is very different. Charging for what your work is worth, maybe. Maybe we could go there. I'll go that far. All right. That was just a little, I just went down a little rabbit hole because that one gets me worked up sometimes.

The next thing I was going to say is I've heard sometimes people say, oh, but you can't let people know that they are your first clients. I call total BS on that. I was actually someone's very first coaching client, I had no issues. I was like, yes, I'll pay you all the money because I want what you're offering. This is exactly what I've been looking for, it's a yes for me.

And so I think because I had that experience, I just don't buy into that at all. I think that it's way better to be transparent with someone, than to try to fake it, right? Or fake it until you make it or fake it until – What's really

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happening is fake it until you believe you're good enough to tell someone like, oh yeah, I'm actually a brand new coach. If this is you and if you're like, oh my God, I would never, I would just question that. Like, why not?

I remember being a new coach and telling people, yeah, I'm a brand new coach. I just started my business and I can totally help you. Whatever the thoughts are that are playing in the background, those are really important for you, especially if you're a new coach and you hear me say this and you're like, what? I think it's really important to work through those thoughts about yourself or what people will make that mean because some people will make it mean things that you haven't even considered.

Like, oh, amazing, I love being the first at something. Or, oh, amazing, I bet you're less expensive than some coaches that have been doing it for a while. Or great, I love all the personal attention. I bet you probably don't have a lot of clients, I'm going to get so much personal attention, this is going to be great. Whatever, like they might have thoughts that you haven't even considered.

I'm not suggesting that you have to go around telling every single person I'm a brand new coach. I've never had a client, but just if the thought of that appalls you, I would investigate why just the teensiest bit. Because once you own it and you step into that energy, all people want to know, like people that are watching, people that might consider hiring you is that you feel confident in what you do and that you can help them get the results, that you sound clear when you're talking about it.

Okay. So now I'm just going to give you a couple other ways that you can practice coaching that isn't necessarily taking on a bunch of clients. So maybe you're like, Lindsay, this is great, I love this idea. And right now maybe you're still working full-time or something else is taking up a bunch of hours, but you know that you would still just love to be coaching more.

By the way, I think this is like a hack to building your business, just coaching as much as you can. And I don't necessarily mean signing as many clients as you can. I just mean being in that coach energy is very

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different than being in the consuming, let me learn more, let me whatever energy.

So here are some ways to do it. You can, like I already said, you can coach one-on-one, right? You could decide ahead of time, I'm going to take five free one-on-one clients for four sessions each. Or I'm going to take 10 one-on-one clients for six sessions each. It really doesn't matter, you get to choose. I'm going to take 20 one-on-one clients for one session. I'm just going to practice coaching all the people in one session.

But there are other ways to do it. And this would be true, so you can use these if you're a brand new coach, but these are also things you could incorporate if you've been coaching for a while and it feels like, oh, okay, well, I already charge for coaching, but I don't have all the clients that I would love to have. And I would love to be coaching more, but the thought of taking on free clients at this point kind of feels like going backwards.

Here are some other options. You can host a workshop. I hate to use the word webinar because a lot of you might be like, ah, that feels very official. But like a workshop, a training, a free coaching hour, whatever you want to call it, where you're bringing, like getting people to sign up for this free coaching in whatever format. Either you're going to teach something and then you're going to open it up for coaching, that's the part where you practice the coaching.

Or you can even just do – A lot of my clients do this because I used to do it, so they saw that and they're like, oh, okay, that's a fun idea. You can just do free coaching hours. Like I used to do that instead of webinars or trainings. I would just be like free coaching, free live coaching. Let's go. Come on, get coached by me. Those worked really well for me and it just put me in the energy. And I did this as I had already built my business pretty significantly. Like not even that long ago, I did this.

You can get creative with the thing I just said, but just in a creative way. Like what's something you've never seen done before? What's something that would maybe be specific to your niche that other people aren't doing?

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For me, doing the free coaching hours, I, at that point, was coaching coaches. So it made a lot of sense. They knew what coaching was. A lot of them knew me because I was just doing it to like my email list and my social media followers. So they knew me and they knew like, oh yeah, I'd love to come get coaching on something from her.

