



Chris Sparks

*from poker champion
to peak performance coach*



I N S I D E C O A C H I N G

See how successful coaching businesses work from the inside out

Inside Coaching shares an authentic and in-depth look at the stories, set backs, mindsets and daily habits of flourishing coaches; and explores the activities, revenue models & client attraction strategies behind their success.

We offer these examples not as a blueprint to be replicated, but as inspiration to follow your own path, make it fun and remember that authenticity is your greatest asset. Find more episodes at insidecoaching.satori.app



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I N S I D E C O A C H I N G · S E A S O N 0 1 · E P I S O D E 0 2



Chris' Story

Chris was at the top of his game as a professional poker player and coach, when he decided to apply what he'd learned about peak performance to the field of entrepreneurship instead.

I coached over a hundred players back in the day and it was a big part of my success. That was my introduction to the power of coaching, and how the right actionable information can be very high leverage in accelerating someone towards their goals. It was my gateway into the peak performance coaching that I do now.

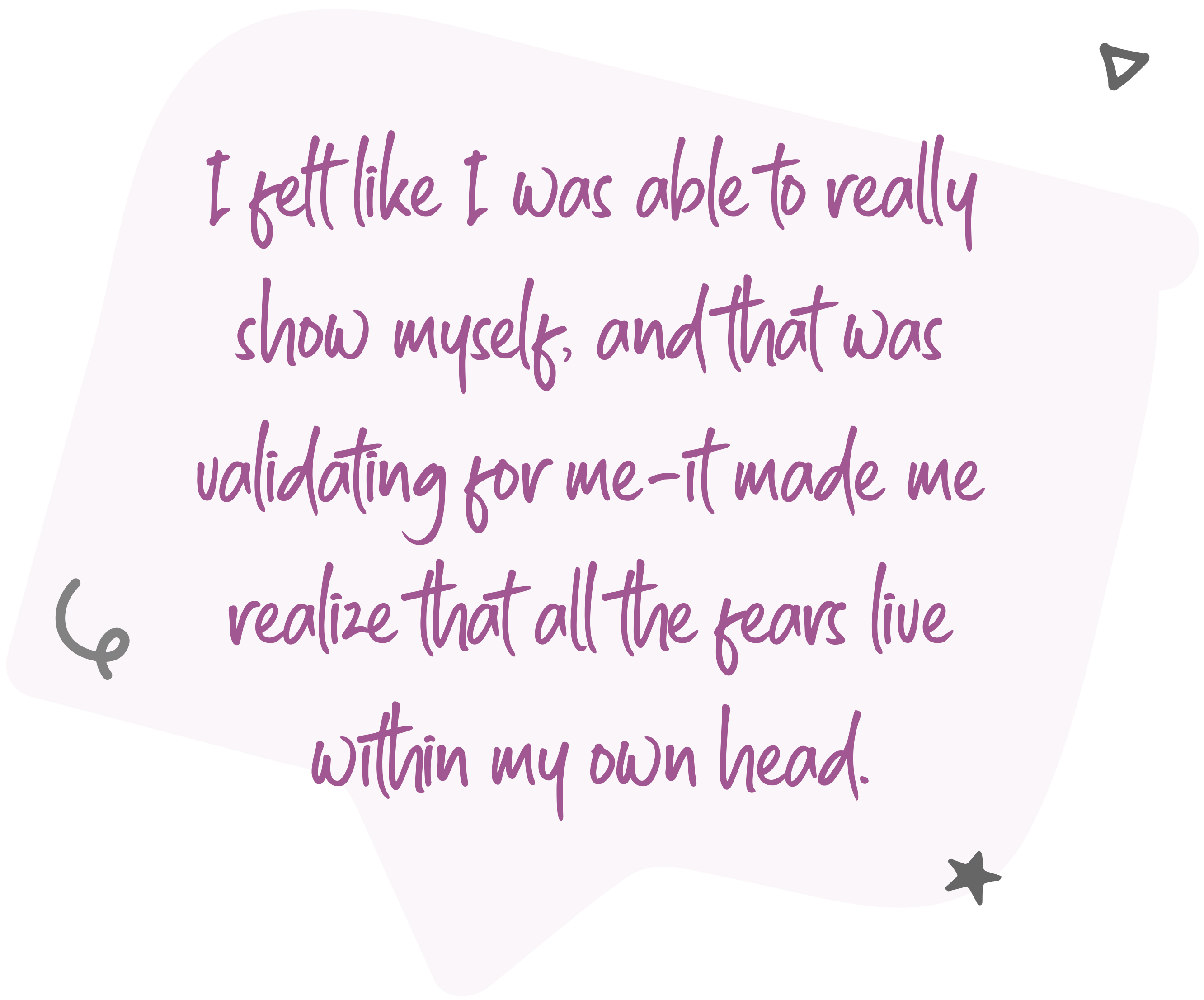
When I decided that poker is inherently zero sum, I wanted to take what I had learned, and use it to move the human race forward a few inches. Things I'd learned to become one of the better poker players—mental focus, discipline, having the right habits and systems in place—transferred over to entrepreneurship. Although I had a business degree, all my internships were with larger companies. So I took different angles into learning about startups. I worked in venture investing, angel investing, marketing, and joined a startup full time for a bit.

