Masterclass

Pause for reflection

This fourth article in the five-part Masterclass series is written by Charlotte Sills and Bill Critchley

So far in this Masterclass series by Ashridge Consulting Ltd (ACL), we have examined the aims and characteristics of the effective coaching relationship. We have stressed the importance of building an effective working alliance with the client, through building rapport and developing a mutual understanding in relation to goals and tasks. We have also examined some of the organisational key issues and areas of focus that are central to the coach’s role. All these elements are vital and fundamental to the skills of facilitating change. In this article we shall outline an approach that goes beyond this to take a meta-view of the coaching and its overall aim in facilitating change.

At Ashridge Consulting, we believe that there is a particular stance that optimises the creativity and effectiveness of the outcomes of coaching. One way of expressing this would be to say that we view coaching as transformational rather than remedial. To achieve this, the coach needs to embrace certain qualities which are both skills and attitudes.

Coaching skills and attitudes

- An attitude of enquiry

There is a whole raft of skills that are essential to the “helping” relationship. These types of skills help the client to become more aware of his situation, in his role and in his organisation. They help him to recognise which patterns of his thinking, feeling and relating are useful and which ones are less useful, as well as to understand his options and his decision making processes. In a coaching session, these key skills include active listening, phenomenological enquiry (ie enquiring into a person’s current experience as they see it), challenging, clarifying, crystallising and giving feedback. As well as being used in coaching, these skills are commonly used in counselling and psychotherapy.
Strategies within the coaching session

Exploring
- Phenomenological enquiry / awareness raising
- Clarification of goals, options, actions
- Exploration of patterns of thinking, feeling, behaving, e.g.
  - Identifying patterns from past to present
  - Examining the dynamics in the room
  - Telling life story and identifying significant choices, changes etc
  - Exploring learning styles
  - Doing nothing — providing space

Teaching and Experimenting
- Skills practice / role play / video
- Designing and delivering training inputs
- Administering psychometric tests
- Using different media — artwork, music, movement
- Referring client to another source of therapy / training

- Reflexivity

This is the ability, in the coach, to really to know oneself: to be aware of feelings, thoughts, assumptions, biases and prejudices and to reflect on this awareness with the client in a way that is useful to him. For example, if a coach is able to tell a client how he is personally affected by the client’s behaviour, the client might better understand how his actions and attitudes may affect his colleagues or how he might be perceived within his organisation. Remarks like “As I am listening to you, I am aware of feeling increasingly anxious,” or “I'm getting overwhelmed by too much detail,” or “I'm starting to feel defensive,” enable the coach to use his awareness of his own feelings and reactions to show his client the effects he has on other people. Theorists might describe this as “use of self” in the coaching relationship.

- Relatedness

This is the entering into a relationship with the client in a real way. Many conventional coaching relationships are based on the idea of coach as helper of the client or facilitator of learning. At ACL we have a different perspective in that we believe that real learning is co-created between coach and client. The coach is willing to be changed by the client and he is not reluctant to make his impact on the client. The coach engages in a genuine relationship of equals working together to produce creative solutions. This approach avoids the temptation for either of them to see the coach as an expert; this could be a somewhat patronising position that does not invite creativity.
• **Holding the paradox between certainty and uncertainty**

It would be easy for the coach to fall into the trap of encouraging the client to do ‘more of the same’, to improve himself whilst maintaining old patterns of behaviour. This might serve the short-term purpose of reassuring the client, but will not introduce anything novel. The coach needs to take risks — including risking not being liked or perceived as immediately helpful. He does this in the service of breaking old patterns of acting and reacting. This approach can be vibrant and exciting but also disturbing and anxiety provoking — for both the client and the coach. These are moments when the coach holds his or her nerve, being willing to forgo stability and familiarity. He thereby models taking the risks that he is inviting the client to take. The coach needs to create an area of “bounded instability” (Stacey 1992) that provides enough structure and solid ground for safety, but enough newness in the unpredictability of a real meeting in order for creativity to flourish.

This involves stepping into the unknown for the coach and the client. They must both be willing to sit with uncertainty and stay connected in their dialogue. Within the security of the coach / client relationship, new ideas and patterns of behaviour can be explored in a relatively safe environment. The risk averse client, who is breaking old behaviour patterns and behaving in more innovative ways, may feel more secure about trying out these new approaches for the first time within the coaching relationship than he would in his organisation.

**Coaching as a strategic process**

We have focused so far on the coaching session itself. Now we want to step back and take a broader view of coaching as a strategic process in the service of sustainable change. This highlights some key factors that start before the coaching engagement and continue after it has terminated.

### Before the coaching sessions

At the time of arranging the first meeting, the coach may encourage the client to undertake any or all of the following tasks prior to the meeting:

- Develop views on how or what they would like to be different in their working lives.
- Have a conversation with their manager on the same topic
- Possibly get 360 degree feedback from their place of work
- Collect broader data about themselves from a wider arena — for example from friends, family, customer, suppliers

During the course of the coaching, as well as attempting to co-create the kind of sessions that will open up possibilities as we described earlier, the effective coach will also consider a range of strategies outside the formal coaching meetings.
## During the coaching process

### Strategies in the organisational context
The coach might choose to extend his or her involvement outside the actual session. He may for example:

- ‘Shadow’ for a period of time
- Sit in on meetings and give feedback
- Interview colleagues and distil feedback
- Facilitate the analysis of feedback – explore, debrief, interpret
- Take part in a three-way discussion with, e.g., line manager (coach acts as mediator, advocate, planner)

### Strategies for the client in between sessions
The client is encouraged to continue his development between sessions by a variety of means, such as:

- Keeping a notebook of significant new insights
- Practising new skills, different behaviours
- Writing up the coaching session, to compare later with the coach’s impressions
- Making agreements with colleagues and subordinates to ensure ongoing feedback about his impact and behaviour
- Developing supportive networks (see below also in Finishing tasks)
- Reading books, articles, using the web, etc.

Finally, the coach will be aware of the possibilities for growth and the maintenance of new ways of being that occur around the conclusion of the coaching contract and also after it has finished

## Finishing and afterwards

Coach and client address together:

- How the client might respond to the end of the coaching process, based on past patterns
- The significance of transitions for the client
- What other forms of ongoing development can be put in place, for example an action learning group; supportive networks with business related contacts with others in different organisations but in similar situation; social networks / hobbies, interests
- What contract might need to be made with the manager in relation to that
- How to ensure that the client will receive ongoing feedback
- What other areas for growth have been identified
A major challenge for the coach lies in developing the ability to select and use a blend of skills and strategies that is unique for each client situation. The appropriate mix from the coach’s kitbag must be chosen and used in ways that create new options for the client rather than becoming the formulaic application of traditional techniques and methods. The ability to do this – the “treading of the fine line” to facilitate change through the skilful creation of space for exploration as well as the deployment of trusted strategies – will be a recurrent theme throughout the ACL “Coaching for Consultants” course.

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