But depending on where you are in your business, maybe you have to get more creative, right? That might not work if you don't have a large following. And by large, I'm going to put that in quotes because mine is not large by any means compared to a lot of other people. But if you just know that at this point, maybe you're brand new, your audience feels very small or your niche is very specific or the people that you would be talking to wouldn't even really know what you mean by just come get coached, you're going to have to be a little more creative with it, right?

Like what is a way that people in your niche would love to come together to work through something? Online, you can host in-person events where you practice coaching. One thing that I did, I'm sure I've talked about this at some point on the podcast, but I used to go to a women's shelter by where we used to live. There was a women's shelter down the road and I used to go there for like an hour or I think it was supposed to be an hour, and let's be clear, I'm pretty sure I would end up staying like three hours.

And I would just sit with the women and talk with them and coach them. I put this in quotes because it was like light coaching, right? Some of them were definitely not in the space for coaching. And I wasn't showing up saying, oh, I'm here to coach you. It was a little more, I forget exactly how the owner kind of talked about it, but they always knew I was coming. They could come sit and chat with me if they wanted to.

I just really connected with them, gave them kind of a, sometimes it was just like a sounding board. But I would sneak in some coaching, not like coaching without consent, but just more like sneaking in coaching concepts, right? Or just asking simple questions like, yeah, like how are you feeling about that right now? Just really tiny ways of helping them really feel, like creating more self-awareness.

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So things like that. Are there places around you where you live that you could volunteer to coach? It doesn't have to be someplace like a woman's shelter. It could be a business, anything that fits with your niche, right? Think about your niche, think about what you do, where could I go and offer value? What would that look like?

And you'd want to be really clear, like this is value for them. And this is another place where I would be really honest, like I'm just kind of practicing this. That's why I'm doing it for free. That's literally what I told the owner of the women's shelter.

You could start things like a book club or a meetup or a networking event, or just anything like that, that you can be in charge of, that you are starting, that you make it very clear ahead of time, kind of some creative way that you're wrapping coaching into the thing that you're doing.

You can offer, just ask your friends and family, like what I was saying, right? Like I would love to practice some coaching. I just want to be coaching more, can I coach you? Would you let me coach you on this? I'm not going to sell you coaching. This is like no strings attached, I would just love to do a few sessions with you.

Not your friends and family that you're like, oh, I see like where I could really help them, AKA fix them. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about truly offering just free coaching, especially if it's something they come to you about for advice or your insight or whatever. Like, could I actually just practice a coaching session on you over this topic? Let's just see, you might love it. We'll see. And really truly being unattached to them that after that they're going to become your client. I think transparency, again, is always the best policy.

I think that's it. Those are my main tips. I have done all the things I just mentioned, besides taking an X number of clients for a certain number of sessions. I've done all the other things I just talked about. I think they can all be very effective. And my thought was always, I just want to be coaching as much as I can. So when I had like one client or two clients, or I don't

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know, I would say all the way up to 10 clients, I was doing a lot of free coaching just in different ways.

One thing I didn't mention is you can also offer to coach your peers in masterminds. In my spaces. I love it when people coach each other. There's a very open peer coaching policy and it's not required, but I think it's amazing. That's another great way to practice. Again, you might come back to a little bit of that, like they might help you a little bit like with the coaching. So I don't think it's quite the same as coaching just the general humans, but it can still be very powerful, especially if you're coaching them in what you love to coach on.

So I think that's it. That was just a long winded answer to should I have free coaching or should I not? Hopefully you found it super valuable. I would love to hear your opinion. Get with me, find me on Instagram, send me a message. Tell me your thoughts on this. Maybe there's something I haven't thought of. Maybe you do this and there are other things that have come up for you along the free coaching journey that I haven't even considered. I would be so curious what that is.

I will otherwise see you next week. Goodbye.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *Mastering Coaching Skills*. If you want to learn more about my work, come visit me at lindsaydotzlafoaching.com. That's Lindsay with an A, D-O-T-Z-L-A-F.com. See you next week.