

A woman with blonde hair tied back, wearing a blue tank top, is performing a shoulder exercise in a gym. She is holding a pair of dumbbells with both hands, arms extended forward. The background is a blurred gym setting with other people and equipment.

THE FUTURE OF
HEALTH & FITNESS COACHING

**FOUR HUGE
MISTAKES**
COACHES MAKE EVERY DAY

DAY 3



4 HUGE MISTAKES THAT HEALTH AND FITNESS COACHES MAKE EVERY DAY.

Plus, how you can avoid them by becoming more client-centered.

By John Berardi, Ph.D.

Almost every coach I've worked with has made the same four coaching mistakes with their clients and patients. If you can be one of the few to avoid them, you'll stand out from the rest.

Am I a good coach?

Most health and fitness coaches wonder this — some of them secretly, perhaps — every single day.

You want to know if you're *really* as good as you think you are.

You want to know if you'll stand out in the field someday, like you envisioned when you decided to take this path.

What I've come to realize is that it's not “good coach” vs. “bad coach”.

In fact, some of the worst habits in the industry are the most *rampant* — even among the best professionals.

Most of the thousands of students I've worked with have fallen victim to the same four HUGE coaching mistakes.

Mistakes that hold them back in their careers.

Mistakes that make clients / patients fail or quit.

Luckily, you can fix these mistakes.

Here I'll show you:

- how to identify the mistakes;
- how to correct them; and
- how doing so helps you become a truly elite coach.

So you walk into a doctor's office...

"I have a stomach ache," you say faintly. You're intimidated by the wall of medical diplomas in front of you.

Your doctor doesn't look up from her paperwork.

"Is it your esophageal sphincter or your jejunum? Be specific, please. And hurry up. I have many patients to see today."

"Um," you say. "Um."

You can't remember high school biology. You poke your belly. The pain is a bit nebulous. You aren't sure exactly where it hurts.

"Doesn't matter. It's stomach cancer," says your doctor briskly. She still doesn't look up. She keeps writing. Then she hands you a pile of prescriptions.

"Here are the meds you'll need," she says. "Please note that there are three dozen, all with distinct side effects. Good luck making sense of that — I hope your pharmacist minored in cryptography."

"We'll have you in chemo and radiotherapy, too. You shouldn't have eaten all that bologna, you know. Bye!"

Your doctor gets up and walks out. You're alone in a cold office, wearing a gown with your butt hanging out.

You look at the papers.

On top, instead of your name, it says "Stomach Cancer Case #DZ/015".

Forget this, you think.

I'll just go home and take some Pepto-Bismol.

So you walk into a *different* doctor's office...

Here's a different scenario.

You walk into the doctor's office.

She greets you warmly, by name, and her body language says she's going to give you her full attention. She sits down with you, maintaining eye contact and a friendly demeanor.

"I have a stomach ache," you say.

"Tell me more, in your own words," she says. "What is the pain like? Is it sharp, or dull?"

You think. "Sharp." She nods, and takes a note.

"Does it come on suddenly, or is it always there?" You respond, and she writes some more notes.

She keeps probing thoughtfully until she has a clear picture of your symptoms.

"Well," she says, after a careful evaluation, "it sounds like heartburn."

"Now, in my experience, the basket of chili fries and five pounds of suicide wings you eat several times a week may be contributing to the problem."

"I'd recommend we address that issue. But it's your call."

"Given that new knowledge, how would you like to proceed?"

You think a bit. "I don't want to give all that stuff up."

“I understand,” she says, with a smile. “I love chicken wings too.”

“Tell you what... why don’t you start with a couple of simple steps — one from me, and one from you? I’ll give you an antacid, which is simple to take. And you can try ordering 4 pounds of wings instead of 5.”

“OK,” you say, also smiling. “I can do that.”

“And,” she adds, “I’d like you to come back and see me in a week or so, regardless of how you feel. It’s important to make sure you are on the right track with this plan.”

“Please book an appointment on your way out, so it’s easy for you to remember. I’ll walk out with you to the front desk and connect you with our appointment booker.”

You leave the office feeling understood, a little more confident, and relieved.

