



## Coaching Articles

### The Four Dimensions to a Coaching Session

An article by Peter Bluckert

#### 1. The client's story

In reviewing my own coaching experience over the years and witnessing many hundreds of hours of practice sessions conducted by coaches in training I find that there is invariably a story the client wishes to tell. It may simply be the context for a performance issue or a complex and intricate tale which the client wants the coach to understand. Experienced coaches may decide to 'manage' the story-telling as they know that they need less 'facts' than the client thinks they need. Less experienced coaches tend to fall into the trap of believing they must understand all dimensions of the story and sometimes become worried about losing elements of it. Other 'interference' in the coach's mind can be anxiety to ask good questions which can lead to the danger of rehearsing the next question instead of really listening to what is being said now.

Good coaching is more akin to dialogue rather than interview with a looser and more flexible rhythm. This requires the coach to relax, let go of fixed ideas of where the session should go and work more with the emerging process. Part of this emerging process is the impact that the client is having on the coach him/herself and this is the territory of the self as instrument of change.

#### The importance of the client's story

It is nevertheless important to remember the significance of the story to the client. They may have an intolerable situation at home or problems at work which cannot be addressed elsewhere. These issues may have been 'split off', unable to be addressed and sapping energy, yet with no outlet.

Many people are starved of opportunities to get things off their chest with someone listening well to them. As coaches we should never under-estimate the value of simply hearing someone out. If we can do that without judgement, better still. Clients may only recognise the burden they are carrying when they share their story with an accepting listener.

Will this always be the case? Well here there are many shades of opinion. Purists from the non-directive model of coaching will assert that skilful questioning, combined with active listening will very often be enough. Others believe that there is a time and place for more directive methods such as showing, telling, giving advice, ideas and input.

My own view is that recent classifications of the different types of coaching provide us with an answer. For example, skills coaching is a very different activity to coaching for the executive's agenda. The first will at times require practical intervention and the use of more directive skills, whilst the executive coach, acting as a strategic partner and sounding board, will for the most

part take a more non-directive stance.

### **The dangers of only working with the client's story**

Whilst working at the level of the client's story will sometimes be enough it won't always be the case. The client may find themselves going round and round the same old thinking that they have already done inside their own head or spoken about before. There may be a sense of stuckness or impasse. There is a need for something else to happen.

If this 'something else' does not happen the client may lose interest, energy and commitment for the process. They may reflect that it was good to talk, and the coach was friendly, supportive and empathetic but didn't really help 'crack' the important issues. Worse still, if the story is a negative one and the client has little optimism about being able to improve or change their situation, then the coach can get dragged down into a sense of hopelessness. This can set off the following sorts of reaction in the coach; a desire to fix things, an urgency to get a result before it has really presented itself, or a feeling of helplessness and inadequacy.

When we feel these things we have probably lost our ground temporarily. Interestingly this can be a highly productive place to be though it will rarely feel that way. The answer is to use these experiences, our inner process, as a source of data and intervention. This is what is meant by "the use of self as instrument of change".

However, there is a second level to the coaching process that enables the coach to get beyond the client story when that is what is required. We will refer to this as the client's thinking processes i.e. how he or she is construing their view of the world, their reality.

It is about examining the way the person thinks, especially when this might be limiting their well-being, fulfilment and success.

In Peltier's 'The Psychology of Executive Coaching' he asserts that a 'coach can (and should) tell you that you are thinking poorly, while few others can do this. Your spouse can't, your colleagues can't, and your boss can't either'.

Of course this raises the questions, "What is faulty thinking and who is to judge?". "Does this place the coach in the role of arbiter of sound and unsound thinking?"

Clearly it must not. Coaches need to be highly vigilant about not imposing their own world views, values and judgements on their clients. Ultimately the choice and decision making not only about action but also about how to consider a situation must be with the client.

## **2. The cognitive level - The client's thinking processes**

We all see the world in our own way. How often do we use the phrase 'the reality is' when we are really talking about our view of reality. We can then be confused when others do not act in accord with our version of things. Despite life experience demonstrating to us that our own thinking can be as faulty as the next person's we sometimes act as if our perspective is the only true one.

One common 'faulty' thought process - 'I am here to solve everyone else's problems'. This is one of the most common issues found in coaching, sometimes referred to as 'taking the monkey'. In behavioural terms it is the tendency to take problems off other people or over-actively try to sort them out for the other person. Behind this pattern often lies a belief

system or thought process which goes something like this - 'This is how I feel useful and of value' or 'This is what I'm meant to do ... what I'm paid for'. Maintaining this belief system can of course be costly. It can lead to over-working, stress and a sense of never quite being good enough.

### **How to challenge thinking**

Self evidently the client may experience a challenge to their thinking as criticism or an attack if delivered ineptly. Challenging someone on their thinking needs to be done thoughtfully and skilfully if it is to have the desired effect and not simply push that individual into defensiveness. The coach has to gauge their client's desire and tolerance for challenge. Some clients expect it, even demand it. Others see it as an impertinence.

