Musings on Coaching

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1. **Ensure the client is "coachable**." Not everyone is coachable, and coaching is not always the right tool for every circumstance. Establish a method for vetting "coachability" up front, so you don't waste your client's or your own time and resources. I like to ask questions about a client's strengths and challenges, listening carefully for how much self-responsibility they take. I also ask them to talk about others they work with, and how those colleagues contribute to both their strengths and their challenges. Finally, I ask them what they would most like to improve, and what they are willing to do to make these improvements. The more personal accountability you hear in their answers, the more likely they are to be coachable. In contrast, if you hear many "they's" and "them's," complaints about their circumstances, a lot of self-promotion, or the repeated desire for others to change ("If only others would understand, try harder, do better, etc."), be cautious about entering into a coaching relationship. Coaching conversations are *always* confidential, so self-reporting is the primary way you get information, and it's difficult to tease out the truth from what the client *wants* you to know. If coaching is part of a performance improvement plan, you'll need additional methods to establish an objective baseline and confirm progress—360s, three-way conversations, direct observation, and so forth.

2. **Coaching is both a method *and* a mindset**. Coaching is not *done to* a client. It starts first with your own mindset, your intentional relationship with the client, and your ability to set aside your own biases, assumptions, judgments, and distractions to fully focus on another. As a coach, you have to be willing to make it all about the client, be detached from their outcome, and empower them to come up with their own solutions. This can be a very different way of thinking, particularly if you're accustomed to mentoring, advising, supervising, or even counseling. The assumption lies in that we all have wisdom and solutions within us, but may not always be able to access them. The coach brings neutrality, compassion, powerful questions, reflection, validation, challenges, and accountability to help the client tap their own wisdom and come up with their own solutions.

3. **Performance = Potential – Obstacles**. This simple equation is ideal to keep in mind when coaching someone. *Performance* is the goals or outcomes the client wants to have. *Potential* is the sum of a person's strengths, qualities, knowledge, experience, motivation, resources, etc. *Obstacles* get in the way of achieving optimal performance given a person's potential. Your role as a coach is to partner with your client to: a) define what ideal performance looks like, b) inventory their potential, and c) help them identify and remove obstacles in the way.

4. **Coaching is a co-creative relationship**. While the coach may have more tools, knowledge, or power than the client, coaching is a co-creative partner relationship. The client brings the agenda, does the "field work," analyzes the outcomes, takes action, and incorporates insights and realizations. The client also communicates how *they* would like to be coached, and has the power to modify or terminate the coaching relationship. This is also the case in a supervisor-direct report relationship (see Manager as Coach handout). You cannot force someone to be coached, nor should you use coaching as a disguise for performance evaluation.

5. **Get specific on the coaching agenda**. Sometimes a new client will come with an agenda such as, "I want to communicate better with my staff," or "I want to improve my relationship with my spouse or partner," or " I want to think more strategically." Unfortunately, you can't coach effectively around topics this broad. When setting up the coaching relationship, establish trust and confidentiality, and request that the client bring very specific situations as part of their coaching agenda. Have them name names, explain the particular problem, and/or recount exact dialogue to paint a clear scenario. The more clear and specific your client is, the easier it will be for you to ask good coaching questions, identify themes and patterns, and help guide them toward a coachable moment. The good news is that the insight a client gains by deconstructing a particular situation will very likely apply to broader circumstances. So ask for details until you feel you fully understand the situation, can ask good questions, and explore the coachable moment (see No. 9).

6. **Listen on multiple levels**. Great coaches listen to multiple things on multiple levels. They listen for what the client says, what they don't say, their tone, pace, energy, choice of words, emotional state, open and hidden desires, repetitions, hesitations, absolutes, contradictions, patterns, and silences. This type of listening is not something we're generally taught, and it takes practice to learn to listen at these different levels. To develop your "ear" for listening on multiple levels, focus on one level of listening in everyday conversation until it becomes automatic, then add another level, and so on.

7. **Make asking questions a habit**. To coach without mentoring, consulting, or advising can be a challenging skill to master. Practice by making questions your first "move" in any conversation. In most situations, you will learn more *and* be more credible if you ask first, tell later. Practice asking short, simple, open-ended questions. Do not nest or stack questions (asking more than one question at once, and/or re-asking the same question a different way before the client has a chance to respond). Also note that, "Did you try…?" "Have you considered…?" or "Would you be interested in knowing…?" do not qualify as coaching questions. ☺

8. **Look for the coachable moment**. The "coachable moment" is when you sense the heart of the client's obstacles, beliefs, pattern of thinking, or emotions that may keep them from achieving their goals. This is not the time to tell the client what their problem is, but rather to ask simple, powerful questions that help them see it for themselves. This takes both discipline and intuition. For example, a nonprofit CEO client may have a difficult relationship with their Board Chair. In your sessions, the client may use language indicating that the Chair intimidates them, or that they are giving away their power as CEO. Instead of saying, "Hey, you're acting like you're afraid of your Chair," you might ask, "What would an ideal relationship with your Chair look like?" and "What would *you* need to change to achieve that?" If the client is a visual person, you could ask them to sketch what the relationship looks like now, and where they want it to be. Help the client reach an "aha" moment, but don't force it. You can then reinforce the client's insight with an observation, validation, or summary (avoid "cheerleading" or "approving," though). For example, say "It sounds like you've really shifted how you see yourself in relation with your Chair," rather than, "Great job! I knew you had it in you to not be afraid of them."

9. **Invite the use of tools and exercises.** Sometimes a focused, powerful coaching conversation is enough to transform a client's thinking and spur them into positive action. Other times it may be useful to introduce an assessment, exercise, or tool that helps the client think about their situation differently, catalog existing strengths, envision their desired goal(s), discover new ways to prioritize and organize their time and energy, etc. Have a wide collection of different types of tools and exercises you can use when it feels right. Some coaches like to have an established method and sequence of tools and exercises they give to clients. I prefer a more organic approach; I listen to what the client seems to want or need in the moment, propose a possible tool or resource to use during or between sessions, and let the client decide whether they would like to employ it or not.

10. **Always move toward action.** I believe that, while coaching can be inspirational and transformative, it also needs to be grounded and pragmatic. The internal transformation of thoughts and feelings leads to external change in behavior. Thus, I end every coaching session with a "call to action" that the client chooses. It can be as simple as reading an article, writing in a journal, pondering the answer to a question, or observing others' behaviors. It can be as complex as committing to a difficult conversation, changing engrained habits and rituals, writing a book outline, or creating a business or marketing plan. The client decides *when* they are ready for action and *what* that action should be, although the coach may make suggestions if the client is at a loss about what to do between sessions. It is more likely, though, that potential actions are uncovered throughout the coaching session, and the "call to action" is merely a summary of what the client has already agreed to do. The more specific the goal (think S.M.A.R.T.), the more effective the action. Help them move from "I'll have a heart-to-heart with my difficult employee," to "I'll schedule a one-hour meeting with Jane on Tuesday to discuss A, B, and C." And at the next session, follow up on their action steps to see what went well or not, what obstacles kept them from doing them, etc. I generally opt for "gentle accountability"—unless the client asks me to be tough on them—and focus on what might have gotten in the way of their taking action, as there may very well be coachable moments within this conversation.