Hey, you think, maybe I don’t even need those fries. Chicken wings and a salad. That sounds good. Yeah.

Are you a coach-centered coach, or a client-centered coach?

The scenarios above represent two different methods professionals can use to work with clients:

Method 1: Coach-centered coaching.

Method 2: *Client*-centered coaching.

What’s the difference?

Coach-centered coaching is all about the coach.

Just like the patient in doctor scenario #1, clients of coach-centered coaches:

- **are often intimidated and self-conscious.** They are likely to compare themselves to the coach and feel inadequate.
- **aren't sure what they want, exactly.** They often have just a general idea.
- **may not know health and nutrition jargon.** They're less likely to understand and more likely to feel overwhelmed by their "nutrition prescription".
- **may seem unmotivated to follow the coach's instructions.**

That's because a coach-centered coach:

- **doesn't do a thoughtful or thorough assessment.** Often, coaches are rushed and busy, dealing with many clients in large practices.
- **tend to jump to conclusions** based on their own areas of interest and expertise.
- **overwhelm the client with instructions and information.** They may explicitly or implicitly blame the client for being "lazy" or "unmotivated".
- **recommend changes that are too big or complex.** They may leave the client without the support to make those changes.

In a coach-centered approach, the coach defines the problem and then tells the client what to do.

Client-centered coaching is all about the client.

Like the patient in doctor scenario #2, clients of client-centered coaches:

- **feel understood.** They have the impression that their coach “gets” where they’re coming from.
- **articulate their goals clearly.** They can tell you what they want to accomplish and why.
- **have increased awareness of their own body.** Therefore, they grasp the outcomes of their choices.
- **seem inspired and motivated.** They’re able to follow through on the changes their coaches recommend.

That’s because a client-centered coach:

- **provides a welcoming space and full attention.** The coach listens and asks thoughtful questions to understand the problem better.
- **follows the client’s lead and agenda.** The coach is skilled at helping the client identify key priorities.
- **lets the client be the “expert” on their own body.** No judging.
- **treats the client like a whole person.** Lots of things in a client’s life affect their nutrition and fitness.
- **take “expert” knowledge and the client’s personal priorities into account.** This leads to effective, manageable solutions.
- **articulate clear, concrete follow-up plans.**

In a client-centered approach, the focus is on the client at all times.

For a client, this is powerful. And very effective.

Client-centered coaching is essential to being an exceptional professional.

Decades of research in teaching, counseling, and coaching have confirmed what we've found to be true with over 100,000 Precision Nutrition Coaching clients:

The client-centered approach is much more likely to lead to an effective coach-client relationship and to long-term success.

Client-centered coaching:

- cuts down client resistance;
- makes your life easier; and
- helps both client and coach feel good about the change process.

In other words:

It works.

Of course, client-centred coaching doesn't mean “anything goes” or a *laissez-faire* approach.

It simply means respecting and helping to build the client's dignity, self-determination, self-efficacy, and self-expertise — *they're* the authority about their own lives, not you.

In fact, client-centred coaching makes clients *more* accountable and responsible, not less.

You put them in charge. Now *they're* accountable to themselves. You're just there for reinforcements and guidance.

4 huge coaching mistakes – and how to avoid them.

Like I said, if you've been practicing coach-centered coaching, you're in good company. And it doesn't mean you're a bad coach.

I see it as a very normal part of a coach's evolution into an experienced, stand-out professional.

Correcting these mistakes requires practice, and that takes time. But the techniques I lay out below are easy to apply, which means you can start using them immediately... like, at your very next session.

Coach-centered mistake #1: The answer is obvious.

Sometimes a client comes to you with a problem that is relatively easy to solve. You feel like a little kid in a classroom, your arm stretched up high: *I know this! I know this!*

Here's how this might play out:

- Client problem: They're not losing weight.
- Coach diagnosis: You look at their food journal and conclude they're eating too many starchy carbs.
- Coach prescription: "Replace your carbs with veggies and you're all set."

Here's another example:

- Client problem: They don't know what to eat after a workout.
- Coach diagnosis: They need to start eating protein.
- Coach prescription: "After your workout, eat protein."

In these examples, your diagnosis may be spot-on.

