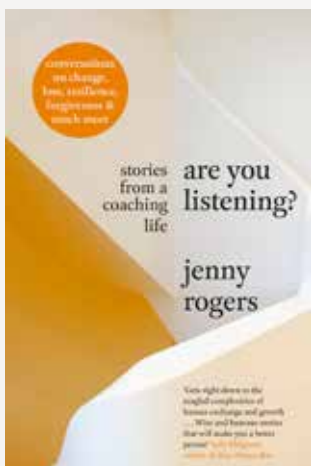


On the bookshelf: what you're reading



Are you Listening? Stories from a Coaching Life

Jenny Rogers
Penguin Random House 2021
ISBN: 978-0-241-47464-8
£14.99

As an enthusiastic reader of two of Jenny Rogers' previous works – *Building a Coaching Business: Ten Steps to Success* (2017) and *Coaching Skills: The Definitive Guide to Being a Coach* (2008) (the latter essential reading on many coach training programmes) – I had high hopes for Rogers' latest book. I was not disappointed. Described by the publisher as a revealing exploration of 'the most vivid coaching journeys taken by some of her many successful clients', here, the author combines her technical expertise and her ability to weave a compelling narrative to take her reader 'behind the coaching curtain', providing an honest and moving insight into the experience of both coach and client.

The book comprises 18 vignettes, each reflecting key experiences or learnings on the author's coaching journey. It spans her 30-year career and touchingly interweaves some of Rogers' own personal experiences, such as the illness and loss of her husband and the impact

that this had on her coaching assignments. Written in an engaging and jargon-free style, each chapter takes the reader from first engagement or presenting issue (Rogers writes she sometimes thinks of this as the 'cover story'), through the arc of the coaching experience to its conclusion. As the narratives are based on real-life case studies, some of these end more cleanly than others. Dual-trained practitioners will recognise the themes emerging – loss, betrayal, connecting with one's true purpose and finding acceptance for the authentic self.

For novice practitioners, or those who are inexperienced in working in a corporate environment, the stories provide a revealing insight into such situations as chemistry meetings, three-cornered contracting, clashes in values between the coach and organisation, and building trust with a client who has not chosen to ask for help themselves.

There is much to be gained from these narratives. They speak to what it is to be human and the existential themes that come up time and time again with clients

For coach-counsellors navigating the boundaries between the two disciplines, there is some thought-provoking discussion about the differences between coaching and counselling. Rogers is clear she is not a trained therapist and discusses how she sees the boundaries between her work and that of a counsellor. What is striking is how often these boundaries are challenged by the issues that emerge as the relationship between coach and client develops. Due to the confidential nature of coaching and

counselling work, one of the key ways we learn is vicariously and I was curious to what extent, if at all, the stories would reveal her methodology. While Rogers seems very self-aware and is open about her own process, readers hoping for a 'how-to guide' would be better served by her earlier work (2008). She notes that 'even after all this time, I still don't know what the special ingredient is for success and I have learned to be content with my ignorance'(p6).

However, there is much to be gained from these narratives. They speak to what it is to be human and the existential themes that come up time and time again with clients. I was reminded of why I chose to become a dual-trained practitioner and the themes that are at the essence of client work. As Margaret Chapman-Clarke puts it, these stories speak to 'what it means to be engaged in a conversation with another human being who's suffering.'¹

Ultimately, this is an honest and moving account of both client and coach experience. If you enjoyed Yalom's *Love's Executioner*,² you may well enjoy this, and who knows, maybe one day this book will be regarded as the coaching equivalent of that classic text? ■

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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Read on for an exclusive extract from this book...

All coaching is about change. If nothing needs to change then you don't need a coach. But the bigger the change, and the more we know we need to embrace it, the more reluctant we can be to do so and the longer it takes. Fear is what holds us back. Clients could be in a successful career, but they may have suddenly lost their zest and have no idea where to go next. They may have been fired from a high-profile job and be the focus of press attacks or social media trolling. They may secretly wonder if they are good enough despite their appearance of uncrackable confidence. They may feel trapped in a failed marriage. They may be facing one of those dilemmas that involves a tempting offer where to accept would be to betray intensely held values. They may be nursing a secret which cannot be confessed because of its potential to humiliate and expose. They may have made a devastating mistake or have experienced a crushing disappointment while pretending to the rest of the world that everything is fine.

The foundation precept of coaching is that we have choice because we are responsible for ourselves. Other people cannot make us happy or unhappy. This idea can be terrifying, which perhaps is why some of us try to dissolve the

oppressive anxiety it creates through addictions or by passing the responsibility for our well-being on to gods or demagogues. Few of my clients now have any religious faith but many start with the belief that what needs to change is other people, yet they discover through coaching that the only person you can ever reliably change is yourself – and that can be arduous.

Clients often begin by giving me what I think of as their 'cover story'. This is something safely small, usually to do with the surface discomforts of life in their organization, though it may be convincingly presented as urgent and important. A good example would be the many people who say they are overwhelmed by their work, there are too few hours in the day, they are appallingly busy, people pester them, they are obliged to deal with their emails even when they are on holiday. The cover story is part of what has helped the client function. It is what the psychologist Professor Franz Ruppert calls the 'survival self' and its job is to distract and protect. At some level the client is testing you: will you swallow the cover story? If you do, they may abandon the coaching, telling their friends and colleagues that you are useless. The real job of a coach is to enable the client to move from the cover story to the underlying story and to find a healthy way of answering the big questions that they may have been avoiding so skilfully for so long.

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