
Improve Your Coaching; Two common traps and hints for avoiding them.

Background

Over the last several years coaching has gotten increasingly popular in companies...and rightly so. When managers learn more about coaching, they see many ways in which they can use a coaching approach in conversations they have (development talks, problem solving, strategy discussions, etc.). There is also more and more material available about the do's and don'ts regarding coaching, such as the requirement 'to stay neutral'. Since there is not so much written about how neutrality can be lost, how this might happen and what to do about it, we'd like to offer the following thoughts.

Two common traps

When acting as a coach for others, there are two common but important traps you can fall into which can affect your neutrality and limit the effectiveness of your coaching: your own mental models and getting 'hooked'.

Your own mental models:

You fall into this trap when you think you recognise the client's problem because it reminds you of a previous experience or it seems to fit into a particular theory that you have. An automatic process is triggered in your head which often results in you jumping to premature conclusions about what the problem is, its causes, related circumstances, etc.. Once this occurs, you will begin to unconsciously filter what you hear, so that only the information which "fits" your mental models will get noticed by you and the rest just passes by. Your ability to accurately hear and see what is really going on for your client...as well as for yourself, is greatly reduced.

Getting 'hooked' emotionally:

This occurs when you are not able to put your own feelings aside while giving attention to your client. Maybe your own anxieties get stimulated because of a similar experience or a personal connection to what is being presented. A simple example could be that you are coaching a colleague in a conflict with her boss, who a few years earlier got you transferred out of a position you really enjoyed. You felt pain and anger around that, but never resolved the issue with the boss and – more or less unconsciously – still carry these feelings around. Now that they are triggered again, these feelings are likely to have a negative impact on your coaching (unless properly dealt with).

How they manifest

Falling into either of these traps can result in the following ineffective, often unconscious, behaviour:

- **Avoiding...** Failing to ask important questions or to explore certain territory that may be useful for the client but uncomfortable for you;
- **Shifting the focus...** Moving attention away from the client's experience or issue and onto your own;
- **Leading...** Taking the client down your own line of thinking rather than his/hers.

How to deal with them

These traps will present themselves at different times for even the best coaches. The best way to prevent falling into them is by:

- **Knowing yourself** well and becoming aware when it happens;
- **Remembering** that as the coach you are there to serve the other person;
- **Consciously choosing** to set aside your own conclusions/issues for the time being, promising yourself that you will come back to them at a later, more appropriate time. (...And then actually doing that!)

This will let you continue to listen and respond to the client with an open and unbiased mind – i.e. maintain your neutrality as best you can.

If you feel for some reason you can not, then it is best to call for a "time-out" from the coaching conversation at that time, and reschedule for later when you can be more centered. In some instances you may simply need to explain to your client why you may not be the most suitable person to coach them on this particular issue.

The short summary...

Self-awareness is essential to:

- Not let out your own issues/feelings get in the way when working with your client,
- Stay focused on your client's experience and
- Be effective in your coaching.

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