But the prescription is *all you*.

If the client has no part in the process of deciding the agenda, how likely do you think they are to follow your rules? (Hint: very unlikely.)

What's more, you can't be sure that your prescription will work for that person.

While the question seems easy, you may have overlooked some key factors affecting their ability to apply and/or benefit from your advice.

With best intentions, you were being coach-centered.

Here's how a client-centered coach might approach the same "easy" question:

- Client problem: They don't know what to eat after a workout.
- Your questions for discussion can include things like:
 - "Can you tell me about your training program?"
 - "What do you notice about your energy levels before, during, and after you work out?"

- “What do you like to eat after a workout? What’s convenient and easy for you, and something you enjoy?”
- “If you were going to consider making a change here, what might that involve, given what you’ve already told me about your schedule and ability to prep some food?”
- Your suggestion: “Let’s brainstorm some ways you might add protein to your after-workout meal that fit with the preferences you described.”

The client-centered coach isn’t in a hurry to prescribe.

They’re more interested in understanding the problem and learning more about their client than they are in arriving at a diagnosis.

And when it comes time to take action, a client-centered coach helps their client arrive at a next step they feel good about.

Coach-centered mistake #2: You’re the expert.

It can be easy to confuse your role as a coach with your role as an expert.

So let me blow your mind a little: A coach is not an expert.

An expert is a “sage on the stage”. Experts have something to say and the spotlight is on them. They’re teaching, talking, presenting, and/or writing.

Talking to an expert is a one-way conversation.

A coach is more like “a guide on the side” — there to understand,

support, and provide back-up. Talking to a coach is much more like an exchange... where the client talks much, much more and the coach listens.

Many professionals and nutritionists try to be both expert and coach at the same time. But that never works.

You can't talk and listen at the same time.

Expert vs Coach: A Guide

Expert

Talks and tells

Already knows

Answers questions

Leads the client

Points and directs

Receives the spotlight

Coach

Listens and reflects

Is curious; looks to learn more

Asks questions

Lets the client lead

Guides and accompanies

Lets the client shine

For the record, there's nothing wrong with being an expert.

For instance, sometimes I give talks or seminars. When I take the stage, I put on my "expert" hat: I'm there to share my research, opinions, and expertise.

But when I'm *coaching* someone, I choose a different mindset. I don't do a lot of talking. Instead, I ask questions, listen, and do my best to help guide that person in a way that respects who they are and where they are.

See the difference?

It can be easy to slide back into expert mode. So check in with yourself.

Before you meet with a client, ask yourself: Am I an *expert* today, or am I a *coach*?

Coach-centered mistake #3: You want to share what you've learned.

Learning is a big part of your job. Information and knowledge are really important to you — they help you be great at what you do.

But what *you* should know and what your *clients* need to know are two different things.

As a coach, you need to know a wide range of nutritional (and coaching) concepts, theories, methods, and terminology. You may use technical language like “oxidative phosphorylation” or “cognitive dissonance”.

Your clients *don't* need to know this stuff.

And they talk in plain everyday language, not jargon.

All your clients need to know is what they should be doing, right now.

They need to know just enough of the “what” and “how” to take action. The details and the “why” are mostly up to you.

Here are some examples of technical messages that you should know along with some practical, teachable, take-home messages your clients should know.

Technical message (coach-centered)

To optimize protein turnover, protein synthesis, thermic effect of feeding, and muscle recovery, most clients should be getting around 0.7 to 1.0 g protein per lb of bodyweight.

To stabilize hormone and blood glucose levels, assist recovery, and fuel training, emphasize consuming carbohydrates with more complex structures, fiber, and resistant starch.

Someone who is trying to reduce body fat will have less kcal flexibility. So, decreasing carbohydrate and/or fat intake can help to repartition intake and control overall kcal consumption.

Someone trying to gain muscle mass should increase carbohydrate and/or fat intake to increase overall kcal consumption, and create a more optimal metabolic and hormonal profile for weight gain.

Research is equivocal on the optimal macronutrient profile for metabolic improvement and reducing chronic disease risk. A number of systematic research reviews have concluded that a vast array of nutritional profiles can result in weight loss, metabolic improvements, and overall health. Adherence is the most salient factor in determining optimal outcome.

