

FROM THE FIELD—WHAT BEING A GOOD PERSONAL TRAINER REALLY INVOLVES

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Thanks to the internet and social media platforms, the fitness industry can take on a rather “fluid” identity, specifically when it comes to identifying the role of a personal trainer. It is not uncommon to find fitness professionals shamelessly escaping their scope, opting to give out life advice, nutrition advice, relationship help, daily motivation for self-love, clinical musculoskeletal therapy advice, and more.

This case of “identity crisis,” coupled with the lack of regulation in the personal training world, is what causes personal trainers to take such liberties and attempt to be leaned on and relied upon as authorities in areas where they should not be (2). The interesting part is that most people who focus on all of the above areas of expertise, never actually become excellent information sources in any one area. Simply put, trying to become an expert or master at everything makes it difficult to become an expert at anything. One must remember that the main job of the personal trainer is to help people with their exercise programming. For that reason, it is worth examining why the above phenomenon happens among personal trainers. A personal trainer’s role is to act as a navigator to help a client safely achieve fitness goals, including assessing, motivating, educating, and training clients (1). Under this umbrella, a personal trainer may have to be more encouraging and motivating for some clients than others. In other cases, the personal trainer may need to be the vigilant, cautionary voice of reason to let a client know when to scale intensity back in the name of health. Personal trainers must also understand when they need to refer clients to other qualified healthcare professionals (1). Once a personal trainer understands the extent of their scope, the nature of the job can become clearer.

FOLLOW ME, NOT MY ADVICE

A large social media following can give a content creator and a content consumer a skewed idea of what credible information really is. Often, those lines can get blurred when the audience grows. Once they have reached the limits of their knowledge or lose passion for actual fitness content, they may start pursuing a stronger following based on nothing other than who they are, their personality, their beliefs, and their habits. As innocuous as this may sound, it is actually pernicious. People wanting a big audience for themselves rather than for their advice begins to disrupt the basis upon which the fitness industry should be built. Not only does it distract from actual fitness content, it also discourages the idea of sharing information from multiple sources.

Yes, people have the choice to “follow” and “unfollow” whoever they want, but personal trainers can make it much easier for them by staying in their lane and remaining within their scope of practice—especially if they use their social media primarily as a business tool. Fluffing up profiles with life, nutrition, clinical, and psychological advice ignores many facets of being a personal

trainer alone that many people could stand to improve, which may change the areas of emphasis and interest for a personal trainer looking to leave their own footprint.

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Being a good personal trainer is more than having “good” exercises and being an energized motivator who keeps a client safe while they work hard. Personal trainers have one of the most dynamic jobs and they come into contact with an eclectic mix of backgrounds. What makes this job unique, is that personal trainers are in a position to tell clients what to do while correcting them on things like exercise technique. That transfer of “power,” so to speak, does not always sit well with people depending on their upbringing and life experience. It takes time and experience to know what “hat” to wear to acquiesce to different personality types.

A cue that may work well to help one person understand a concept may not work at all for another. Even smaller things, like the energy and method chosen for motivation or keywords that a personal trainer uses when helping a client visualize results, can be very “make-or-break” to the smoothness of the relationship. The following example demonstrates how the same piece of fitness advice can take effect by playing into the client’s strengths, depending on the client who receives it.

THE SKILL OF COMMUNICATION

Consider an example: the following is the message a personal trainer may be trying to deliver to a client. Depending on the client and his or her walk of life, the message may need to be tailored to achieve the ideal response:

“The chronic pain you are experiencing in your knees may be due to weakness in your quads and immobility in your hips, coupled with being overweight. Focusing on a scale weight that is about 30 lb lighter can be helpful to you, and that will involve not only diet changes, but also the right exercise selections in the gym.”

Client 1: A 42-year-old wealthy investment banker with Type A personality and an 80-hr work week.

“If you’re ready to put the work in, the results will come, most likely first in the form of your performance improving. As you become a better functioning machine, your knees may stop hurting and you’ll likely get more range of motion in your hips. Using the biggest, strongest lifts in the gym as our go-to, you will elevate your metabolism and build muscle, but all of this depends on how disciplined you are regarding what you put into your body. If you want to be on your ‘A’ game at the bank by 50, we should start by getting your body on its ‘A’ game.”

Client 2: A 23-year-old student with body dysmorphia, a history of eating disorder, and poor self-esteem.

