



Successful coaching - the six key factors (Part 1)

An article by Peter Bluckert

Introduction

What makes for successful coaching? Is it about the coach – their skills and qualities? Is it about the client – their commitment to the process and desire to improve or change? Or is it to do with the relationship between them? Perhaps it is about the models or techniques the coach uses or the psychological framework they operate from. What are the key ingredients of excellent practice and successful outcomes?

Here, in Part one of a two-part article, I set out three critical success factors for coaching: the coach's competence and commitment; sound coaching method; and good coaching process. The remaining factors will be discussed in the [next issue](#). They are: the coaching relationship; client factors; and the professionalism of the coach.

The six key factors in successful coaching

1. [The coach's competence and commitment](#)
2. [Sound coaching method](#)
3. [Good coaching process](#)
4. The coaching relationship
5. Client factors
6. The professionalism of the coach

Success factor 1 – The coach's competence and commitment

There is a growing desire within coaching to establish the core competencies of different types of coaching activity. At present, many coaches argue that there are three higher level competency categories – business, coaching and psychology.

Business competencies include corporate awareness and 'savvy' understanding of organisational dynamics, culture, and politics and the general ability to 'hang out' in executive life with a fair degree of comfort and appropriateness. Without these things, the argument is that the business coach will not gain credibility and acceptance. This is applicable to both internal and external coaches.

Coaching competencies are a combination of skills, mindset and clarity about the role. Some believe that the coach with strong coaching competencies doesn't really need the other competency areas i.e. business and psychology because a good coach can coach anyone whatever their background and occupation. This is an appealing notion with some truth in it. However, a closer examination of the role of the executive coach in particular, will reveal coaching agendas and contexts which require the coach to possess a broader based skill set.

Psychological competencies for coaching are fundamentally grounded in awareness – both self awareness and awareness of others. Coaching assignments often have a behavioural dimension to them and require the coach to understand how behavioural change takes place, (and why it often doesn't), as well as possess behavioural coaching skills. The importance of the Assessment stage of the coaching process also establishes the need for psychological training in assessment methods and techniques. For the executive coach, there can be advantages in having a counselling or psychotherapeutic training in order to diagnose more complex psychological issues in corporate life as well as coach executives through critical phases of their life e.g. career derailment.

I have recently developed an instrument for assessing coaching competence across the full range of skill-sets and knowledge. It is known as the 'Coach Competency Inventory' (CCI). What follows is a summary version based around the three higher level categories.

Business

- Corporate knowledge and awareness
- Understanding of different organisational contexts
- Awareness of 'systemic' and 'structural' aspects of organisational life
- Understanding of the role and function of leadership
- Appreciation of change management
- Capacity to work in results-focused environments
- Awareness of organisational politics
- Appreciation of corporate culture
- Appreciation of career development and executive derailment

Coaching

- Good conceptual understanding of coaching theory and principles
- Basic coaching skills such as: active listening, asking questions which raise awareness, allowing silence, summarizing and reflecting back, clarifying goals, providing performance feedback, encouraging and motivating etc
- Advanced coaching skills such as effective challenging, analysing more complex coaching issues, seeing patterns in diverse events, use of the here and now, use of self as instrument etc
- A coaching mindset, values and beliefs
- Clarity around the coaching role
- Capacity to form good coaching relationships
- Understanding of good coaching process and method

Psychological

- Good conceptual understanding of psychological theory
- Understanding of Assessment processes
- Psychological-mindedness
- Self-awareness
- Social awareness
- Self management

- Psychological insight
- Psychological skills
- Capacity to provide a 'holding environment'

In addition to coaching competencies, there is another vital dimension to the successful coach – that is the coach's commitment. Having a skilful coach rooting for you, on your side, working with you for your success is a powerful force for change. Those who have been fortunate enough to experience this will vouch for how good it can make you feel. To have someone believe in you is a very powerful thing and should not be underestimated.

Success Factor 2 – Sound coaching method

Coaching method is partly about you and the kind of coach you are. It's also about working to sound coaching principles. Let's take a look at some of these.

The first and most important is that the coach is there to assist the learning, development and change of the other via facilitated discovery and not by 'tell'. Despite the fact that most coaches know this they nevertheless cannot resist the expert role and often engage in problem solving or solution offering. Many coaches still need to learn and re-learn to 'trust the process'.

A second principle is that coaching should be a dialogue or conversation not an interview. The coach needs to be fully present and not hide behind the role. That means being touched and moved by the client as well as influencing and impacting them. To be fully present coaches need to prepare themselves mentally and emotionally before sessions to minimise distraction and be ready to focus in the moment.

A third principle is to balance support and challenge within the coaching exchange. Too much support over time and too little challenge will often leave clients under-stimulated, even bored. Too much challenge without sufficient support can produce an unsafe environment for learning.

In an earlier article published in 'Coach the Coach, Issue 1.' entitled 'The Four Dimensions to a Coaching Session', I set out a coaching methodology. The four dimensions are: the client's 'story'; the clients' thinking processes; the clients' feelings; and the coach's use of self. For a fuller explanation of this, refer to the original article.

The client's 'story'

The client often wants to tell their story. It may be simply the context for a performance problem or a complex and intricate issue which the client wants the coach to understand. Experienced coaches tend to 'manage' the story-telling as they know that they need fewer '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.

However, coaches do need to recognise the significance of the story to the client. 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, all the better.

The client's thinking processes

The second level to the coaching process enables the coach to get beyond the client story when that's required. This is about examining the way the person thinks, especially when this might be limiting their well-being, fulfilment and success.

Peltier (2001), 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?' and '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.