Translation (client-centered)

See your hand? We'll use your palm for a serving size.

Eat 1-2 palms of higher-protein foods at most meals. This includes things like chicken, fish, beef, lentils, tofu, etc.

Here's a list of foods high in protein. Just pick from the list each time you eat.

Cup your hand. That's what we'll use for a serving size.

At most meals, eat about 1-2 cupped handfuls of minimally processed carbohydrate-dense foods.

Here's a list to give you some ideas. We've got fruits, whole grains, beans, root vegetables, potatoes, etc. Just pick from the list each time you eat.

Since you're trying to lose weight, let's work toward eating a little less food.

Here's an easy way to start: Notice your normal portion sizes, and then see if you can cut that back by 2/3 to 3/4. You can also try eating with smaller dishes.

Since you're trying to gain some muscle, let's work toward getting you to eat a bit more. Here's an easy way to start: Let's add another small meal to your roster. Do you know how to make a Super Shake?

What's the best diet? Well, it depends. I can give you some general principles to follow. But what's most important is that we find something that you enjoy, and can realistically stick to.

In client-centered coaching, you transform and translate more complicated, theoretical information into practical information your clients can understand and act on immediately.

You come to client sessions with handouts you made (grocery shopping lists, etc.), infographics you printed, and maybe even how-to videos cued up on your tablet.

As you continue to practice the client-centered coaching method and perhaps decide to go get more education on nutrition, client psychology, and other aspects of your business, you'll develop many ideas for meeting your clients where they are and helping them follow through.

At Precision Nutrition, we've found that the faster you can guide a client from *thinking* to *doing*, the more likely they are to stay inspired and motivated.

Coach-centered mistake #4: Your client thinks they know it all (but they don't).

Things are extra tricky when you're dealing with a "difficult" client.

Suppose you and your client have worked together to create a great program customized for them, enriched with your years of experience and knowledge, and designed around their objectives and goals.

You're only a couple weeks in when the client tells you they want to quit your plan in favor of the advice of a TV doctor who's recommending a new supplement for weight loss.

At this point it can be incredibly tempting to disagree with your client.

(Disagree might be putting it mildly.)

My advice on this will probably surprise you at first:

Don't tell the client to avoid the bad TV-doctor advice.

Client-centered coaches know their job is not to persuade, or argue, or demonstrate why their way is best.

Remember, a client-centered coach listens, asks questions, shares their best recommendations and ideas, and then lets the client decide — *even* the “difficult”, know-it-all client.

So here are the steps I help Precision Nutrition coaches learn for these circumstances:

1. **Be curious about why that advice appeals to that client.** Often, the client may be trying to meet an underlying need, such as feeling a sense of control over an uncontrollable process, or looking for “The Answer” that will make everything OK. Or they may like the security of “a doctor said so”. Or any number of other reasons. Try to understand *why* that advice in particular is “hooking” your client’s attention. Why this, why now?
2. **Look for the underlying need that the client has, if possible.** Speak to that need: “It sounds like you like that structure, with the meal plan. Do you find that having something written out for you is helpful?”
3. **Speak to that underlying need, if you can:** “OK, so if you’re looking for some more structure, I might try another approach, such as X. I find that’s easier to do and stick to, and it gets you the same type of thing as you’re looking for.”

4. **Let them learn, try stuff, and experience what happens:** If your client still wants to give the zany advice from “Dr. Whoever” a go — let them. Treat them as informed observers and experimenters in their own lives.
5. **Turn the “Dr. Whoever” experiment into a learning experience** — a way for the client to gather real-time information on what works for them and what doesn’t. “I’d be curious to know how you do with the Dr. Whoever plan. Would you mind taking some notes for me on what comes up each day when you follow that plan? In particular, I’d like to know how your energy level is and how your hunger goes.”
6. **Tell the client you’re going to monitor them closely to make sure they stay safe.** “As your coach, I’d like to keep an eye on you, just to make sure you’re doing OK. I want to make sure you’re getting all that you need.”

