

The role of the coach as a catalyst for change



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The coach is a catalyst who promotes change but does not direct it.

Discuss this statement in the light of your own experiences of coaching, discussing the

a. coaching relationship, b. contracting, c. the use of models in coaching and d. your own development as a coach.

The Greek philosopher Socrates, born in roughly, 469 BC, said “ the secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new”.

More than 2000 years later humans still resist change, the fear of the perceived loss that will be incurred overshadowing the ability to see the potential and opportunities that the future holds. Despite this natural and inherent fear, people who approach coaching with an open mind can gain the self-awareness necessary to develop both themselves and those around them.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a “ catalyst” as “ a person or thing that precipitates an event”. The role of a coach is to enable the coachee to gain a clear understanding of where on their career path they currently are and support them as they find the clarity to understand where they would like to be. The coach then works with the client to develop strategies for dealing with challenges and empowers them to make the change required to achieve their goals.

The strength of the relationship that exists between the coach and coachee is fundamental to the success of the practise. Douglas Riddle of The Centre

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for Creative Leadership says “ the qualities associated with coaching, such as deep self-awareness, genuine interest and caring expressed through curiosity, open questioning, and listening, are the ones that energize us and generate creativity and commitment.” (Riddle, 2016, p. 3).

When we examine this statement, at its’ core is the desire of the coachee to be listened to and to be provided with a safe environment in which they can explore their experiences, decide on their future goals and create the plan to get them from A to B.

It is impossible for any of this to develop without trust and openness on both parts. The coach’s curiosity must be unbiased, without any preconceived notions on where the conversation should go. This will present the client with a “ blank slate” against which they can take the time to explore their options, without undue influence.

Challenging conversations and questions are a natural part of the dialogue, the purpose of the challenge being to awaken awareness and in the words of Eckhart Tolle, “ Awareness is the greatest agent for change”. At times, the client may be uncomfortable but the role of the coach is to provide an impartial space where difficult questions can be asked and ultimately answered. While deeply interested in the progress and wellbeing of the coachee, the coach has no vested interest in the specific events being discussed. Maximum value can only be achieved when there is complete honesty from the client.

Central to the success of the coaching relationship is ensuring that the boundaries and expectations of both parties are clearly outlined from the beginning.

According to “ Techniques for Coaching and Mentoring” (Natalie Lancer, 2016, p. 40), “ coach supervisors tend to agree that a high proportion of the problems in coaching relationships occur because of a failure in the contracting process”.

Taking the time at the beginning of the process to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the coach and the coachee is important in avoiding issues further down the line, despite the fact that “ initial contracting can often be a brief and slightly embarrassing affair!” (Natalie Lancer, 2016, p. 45). Without this process confusion may arise as to the nature or purpose of the coaching sessions.

In his book, “ Coaching for Performance” (Whitmore, 2017, p. 168), John Whitmore provides a detailed checklist for the initial coaching session, much of which covers the content of the “ coaching contract”.

One of the most significant points centres around the importance of informing the coachee of how coaching differs from mentoring, counselling or consulting. The deeply personal nature of the conversations that will take place makes establishing ground rules at the beginning particularly important.

John Whitmore also points towards the importance of discussing assumptions and understanding how much support or challenge the coachee wants from the coach.

This conversation also gives the client the chance to highlight “ red line” issues, things that they are certain that they don’t want to discuss. The possibility exists that as the trust in the relationship builds these are the issues that will come to the fore but in the initial phases this must be respected.

In situations where a third party has suggested, or is paying for, the coaching sessions, the contract establishes the baseline around confidentiality and trust. This is the place where clarity is given on what is discussed with a third party and how those discussions take place. For example, if a HR department is involved it may be that the contract establishes that no conversations will take place between the coach and the HR department without the coachee present.

Spending the time discussing the contract in the initial conversation also allows both the coach and the coachee align on simple housekeeping issues such as length and format of sessions, cancellation policies and setting expectations of the sessions. Although these may seem like basic elements of any professional relationship, openly discussing the basics gives an insight into the values of the client and is the first step in establishing a good rapport before moving forward with the coaching relationship and formal coaching models.

If the purpose of the coaching relationship is to enable the coachee to see the potential that exists within them, there are a number of techniques, or models, available to the coach to nurture that journey of self awareness.

Sir John Whitmore developed the GROW model throughout the 1980's, having realised that the coaching methods and techniques initially designed for sport were equally applicable to business leaders and organisations. (Whitmore, 2017, p. 97).

