



Successful coaching - the six key factors (Part 2)

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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 two of a two-part article, I set out the remaining three critical success factors for coaching: the coaching relationship; client factors; and the professionalism of the coach. These follow on from the [first part of this article](#) which focused on the coach's competence and commitment, sound coaching method and good coaching process.

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 4 – The coaching relationship

The coaching relationship is regarded by many coaches not just as a critical success factor but the critical success factor. This is hardly surprising given that you can be a highly skilled and experienced coach, use sound method and good process yet not necessarily gel with your client. There is the question of 'chemistry'. It is unrealistic to think that coaches will establish the same level of rapport with all their clients.

Nevertheless there are things we can learn about forming effective coaching relationships. Some of these come from coaching literature and some from the counselling and therapy world. We will start with the latter, not least because they have been studying the client relationship for a good deal longer.

Without doubt, one of the most profound and lasting contributions to therapeutic wisdom came from Carl Rogers (1951, 1957), who to this day stands as a landmark contributor to humanistic psychology. He proposed that there are a number of 'core conditions' which determine the quality of the therapeutic relationship. They are: unconditional positive regard and acceptance; accurate empathy; congruence/genuineness; and non-possessive warmth. Unconditional regard means to communicate a deep and genuine caring which is non-judgemental. Congruence

means that you act in accord with your values and belief system, seeking to be real and genuine in your interactions with other people. Accurate empathy is about understanding the other person's world from their subjective reality. It is about trying to 'walk in their shoes'. Non-possessive warmth refers to a quality of friendliness which is neither gushing nor taking over the client. It is warmth allied to respect but also implies a certain level of distance.

It is now half a century since Roger's coined his 'necessary and sufficient' conditions of beneficial outcomes and an extensive body of research has confirmed his views.

In applying Rogerian thinking to executive coaching, Peltier (2001) makes this point:

"The core skills described by this approach are demanding, but they contribute to a core competency for coaches. This approach is essential for the development of a working relationship with clients".

Peltiers' point that the core conditions are 'demanding' is well made. In training programmes for coaches, we often hear delegates honestly admit their difficulties in taking a non-judgemental stance. Many also have problems expressing empathy. They think that if they understand the clients' thoughts and feelings that that is enough. However, empathy is more than whether we think we understand the other person's world. It is whether we communicate that empathy in a meaningful way. It is about conveying and expressing something – a thoughtful, sensitive comment or a caring gesture.

The coaching relationship is of course a dynamic not a static thing. It grows, develops and changes over time. And sometimes it doesn't. There may be occasions when it hardly gets off the blocks. The great value of the Rogerian framework is that it can provide us with some of the reasons why that elusive 'good contact' hasn't materialised.

Most coaches will recall clients who they haven't warmed to at first meeting. That feeling may be reciprocal. The good news is that this often changes. Because of the dynamic nature of relationships, it is always conceivable that good connection can emerge from cool beginnings. If the coach is able to facilitate the core conditions then the client may feel more prepared to reveal their vulnerabilities and to take the risk of being open to the coach and the coaching process. This in turn may produce a different reaction in the coach.

On occasions, this may require the coach to look harder in the mirror themselves and ask such questions as: 'Have I really been fully present with this client', 'Have I hidden myself yet expected him or her to do the opposite', Essentially, 'Have I shown up'? If the answers to these questions are that we have stayed too protective of ourselves then we have a new question to ask – 'Am I ready to take more risks with this client and really be there for them?'. The results of this are often transformative in relationship terms.

Any discussion of the coaching relationship would be incomplete without acknowledging the importance of trust. For the client, trust enables them to feel safe enough to say whatever they need to or reflect on mistakes and deficiencies – to be fully honest with themselves. This of course takes us straight back to Rogers because if the coach is not accepting of the client and worst still, conveys a judgemental stance, then the client will certainly back off. They will also be far less likely to go there again in the future.

This is an issue for all coaches but perhaps comes into sharper focus in line management coaching where many factors are in play. During our in-company coaching programmes, we

often hear staff and managers question whether people would feel able to open up to their line manager. Some organisations set up off-line coaching arrangements for this very reason.

However, this is not necessarily the norm and we all know managers who are strongly trusted by their teams and where line coaching is completely feasible.

In ending this section, I want to remind you of where we started – that the coaching relationship is not just a critical success factor in coaching. It may be the most important one. One of the great values of having a coach can be the experience of someone really there for you, encouraging you and offering that unique balance of support and challenge. When clients look back, years later, on their experience of coaching, more often than not, they bring you to mind when they need to. You exist in between and long after.

Success factor 5 – Client Factors

The reason why I questioned in the last section whether the coaching relationship is really the most important factor in coaching is that there is another serious contender for that position – the client themselves. The hugely interesting book 'The Heart and Soul of Change – What Works in Therapy' (Hubble, D. & Miller. 2004) identifies the 'big four' factors in therapeutic success: the client; the relationship; hope/expectancy; and models/techniques. In their influential study included in this book, Asay and Lambert (2004) attribute 40% of success to client factors, 30% to the relationship and 15% each to hope/expectancy and models/techniques. This potentially has much relevance to coaching although at this point, there is no equivalent study of coaching outcomes.