The key is to respect that your clients are in charge of their own lives. Keeping them accountable to themselves means they’re much more likely to reach their goals (and give you your deserved credit for it).

Behavior change starts with you, the coach.

Coaching can be a tough job. Sometimes it means doing the opposite of what feels normal or natural (like when you just want to scream, “*Do not listen to that TV quack!*”).

Plus, it can be tricky to acknowledge — and change — behaviors in ourselves. No one wants to think they’re a “coach-centered” coach.

But making the switch to a client-centered approach just may be the biggest, most profound thing you can do for your clients and your career.

Learn it, practice it, get better at it.

The results will speak for themselves.

What to do next: Some tips from Precision Nutrition

The paradox of knowledge and passion

Here's a twist you probably weren't prepared for when you decided to go into the health and fitness coaching.

The more knowledge you have, the *harder* it can be get into your client's mindset.

The more passion you have, and the more you care about your clients, the harder it can be to step back and allow them to guide the agenda.

Effective, top-notch coaching means knowing the textbook stuff so well that you can effortlessly translate and customize it for a given client's needs — on the spot.

Paradoxically, until you have enough experience to routinely practice client-centered coaching, your knowledge can become a crutch that holds you (and your clients) back.

Because here's the thing. (Bear with me; I know you worked hard to build that expertise.)

Your job in that interaction with the client is *not* to know a bunch of stuff and then dump that stuff on them.

It's to take all that you know and *translate* it for them so they can take immediate action.

That means giving them *only*:

- what is important, relevant, and essential for them;
- what they can understand and absorb; and
- what will help them do something *right* now.

Here's how to get the ball rolling with your new client-centered approach.

1. Recognize where you need to grow.

As you gain experience in the field, be aware of your blind spots, assumptions, and areas for further growth. (Hint: If you feel a strong sense of certainty about “how things are” and the desire to “be right”, you may be on the wrong path.)

On a scale of 1 to 10, how “client-centered” are you, based on what I've described?

How much time do you actually spend...

- actively listening to your client (versus interrupting or waiting for them to finish so you can talk next)?
- exploring their perspective and trying to understand their point of view (versus assuming you know what they need)?
- asking them to generate their own potential solutions or next actions first (versus just giving them advice right away)?
- asking them what they think they could realistically try (versus just giving them instructions to follow)?

Think of some times when you fell into one of the mistakes discussed in this article.

Make a note of those situations, and write down a client-centered alternative approach you can try next time.

2. Evaluate your own client-centeredness right now.

Where do you think your clients would put you on a client-centeredness scale?

Is there a particular client with whom you could practice being more “client-centered”?

Before your next session with that client, write down some client-centered responses to questions or concerns she might raise:

- What are some questions you can ask to understand the client’s life and goals a bit better?
- What’s some nutrition jargon you can translate into everyday-speak?
- Is there a way you can adjust your recommendations for this client to take the realities of her life into account? (Again, if you don’t know what her life involves, how could you find out?)
- The advice you’re about to give... could you make it simpler or clearer?

3. Channel your client.

What’s it like to be in your client’s shoes? How does it feel? How do you want to be talked to?

Here’s a visualization exercise Precision Nutrition supercoach Craig

Weller uses to bust himself out of the coach-centered mindset:

I imagine I'm stranded on a muddy dirt road in a rental car with a flat tire and no fuel or cell phone reception in the middle of nowhere in a Costa Rican jungle.

Then, this one person happens upon me in a working vehicle, with a spare tire and a functioning cell phone.

How would I feel?

How would I hope that person — who has the potential to help — would treat me?

Your clients really need you: it's your job to help guide them out of the jungle, and make them feel safe, respected, and supported while you do it.

4. Observe an experienced client-centered coach.

Don't try to do it all alone. It's hard to see your own blind spots or understand what you need in order to develop.

Get feedback from an experienced mentor, who can help guide you through your own coaching process.

Find a client-centered coach who's willing to sit with you a few hours per month and talk through some of your work with clients.

It's like having a time machine — it allows you to see into the future of your career as an elite coach.

Want to learn how to coach like we do, in a more systematic, reliable, and scalable way?

Then you'll definitely want to check out **ProCoach**.

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