“If we focus on getting as strong as possible through these key muscle groups, you will probably notice the pain in your knees begin to disappear. Improving this situation will make it easier to train more aggressively toward better health. The movements we choose in the gym will be easy to quantify and make progressions on, while at the same time giving you feedback by way of changes to your composition for improved fitness. You will notice the great feeling you get from seeing improvements in one area will feed into other areas. For example, eating clean, nutritious meals will improve your energy and mood, which will allow you to train with more focus and achieve even more strength. As your body composition changes, these phenomena will likely amplify themselves, and that is something to be very excited about.”

Client 3: A 50-year-old chemical engineer with a PhD, family, and stable schedule.

“For the next 16 weeks, we should set and track a goal for losing about 2 lb of body fat per week. That will come from chasing a calorie deficit built around good, whole foods that are rich in protein. Training four days per week using mostly compound movements focused around hip mobility and strengthening the muscles around the knee will be our vehicle toward reducing, and possibly eliminating your chronic pain. Addressing weak links in your chain through the right exercises is the answer to unlocking potential in your body for change.”

In each case, the same message was received by three people:

Client 1: An individual who may be used to high-octane motivation and an intense lifestyle.

Client 2: An individual who is likely more fragile to certain triggering words and phrases, and may be susceptible to mental health struggles or negative feelings depending on their own view of their body (or how it is reinforced by others).

Client 3: An individual who is more analytically inclined and motivated by organized, trackable statistics.

Of course, these three examples are not exhaustive and applicable to every person, but they do represent how personal trainers need to be able to communicate differently to various people in order to achieve the same goals. The main way a personal trainer can develop the soft skills necessary to play to the needs of individual clients would be to build more experience working with a variety of clientele, including clients from different age groups, athletic backgrounds, occupations, genders, skill level, and with different goals. Secondly, a proper intake process that allows personal trainers to learn more about a client’s personality, lifestyle, interests, and positive triggers (words that can potentiate action or excitement) can be invaluable to eventually have the personal trainer speak the same “language” as their clients for a harmonious relationship.

A REFERRAL SOURCE

To be a good, credible personal trainer, it does not mean one has to also double as a clinician, psychologist, nutritionist, or life coach. It just means a personal trainer should be able to have a great colleague referral system to help clients in need. This will be much better to keep credibility intact and give the personal trainer a greater potential client base when those professionals return the favor of referrals. Now, the personal trainer is viewed as a reliable and trustworthy source, which is much more powerful than just trying to be a jack of all trades.

TRUE TO STANDARDS

This is yet another quality of personal trainers that can easily be forgotten. Personal training is a client-focused industry, but it does not mean a personal trainer’s own personal standards should go by the wayside. First and foremost, that means being one’s own disciples of the craft and practicing what one preaches.

A personal trainer should always have a deep archive of first-hand experience with anything he or she is coaching clients to achieve. It does not mean the personal trainer has to have been a powerlifter to train one; however, it does mean that the personal trainer has to have first-hand experience with what it really feels like to spend time focusing directly on strength development as a primary goal. Spending hours learning the techniques and biomechanics of moving heavy weight efficiently will give the personal trainer the expertise they need to be relevant for that goal.

This goes the other way also; personal trainers have to make a living, but not if it comes at the expense of their standards or knowledge base. For example, if a personal trainer has a client who disrespects the power dynamic, tries to hijack the training session, disobeys the personal trainer’s advice, or blames the personal trainer for a lack of results, it does not sound like a good fit. When this is the case, it is the right time to graciously refer that client to another personal trainer who may be better equipped to align with this client’s personality type.

On a similar note, charging appropriate value—not only something that is competitive with the going rates of personal training in the region, but also something that takes into account the amount of knowledge, time, and effort a personal trainer has put into refining their craft—is something that should not be compromised. This treads a fine line between being resistant to do any work for free and being confident that the full-time investment comes at a price. Giving a prospective client a training tip and five minutes of your time on the gym floor can be exactly what gets the ball rolling for a long-lasting client who trusts and respects the personal trainer. Not giving any information whatsoever without being paid for it starts to depart from the original purpose of wanting to help people. Personal trainers and clients both would do well to understand the difference.

Instead of putting the personal trainer’s time and energy into nothing other than creating a “personality” on the internet for the masses to follow, personal trainers should master the craft

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of personal training by being a lifelong student of it. That comes from study, time spent in the field, and continuing education by way of mentorships, workshops, seminars, and lectures for professional development.