I had ex-poker friends who were starting companies. As an entrepreneur, there's a million things you can be doing, and the most important thing is to decide what's the most important thing—so I was having informal conversations with them around how to structure things a little better. One day, one of the guys asked to pay me, and all of a sudden I had a business.

I'd been thinking about creating a business around that, but I had a lot of fear there—impostor syndrome—what are people going to think? There are a lot

of misconceived notions about coaching, so some people in my network didn't think too highly of them—no accountability, no metrics, it's just motivational, anyone can do it. But that changed as I met a few people who I considered were doing it for the right reasons. I really opened my mind to the different dimensions of being a coach, and I was able to release the fear. I felt like I was able to really show myself, and that was validating for me—it made me realize that all the fears live within my own head.

That was mid-2016 and it's slowly grown from there. I started to see that I actually have talent. I work very hard at this; I have expertise that I bring to the table. It's not really something that I had planned on doing, but I really enjoy it, and I think it's something that I'll be doing in some form for the rest of my life.



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Chris' Business Today

Open-source investigation

I've been doing this for four years. At first it was productivity coaching, diving in on habits and systems. Then I moved more into performance—doing the right things, structuring day, energy, focus, the mental game.

My approach is that all my knowledge is open source—everything I learn. And what I see as my mission and purpose, is that I'm trying to work with the best and discover what makes them tick—what sets them apart, what are they doing that anyone can replicate? Then distilling that down into actionable principles that I can share widely. That's a big part of how I've evolved as a coach. I've moved away from this feeling of needing to be an expert; my skill is more of an investigator, helping someone discover for themselves.

The coach as a forcing function

"Forcing Function" comes from both mathematics and design. I define it as a constraint that draws one's attention to something. Productivity performance comes from constraints—deciding what is most important, then putting on constraints; everything else is a distraction.

As a coach, I act as a forcing function, helping people to decide what is number one, and putting their attention there. I put constraints on someone so they can't work on numbers two, three and four. It's both my function and my methodology.

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Guiding clients on the journey from Founder to CEO

Most of my clients fall in the tech entrepreneur or agency founder mold. I see these entrepreneurs as running a marathon, tackling a very large problem which will take them five years to solve. They're going from Founder to CEO. How can we scale? That's where the really interesting and challenging problems come in—triaging the opportunities and maximizing the Founder's time. Are they working on the right things? Can they keep the team lined on the mission? That's really what I love doing.

Creating, connecting and steering the ship

I try to spend about half my time in conversations—with clients, potential clients, or people who I could partner with in some way, anyone who could teach me something—I treat that as productive.

*Maybe another 30% is content creation. Writing, sharing things on social media, editing. Last year, I published a 100-page workbook called *Experiment Without Limits*, where I distill all of my principles and techniques for achieving peak performance into step-by-step prompts and exercises, or what I call experiments. Over 5,000 people have downloaded the workbook since we open-sourced it. The workbook gives potential clients an opportunity to experience the benefits of implementing these changes into their life before making a major commitment. More importantly, since my time is limited, publishing the workbook allows me to pay it forward and create wider ripples of impact.*

The last 20% is talking with my team, making sure that things are moving forward, and I'm not getting in their way—because usually that's the reason that they aren't.

Moving from Coach to CEO

Forcing Function was a one man show for the first two years; I now have a team of four, including myself. The big shift for me was when I moved from, "I want to be a coach as a lifestyle", to wanting to create something big and impactful. It was beneficial to move away from, "I am a coach" to "I am the CEO"—the Founder of a business. Having others on the team acts as a forcing function. It forces me to think larger and to set my sights higher.