This model is widely used in coaching today and asks the client to discuss their Goal, Reality, Options and what they Will do. As in any sport the importance of both short and long term goals is vital as it gives a person something to aim for but also a sense of achievement when the shorter term goals are accomplished.

Incremental achievements on the way to larger successes help an individual stay focussed and keep momentum going. Working with a client to set these goals, it must be remembered that all goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely. The role of the coach is to challenge unrealistic goals but also to encourage the client to see beyond their self-limiting beliefs and set goals that stretch and test them.

The CLEAR coaching model was developed by Peter Hawkins (Hawkins, 2007), also in the 1980's and has a slightly broader approach than the GROW model. CLEAR encourages Contracting, Listening, Exploring, Action and Review. Exploring challenges the coachee to review both the impact that the situation is having on themselves and also the options that are available to them in the situation.

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As a novice coach, it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that each session must begin and end with a full round of the GROW or CLEAR models.

Experience is showing me that this is not the case and it may take one or two sessions to work on goals, before moving to options and then back to the reality of the situation. The models are a framework to work within but not a rigid method that is only successful when applied in the correct order.

Gregg Thompson talks about the 3 C's of coaching in his book "The Master Coach" (Thompson, 2017). Describing coaching as "a powerful, interpersonal process that stimulates and equips a person to perform at a higher level while accelerating their development", Thompson advocates the 3C Coaching Model built on "Character, Connection" and "Conversation."

Character can be defined as sharing and staying true to your values because coaching without values is worthless. This comes underpins the importance of the coaching contract, ensuring that your values as a coach are outlined at the beginning.

Connection is seen as identifying, believing in and building on your clients' potential and strengths. This encourages coaches to see their clients as "Talent", becoming their chief supporter but also challenging them when necessary.

The thirdC, Conversation aligns with the self-awareness aspect of other models, encouraging the coach to focus every word and thought on the client in an open minded and unbiased manner.

All of these models require that the coach approach the sessions in an impartial way, allowing the client the space to explore their thoughts, without judgement. The changes that the client wishes to make are already possible, if they can take the time to explore their own potential.

The opportunity to work with someone as they explore their potential comes with responsibilities and perhaps the greatest of these is the ability to give them your full attention.

I have found that my personal journey of development has focussed on 2 key areas, emotional intelligence and the neuroscience of “changing your mind”. Gaining a greater understanding of these has enabled me to see that, while the part played by the coach is an important one, the true power rests with the client. Developing my own emotional intelligence is central to providing the platform from where the client can move forward.

The key to this rests with self-awareness, David Clutterbuck describes it as having “the courage to see ourselves as we are and to behave as who we are, rather than feel we have to put on an act” (David Clutterbuck, 2016, p. 149). The self-limiting beliefs we carry with us can cloud our judgement and blind us to the possibilities that surround us. As a coach we can work with our clients in a non-judgemental way and using the tools and techniques previously discussed, guide them to an awareness of their own possibilities.

Gaining an understanding of my own values and biases allows me to work with the client in a non-judgemental way, ensuring that the solutions discovered come from within them rather than me. The role of the coach isn't that of “problem solver” but rather a guide to the problem's solution!

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There's a quote I've often heard about change that goes; "Consider how hard it is to change yourself and you'll understand what little chance you have in trying to change others". The neuroscience behind habits is fascinating and goes a long way to explaining how difficult we find changing out behaviours.

Being introduced to the work of Richard Davidson, the founder of the Centre for Healthy Minds, has shown me that we can literally change our mind through mindfulness and reinforcing positive behaviours.

According to Davidson, research shows that there are 4 components of well-being that can be improved by meditation. (Tlalka, 2016) These are resilience, outlook, attention and generosity. Although resilience takes thousands of hours to build up, outlook and attention can be improved in a reasonably short period of time.

Given that we live in an "always-on" world, the ability to self-care and nurture quiet spaces in our lives is of utmost importance for both mental and physical health.

Understanding that we can build new neural pathways that ultimately lead to greater happiness is a powerful realisation.

As a coach, it is of benefit to our clients if we can introduce them to a "pause" button, exercises that can help them step back and review a situation calmly, having taken a moment to centre themselves. This will allow them to choose their reaction to a situation rather than reacting without thought.

The decision to make changes rests with the client in a coaching relationship. The coach can challenge preconceived notions and provide an opportunity for the coachee to become more self-aware, and in the words of Eckhart Tolle, “ awareness is the greatest agent for change”.

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