The client's feelings

When the client arrives at the key issues concerning them there, will usually be an emotional dimension. Coaches may sometimes miss this or be unsure about whether to go there. One aspect of this confusion is that "feelings work" can seem like counselling. 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.

In fact, it can be entirely appropriate 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 – for example in a crisis situation such as redundancy.

The coaches' 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 one that is 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'.

We can get confused as to whether we are saying more about our self 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.

Success factor 3 – Good coaching process

The key aspects of good coaching process

- Contracting
- Structuring the coaching intervention
- Assessment
- Delivering the coaching
- Creating the coaching agenda
- Review and evaluation

Contracting

Anyone who supervises coaches will tell you that many problems further down the line have their origins in the contracting stage. Perhaps the coach has not been clear about expectations, the confidentiality agreement or some aspect of the business arrangements.

The “getting started” phase should therefore be undertaken with care and consideration to the following kinds of issues:

- Who is the client.
- Is it a two or three party contract.
- What are the desired outcomes of the coaching.
- What are the reporting back arrangements.
- What are the confidentiality arrangements.
- How will the coaching intervention be structured.
- How will it be reviewed and evaluated.
- Where will the coaching take place, how often and what support is being offered.
- What are the business arrangements – fees, cancellation terms, etc (external coaches).
- Provision of a code of ethics.

Assessment

Assessment is a crucial part of the coaching process. It can provide information on a person's IQ, EQ, leadership style, learning preference as well as identify strengths and areas of development.

There are many different ways to approach assessment which include structured assessment or development centres, the use of psychometrics such as MBTI, 16 PF, FIRO, EQ profiling, 360 degree feedback and 1-1 or group interviews.

Assessment can be a complex issue as certain instruments are for use by trained psychologists only. Experienced coaches tend to have their favoured methods of assessment. Some believe that 360 degree feedback is more useful for the coaching process as it brings together a wider range of perspectives. Other coaches hold strong affinities to particular psychometrics such as MBTI, FIRO and 16PF.

Creating the coaching agenda

Sometimes coaches are a little vague in the early stages of the coaching process and do not pay sufficient attention to the creation of a coaching agenda. This can later lead to a nagging

feeling of dissatisfaction in the coach and sometimes an early termination of the coaching by the client.

However, if the assessment stage is undertaken properly then this should provide a good deal of data to feed into the coaching agenda.

Another source of input into the coaching agenda will come from the sponsor (if there is one). The client's manager or HR director may be the third party in the coaching relationship and he/she will typically have a number of desired outcomes from the coaching process. These should be explicit and discussed openly in the contracting meeting.

Finally, there is the client themselves who may or may not have a list of issues they wish to bring to coaching. Some clients know exactly what they want to use their coaching for; others benefit from the more structured approach to creating the coaching agenda.

Structuring the coaching intervention

Whilst coaches often have preferred ways of structuring a package of coaching i.e. 6 sessions of 2 hours spread out over six-twelve months, it is important to hold in mind the principle of flexibility. One of the hallmarks of coaching is that it is a 'tailored' process to meet the needs of the individual. Therefore we should look at each situation as it arises and be careful of falling into a rigid or formulaic way of structuring the coaching.

Sometimes the situation calls for an urgent response such as when an executive is made redundant. There may be a need to build in more support at the front end of the coaching and then ease off later.

It can be helpful to involve more than one coach in the delivery of the coaching and there may be real benefits in shadowing the client in their own environment as part of the overall process. Some coaches value being able to contact the coach between sessions by email or phone – some never do.

The key point is to look at every coaching situation freshly. Take into account the clients needs and design the intervention for that person.

Remember also that the venue can be a critical factor. A manager is not going to open up about a serious problem if they are having their coaching session in a hotel lobby. The coach needs to ensure that the physical space provides a proper 'holding environment' for which deeper, intensive work can take place when necessary.

Delivery of the Coaching

The quality of coaching will depend on a number of factors not least the competence, commitment and professionalism of the coach. It will also be about good coaching method –a subject already dealt with in detail in Success factor 2.

Coaching tends to take place over several months and the coach should be aware that different kinds of challenges will lie ahead. The one certainty about the human condition is that our lives are constantly changing. We may think at the beginning of the process that we are clear about the coaching agenda only to find, further down the line that some significantly more pressing issues come to the surface. If we work flexibly, we can bend with the situation

and address the important needs at the time.

Review and Evaluation

Review of outcomes and return on investment are two of the hottest topics in coaching today.

Methods favoured by coaches include 360 degree feedback at the beginning and the end of the coaching process with a half-way stage review of objectives. Or an even simpler exercise of listing the desired outcomes in a contracting meeting at the beginning followed by a review meeting at the end.

The review meeting will often include the sponsor, the client and the coach. Typically, each will share their perspective about how much (or little) progress has been made as a result of the coaching. Whilst there can be differences of view expressed, the general norm is that a consensus emerges, usually a positive one.

Some coaches conduct more wide-ranging evaluation processes and compile reports which contain interview material with the coachee, their manager, peers and direct reports.

Summary

Three of the six key factors in successful coaching have been explored in this article; the competence and commitment of the coach; sound coaching methods; and good coaching process. The remaining three: the coaching relationship; the client factors; and the professionalism of the coach, will be presented in the next issue.

There will also be a discussion of the relative importance of each of these factors.

References

1. P.Bluckert. (2004). 'The Four Dimensions to a Coaching Session'. Coach the Coach. Issue 1. Fenmans.
2. B. Peltier. (2001). 'The Psychology of Executive Coaching'. Brunner-Routledge.

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