The first person I took on was a business manager, who really helped me to shore up my operations. Then someone on the content side, helping me share more often, things like newsletters, putting out blog posts, and preparing for podcast interviews like this one

Leaning into speaking and events

I love teaching. When I led workshops in NYC, I witnessed the massive growth that can happen in a single day when the right frame is created, and the right people are in the room. Now that things have gone digital, I moved our in-person workshops to an online, cohort-based format. We have had two cohorts so far where we connect executives from all around the world to help push each other to new heights. Being able to help create that experience is a huge rush

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"I will tell you everything I know
before you've given me a dime.

If you still find this interesting,

I can help you put it

into practice faster."

Cultivating conversations and adding value

One of the mistakes that I made in the beginning was trying to import what I did with poker, but the models are very different. As a poker coach, the way to attract clients was to be as hard to reach as possible; to create a pulse exclusivity where I had a long process before someone could work with me.

I naively thought I could do the same thing as a coach, but it didn't work. Now I've gone in the opposite direction of making myself as easy to reach as possible, so that all clients come through a conversation.

I'm looking to cultivate conversations rather than creating distance. If I'm adding value to people, it will come back to me. In poker you make money with asymmetric information. I know more than the other people at the table. My approach now is, "I will tell you everything I know before you've given me a dime. If you still find this interesting, I can help you put it into practice faster." That really is how I've shifted.

Support and accountability

I'm constantly looking for ways to accelerate my progress, and I've found having the right coach to be invaluable. Revealing the unknowns, or things that I would have had to learn the long, hard way. I would say I have a dozen people in my life who fit that role, plus someone I speak to every day, holding me accountable to have a plan for the day, because that's 80% of it.

It's useful to experience what it's like to be coached in order to have more empathy for those you're coaching, and understand what the true pain points are.

Get processes and systems down

Using the leverage of repeatable systems has been part of Chris' formula for success since his days in the poker world. Bringing Satori systems into the administration of his coaching practice was a turning point.

My first business manager was the one who got me on Satori. I don't know if other coaches can relate to this, but I felt like a duck—above the water, I'm

talking to entrepreneurs and saying, "you really need to get your processes and systems down", like, you know, I follow up right away. On the surface, I had everything together, but below the surface, it was a complete mess as far as my records, and scheduling, and keeping in touch with people. I would constantly forget things that I had committed to, and I knew I needed better systems. So my business manager helped me to shore up my operations, and all the things that I did on a recurring basis.

We looked at how I could have clear processes on things, better systems, automating whenever possible. I'd been looking for an all-in-one CRM and scheduling tool for quite a while, and hadn't found anything right. All of them either felt too light, not enough features, or way too heavy, like, I just don't need all of this stuff. She looked at them all, and decided that Satori was the best fit. That was probably the major step for me as far as this becoming a repeatable business. It's not just me hustling and making it work.



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Chris' Mindsets & Practices For Client Attraction

Find your strong, strategic advantage

As entrepreneurs and coaches, the most important decision we make is the market that we choose to serve. Is this somewhere that you have a strong strategic advantage? And is this something that you enjoy enough to live and breathe it?

To be a really successful coach, there really isn't a line between business and personal life. You are the embodiment of what you talk about. Your life needs to be a reflection of your principles otherwise people will see right through it. If this isn't something that you naturally enjoy, it's going to be hard to put in the effort required to make a living at it. And the dirty little secret is that the majority of coaches—like most poker players—don't actually make a living from it.

What is your asset? What is the conversation that only you are qualified to have, and coach on? Niche down to the monopoly of one.



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Let your clients' results be your marketing

I've never done any paid marketing. I'm not inherently against it, but I just don't feel like it's a competitive advantage. I figured that becoming good at it would be at the expense of working on my coaching, which is always seeking the better leverage play. I say my product is my marketing, that if I'm able to drive results for my clients, then hopefully my name will come when they talk about it.

Be referable

My best clients have always come via referral, which has two dimensions... proof that you can do what you say you can do, like client testimonials, and then being top of mind. A lot of that is content creation. I ask for referrals – “Hey, if this is really working for you, I’d love if you could tell someone.” Asking goes a long way.