A good starting point is to act from the stance of interested curiosity. In other words a slightly detached and non-judgemental position of wanting to understand more about how the client comes to see the world in that way. Not with the intent of trying to change the client, which will likely produce resistance.

If, as a coach, you have too much investment in achieving a particular outcome you may be leading too strongly and this may be picked up by the client. Your job is to get the client more interested and curious about their own process through raising their self awareness.

Returning to the question of resistance, it will generally be more productive to acknowledge the positive as well as negative aspects of the 'faulty thinking'. The busy manager who takes on their staff's problems may feel overloaded but the staff may feel well looked after, cared for and genuinely helped. The manager may be seen very positively and be well liked and this will have implications for attempts to change the behaviour.

### **3. The emotional level - The client's feelings**

When the client arrives at the key issues concerning them there will usually be an emotional dimension. Coaches can sometimes miss this or be unsure about whether to go there. One aspect of this confusion is that "feelings work" can seem like counselling and many coaches are not clear about where the boundary lies or are simply uncomfortable with emotional expression and consciously or unconsciously try to shut it down.

#### **Facilitating expression of emotion**

It is entirely appropriate on occasions to facilitate emotional expression in the coaching context. Sometimes it is the very breakthrough that is urgently needed in order for the client to get unstuck and move on. Clients will occasionally bring heightened feelings into the room whether the coach likes it or not e.g. in a crisis situation such as executive derailment.

While it is very likely that difficult issues will be uncomfortable because new learning invariably takes place at the edge of our comfort zone, we don't need to feel it is absolutely necessary to facilitate emotional expression on every occasion. However, we do need to allow feelings to be present when appropriate and provide a 'holding environment' or 'safe space' for the client to do what they need to do.

If every session is dominated by strong emotional discharge then that would be an indication that the client's needs are more suited to the counselling situation and it may be more

important to recognise this and attempt to steer them towards a counsellor or therapist, at least for the short term.

#### **4. The coach's use of self**

Though little discussed in the coaching literature to date I regard the use of self as the highest order coaching skill. It can be the key difference between good and great coaching. An elusive concept and very often difficult to communicate to both students and more experienced coaches it is nonetheless a crucial aspect of any helping professional's potency and wisdom. It is the ability to put words around those intuitive moments when we believe we know something but struggle to describe it. We all have these moments though we may not always trust them enough to risk articulation. Later we might say to ourselves 'I knew there was something. I was picking it up ... I wish I'd said something'.

A huge source of 'interference' can be our confusion as to whether we are saying more about ourself than the client. Are we hijacking the client's agenda or gratifying our own needs rather than offering something which may be helpful to our client. It can feel like a minefield yet it is one which can produce the most brilliant of insights if explored skilfully.

#### **From techniques focus to coach as change agent**

It is common for aspiring coaches to be technique oriented. The word 'toolkit' gets used a great deal and the assumption is that the more tools you have i.e. techniques, the better coach you are. Some coach training providers cash in on this as if this is the way to competence and excellence.

In my view techniques have their place but the most important tool of all is yourself. Your self. In the search for toolkits many aspiring and practicing coaches miss this fundamental point.

#### **The personal development of the coach**

Typically the coach in training moves from seeing coaching as a toolkit of techniques to recognising their own unique place in the process. A growing awareness takes place around what are the coach's own issues and what belongs to the client. This has been long understood in therapy and counselling training and has led to the requirement on many courses for the trainee counsellor to engage in their own counselling process.

Similarly in the coach training experience there may be a point where the trainee coach recognises that they need to do some deeper work on themselves to unblock, develop, heal or better understand themselves.

The question of where to do that work will crop up not just for coaches in training but also for more experienced coaches.

Some will go for the personal counselling route whilst others will look at a more group-based personal development where a greater variety of feedback can occur. The personal development group can be an excellent vehicle for self and 'other' awareness as well as a rich environment for feedback and learning.

Future coach training is likely to have a stronger emphasis on personal development as well as knowledge and skill development.

## Summary

The capacity to coach at all four levels - the story, the client's thought processes and feelings, and the coach's use of self is undoubtedly a challenging proposition. Even experienced coaches often struggle to rise above the story and do what Gallwey refers to as 'eavesdropping' on someone's thinking process. To do these and then add the third dimension of the skilful use of self requires a good deal of practice, personal examination and sense of timing.

## Key learning points

- Don't underestimate the value of simply listening to the client's story.
- The coach also needs to consider the client's thinking processes and to enable the client to explore any 'faulty thinking'.
- A good starting point for the coach is that of interested curiosity. Too much investment in an outcome may increase resistance.
- Coaches may facilitate emotional expression at times, and therefore will need to feel reasonably comfortable with their own emotions to allow this to happen.
- If the client is frequently distressed their needs may be more suited to counselling.
- Sometimes when the client feels stuck the coach may be unsure of what to do. At these times understanding our own experience can help us to make sense of what is happening. We are referring to the 'use of self as instrument'.
- The coach's use of self can be the most profound aspect of the coaching process and is a high order coaching skill.

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