What the authors and researchers of the 'common factors' debate are essentially saying is that it is the client themselves and the factors of their life situation which account for the most important element of the change process. So what is meant by client factors? They consist of the client's strengths, supportive elements in the environment, and even chance events. From a coaching perspective they are about the client's motivation, persistence and sense of personal responsibility. When these key ingredients are present, there is a greater likelihood of successful outcomes.

This can be seen as a very positive way of looking at personal change. Prochaska, whose studies on change processes have informed behavioural coaching models and also writes in 'The Heart and Soul of Change' asserts "in fact it can be argued that all change is self-change, and that therapy is simply professional coached self-change" (Prochaska, Norcross & Clemante, D. 1994. p.g. 17).

So the proposition here is that we must think beyond the issues of coaching skills, models and techniques, although they have their place. We need to recognise the importance for the client of entering the coaching process as providing a 'lift' in expectancy and hope. We certainly should view the coaching relationship as a significant factor but perhaps the client themselves are the key success factor in coaching.

This was also the message of the coachability framework developed by the Lore Consultancy (date). They argued that levels of motivation, aspiration, openness, urgency and a host of other factors, which include psychological health and wellbeing, affect the coachability of the individual.

The Lore 7-point coachability model rates people on a scale between 'not coachable at

present' to 'excellent coachability'. At the lowest end, the key obstacle to coachability are deemed to be psychological or medical problems such as depression and substance abuse. In the middle range a lack of motivation to change or complacency are seen to be the key factors. The 'good' to the 'very good' coachability categories show ascending levels of commitment and desire to learn and to work with feedback. And the highest coachability group described as 'excellent coachability' is characterised as those who have an intrinsic need to grow and develop.

All in all, it resonates with one of the oldest coaching maxims of them all – that coaching works best with someone who is already doing well, functioning at a high level and who wants to improve. Conversely, it works worst where the situation is 'remedial'.

There is just one caveat I would add to this potential over-simplification and it brings us back to the previous success factor – the coaching relationship. We have to be very careful, as coaches, not to write people off despite the fact that others may be tempted to do so. There is always the possibility that through a coaching relationship based on the core conditions described earlier a different set of possibilities may emerge. Perhaps the individual has never really been truly listened to or had the opportunity to experience a level of safety and trust from which to flourish. Coachability scales and similar frameworks of classification have their place but must always be seen as a guide and not an excuse for failing to take the journey, or at least check out the terrain.

Success factor 6 – The professionalism of the coach

Nowadays, there are several standard guidelines and codes of ethics available for coaches from such bodies as the International Coaching Federation (ICF), The European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) and the Association for Coaches (AC). Reputable coach training providers also include professional issues as part of their syllabi and many coaching texts cover a range of issues around good professional practice. Some coaches also come from professions such as psychotherapy, counselling and clinical psychology which have long established and very clear professional guidelines.

Despite all of this, there will still be a wide discrepancy in standards of practice right now. For there are just as many entrants to the coaching field who have little training and experience and who have probably never deeply considered professional practice issues. They will not be working to a code of ethics, may have unclear professional boundaries and will probably never have heard of professional supervision.

All of this is important for several reasons. The ones which most concern experienced coaches are to do with professional standards and the danger that poor practice on the part of some may reflect badly on a newly emerging profession seeking to establish itself as reputable and credible. Coach training providers who promise that they can turn out professional coaches in 2-5 day courses only add to this concern.

A further worry is that well meaning but poorly trained and inexperienced coaches may do more harm than good. They may form inappropriate relationships with their clients which lack professionalism. Examples of this regularly surface, for example, where coaching relationships suddenly turn into intimate relationships.

The more established professions have had much longer to get their houses in order –

coaching is still a relative newcomer. However, the guidelines available from the emerging 'professional' bodies are a very important starting point. All of them offer comprehensive codes of ethics and strong recommendations to be in professional supervision to ensure client protection as well as ongoing support and learning for the coach.

From the client point of view, this is not simply an academic exercise. Purchasers of coaching services want to be reassured that the coaches they are seeking to hire genuinely are professionally competent. Those on the receiving end of coaching need to be able to trust not only their coaches' ability but also their integrity. One of the most important aspects of executive coaching is the capability to keep confidentiality and act appropriately amidst the organisational politics surrounding them. Professional boundary management is an absolute.

A practical guideline for those new to these issues is to remember that professional coaching is always a marginal role. You have one foot in but the other one out. If both feet are in then you've lost your professional boundary. When in any doubt, the coach should urgently use their supervisor to gain clarity and explore ways forward.

But professionalism should not only be seen as a set of do-nots. There is wisdom in these codes of ethics, often hard won through mistakes of the past. There is also pride and enjoyment in knowing that you are operating at the highest levels of professional practice. It inspires confidence in yourself and in your clients. They begin to trust that you are that most important of things, a safe pair of hands.

Summary

Any list of critical success factors begs one last question: are some of these more important than others? Given the infancy of the coaching field we do not yet have the evidence based research available to properly answer this. What we do have is a growing body of experience and the opportunity to look sideways at similar developmental professions such as counselling and therapy. Here the 'common factors' research may offer us some important insights. Good coaching process allied to sound method clearly plays an important part as does the competence, commitment and professionalism of the coach. We should also remember the importance of simply entering a process of change as an energising and motivating factor in itself. But in the final analysis, two factors probably matter above all else; the client themselves and the quality of the coaching relationship. In time, we will no doubt have research which tells us whether this is indeed the case.

References

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