Hang out with clients and add value

The best thing to do as far as marketing, is to hang out with potential clients, and continually add value. I’m not saying go into these communities and start selling yourself. Just go in there and be human and have a conversation. If there’s some problem that someone’s having, that you’re qualified to help with, just help. People will be intrigued and interested. I call this hosting the party. Where are your clients hanging out? Go hang out there with them.

Have an abundance mindset

It’s easy to look at other coaches with a competitive, scarcity mindset. The truth is, there are billions of people in the world who have problems that you are potentially qualified to solve. You only need to be working with a handful of people to make a living at this. Other coaches can help you if you see it as a collaboration. I don’t see other coaches as competing for clients, but resources for me to improve and become a better coach myself.

Be explicit about who you're talking to

Your website is an opportunity to describe who is an ideal fit, so that people say, "Oh that's me, he's speaking to me." There's a large activation energy required to take the leap and say, "Hey, you know, I'm interested in coaching. I'd like to talk". So be very clear that you are the person who I'm looking forward to working with.

A lot of people come to me, already very interested, because what I've written really resonated with them. Content is really the best way of letting people identify if they are one of your people.

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Be intentional about your customer journey

Think about this intentionally—draw out the customer journey. How are they going to hear about you? What are the steps that are required in order to become a client? In poker I wanted a very narrow funnel where if anyone managed to make it through, they're excited to work with me. Now I've really widened the funnel to let more people in, more serendipity, more surface area, and then I decide later, after some conversation, whether it makes sense to take the next step.

Make it easy for clients to declare interest

I want to make it easy for people to declare interest. It also illuminates the areas that are opportunities for this person, so I can add value very quickly. I can say, "Hey, I see you're having trouble with A and B. Here's a couple of resources that I found very useful, and here's a free copy of my workbook. If you want to work through these exercises and send me your answers, I'm happy to give you feedback."

It's very low commitment from them, but if they take the next step forward, that's explicit permission for you to say, "why don't we get on the phone?" If I've decided they could be a fit, I frame it as, "if you'd like to get on a call where I give you some free advice that's highly customized for you, let me know".

Make an exploding offer

I don't at any point in the call talk about coaching or ask them to be a client unless they ask me. If they say, "Hey, I'm actually interested in becoming a client", that's where I step in.

The important thing is if you sense that someone is actually interested, you need to ask them, "Hey, I think we could work really well together. Would you be ready to start?" You need to ask!

Even if they say "Yes", I say, "This is a hell yes or no. It's a big commitment; there's going to be a lot of work. This is an exploding offer—let me know in the next week whether you're ready to get started. If I don't hear back from you in the next week, I'm going to assume it's a no—no worries."

Be clear on your Why?

What is your personal goal in this, and how does it fit into your larger mission? "I want to be a coach because it's an easy way to make money and be my own boss", is unlikely to translate. Coaching being part of a larger mission, really increases the chances of success. I started because I looked at where I was heading and realized that if I continued on the same path, I wouldn't have any chance of fulfilling my goals. But I could teach others what I'd learned for myself, I could add value.

There are days where coaching gets very hard because there's a lot of emotional labor. Having that mission that everything ties into definitely makes it easier to persevere. That's the hidden benefit of being a coach—one of the highest leverage things we can do in the world is to empower people to be more ambitious, to take on larger problems.

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Want more of Chris?

Chris Sparks is based in New York, US.
His focus is peak performance coaching.



- Visit forcingfunction.com
- Book an [Initial Strategy Call](#) with Chris
- Free download of Chris' [Experiment Without Limits](#) peak performance workbook.

Takeaways

1

Find a strong strategic advantage—choose a market which you're uniquely qualified to serve.

2

Walk your talk. Your life needs to be a reflection of your coaching principles.

3

Get a coach. The right coach is invaluable to reveal the unknowns, and accelerate your progress.

4

Open source your knowledge. Give away everything you learn; and offer your support with implementation.

5

Cultivate conversations and add value. You'll find it flows back to you in opportunities and clients.

6

Having strong systems and a team in place is what lays the foundation for a scalable coaching business.

7

Have an abundance mindset. There's a near limitless supply of potential coaching clients. See other coaches as resources rather than competition.

8

Make it easy for clients to declare interest. An online assessment is one way you can invite clients to raise their hand and start a conversation about engagement.

9

Make an exploding offer. Give clients a deadline for acceptance to filter out those who aren't committed.

10

Be clear on your Why. A worthy mission can propel you to new levels of success.