Being a thoughtful and effective communicator can be the first step in having an impact on the greatest variety of clients, which only serves more people and grows the business. Having a solid network of trustworthy, knowledgeable professionals who the personal trainer believes in (and who also believe in the personal trainer) is another area of profound importance to bolster the personal trainer's career, credibility, and job stability by extension.

Lastly, personal trainers should never forget what the name of the game is—helping improve the health and wellness of as many people as possible. It is important not to compromise rates or work for free, but if opportunity is imminent, it is important to let the personal trainer's passion for the craft lead the way. Just because a personal trainer is not a self-proclaimed, multi-faceted social media guru, does not mean they have any less passion for the industry.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee Boyce is a personal trainer in his 15th year of practice. His client base includes a wide range of individuals and athletes, and his expertise has landed him features in many of the world's largest fitness and health publications, with over a combined total of 1,000 articles published in print and online. In addition to his work as a trainer and writer, Boyce currently travels around North America to deliver speaking engagements for professional development, for the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) and other organizations. Based in Toronto, Canada, he also works as a part-time college professor, working with students in the Fitness and Health Promotion Program.

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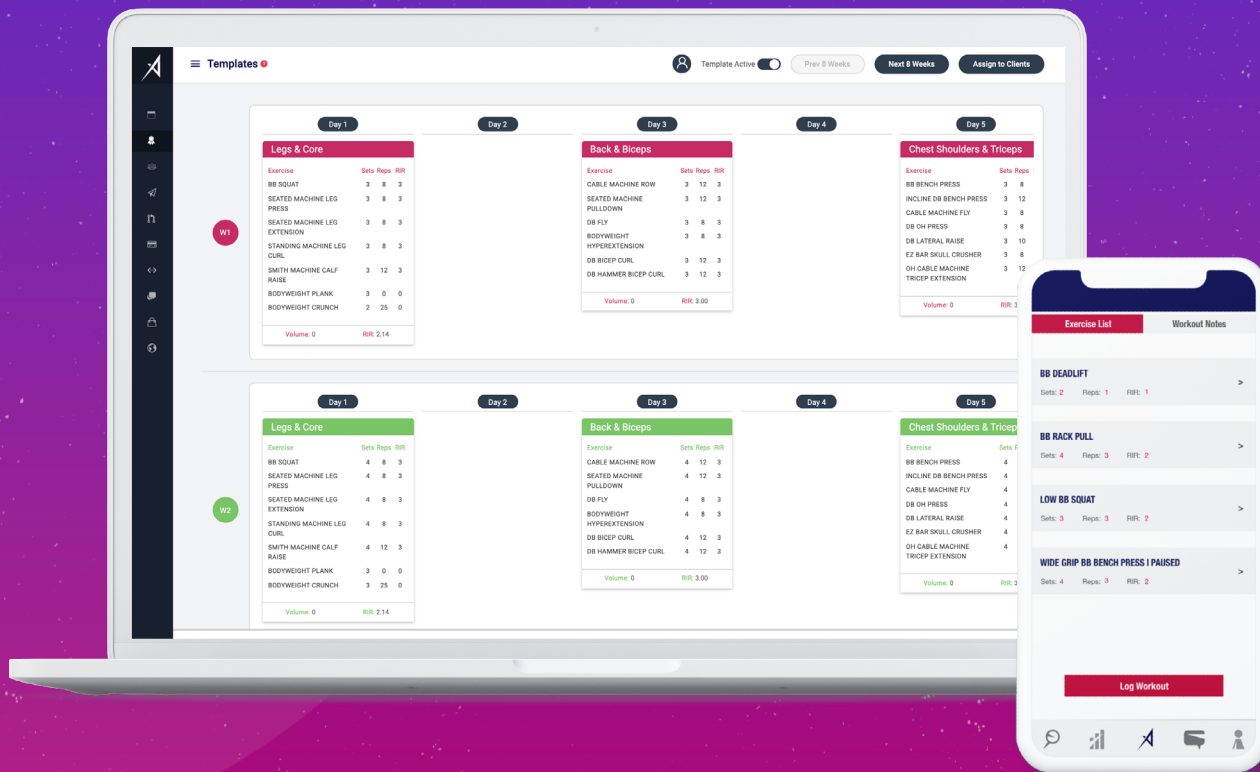
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