



THE COACHING-MENTORING-MANAGING CONTINUUM

A question frequently asked by managers on coaching skills courses is 'When should I coach and when should I be directive?' A short coaching course may create a conflict which can reduce a manager to silence when faced with a perceived obligation to ask instead of tell, in the struggle to lead in a coaching style.

Coaches in training to deliver formal sessions sometimes experience a similar conflict, experiencing an overwhelming urge to 'help' by providing a solution instead of asking the type of questions which will facilitate the coachee's own ideas.

A recent debate on this topic on the email forum of the Association for Coaching demonstrated that there are many different opinions and approaches to this issue, not least what exactly is meant by 'directive coaching' and whether the two words together constitute an oxymoron.

I have noticed, while acting as an assessor for the AC and other organisations, that someone who calls herself a coach may actually be delivering what I would term 'mentoring' - sharing her experience and advice with her clients - although this is not to say that what she delivers is any less valuable than coaching, which will depend on the client's particular needs at any one time.

Some of my most enjoyable moments as a coach have been when I simply reflect back a client's words, perhaps ask an open question, and then get out of the way while my client explores the fascinating realm of the self. The insights (and consequent change) which occur during this process are more powerful than any advice I could offer.

This is eloquently expressed by AC member David Finney, who prompted the debate on the Forum:

"I got into coaching for many reasons, two of which were Tim Gallwey and Sir John Whitmore. For me they were the pioneers of something very new and very powerful. To 'learn without being taught' called out to me. It radiated energy and empowerment." - David Finney (www.theenergyofconversation.co.uk)

Performance Coaching was developed by Sir John Whitmore and his colleagues after John came across the work of Tim Gallwey, a Harvard tennis coach who observed that his students had the ability to teach themselves better than a sports coach could, and who coined the term 'self-directed learning', which is a core principle of coaching.

However, people have different reasons to come to coaching, particularly because there are many who still do not understand what it is. In the corporate sector a coachee may be there simply because all managers at his level have been ordered to work with a coach, whether they want it or not; therefore he may be less willing to explore his 'inner self' and be keen to glean any useful tips the coach can offer. As AC member Jenny Gould says:

'I think it depends so much on what the client wants from the coaching. If it's life coaching then I generally use a more 'clean' style, but I tend to include more directive coaching with corporate clients, because in my experience the clients feel it adds a great deal of value to the work I do with them. It's horses for courses.' – Jenny Gould (Jenm.gould@virgin.net).

The 'clean' style Jenny refers to is the method I mentioned above, of asking questions which will least contaminate the coachee's own self-exploration, and reflecting back the coachee's words. These techniques are fundamental to the practice of coaching and occur in their purest form in David Grove's 'Clean Language', which was developed during the same period as Tim Gallwey's 'Inner Game'.

Managers might choose to work with me because of my experience as a corporate MD and in particular my work with Sir Richard Branson; the possibility of picking up tips about Branson's management style may attract a client more than coaching itself. However, I am a coach and I do not believe that solely offering clients solutions from my own experience matches my job description, however beneficial it may be to the manager, and it is not what I want to do, which relates to my point 2 below, about the coach's own values.

AC member William Barron puts it like this:

'I tell my clients that I am sitting on a three legged milking stool, switching from one leg to another at any one moment in time:

- *One leg is called coaching, which is when I haven't a clue what the answer is and am dancing with the client in the moment hoping to be as clean as possible with my language.*
- *The second leg is called mentoring, when I have some experience of the situation and am able to bring all of that to enrich and support the conversation.*
- *The final leg is called co-consulting, which is where the client and I pool our resources to investigate and brainstorm the situation to come up with an action plan.'*
- William Barron (william@creatinginsight.co.uk)

Three issues come up here:

1. Satisfying the client – should he who pays the piper call the tune?
2. Satisfying one's own wishes as a coach about how to spend one's time – I think that most coaches choose the profession because the fulfilment factor in asking rather than telling is high.
3. Being as useful to the client as possible.

So how do we deal with these?

First of all, let us take 'Satisfying the client'. It is crucial to be clear at the contracting stage about what the client requires and what you as the coach can deliver. The challenge is that it can be difficult for a new client to understand what coaching does without having experienced it.

I was once asked to coach a top level leader in a large organisation whose directive style was on the brink of causing resignations among the team of directors he led. During our first meeting he enthusiastically welcomed coaching by telling me: *'When I was a child I didn't do what my father told me but I obeyed my teacher. Now my team won't listen to me, so you can be the teacher – I'll tell you what I want them to do, and they will listen to you.'*

My instinct was to get straight into the coaching so that he could experience the benefits rather than hearing me try to explain them, but I knew it was essential for us both to be clear on expectations in advance. What I chose to say was:

*'How about if I could help **YOU** become the person they listen to?'*

This got across that what coaching could offer might be even more advantageous to him than what he had requested.

This manager had a brilliant intellect matched with a long and glitteringly successful track record. His stance was that he could give his staff the best solution in a fraction of the time it would take them to reach it during a meeting and, therefore, he was acting in their best interests as well as the firm's by saving their time and effort. This was a rare case, in that what he said was probably true. However, times have changed and people do not like to be managed in this way, and this is where the problem lay.

I spent roughly half the time in the sessions asking non-directive questions, during which he came to understand the impact that his current style had on the business and his own position, and the other half teaching him skills that would enable him to manage in a coaching style. Once he had grasped this concept intellectually, he absorbed each coaching skill with ease and delivered all of them impeccably, with the result that energy levels at meetings soared and people began to enjoy working with him.

Organisations today tend to require not just that their managers have a coach, but that those managers incorporate the skills into their day to day leadership styles. The most efficient way of achieving this is by group training courses, but I find that during one to one coaching, the area of expertise where potentially useful advice often comes up is in coaching skills.

This touches on the third element above: 'Being as useful to the client as possible'. The coach's advice may relate to coaching skills, banking processes, marketing or wherever his area of excellence lies, or it may simply be that his intuition offers a way forward which he thinks the client may have missed. It seems to be expected in corporate coaching that some advice will be offered - and when one has a useful tip to give, where is the benefit in withholding it? So I suggest three guidelines which apply both to formal coaching and managers-as-coach:

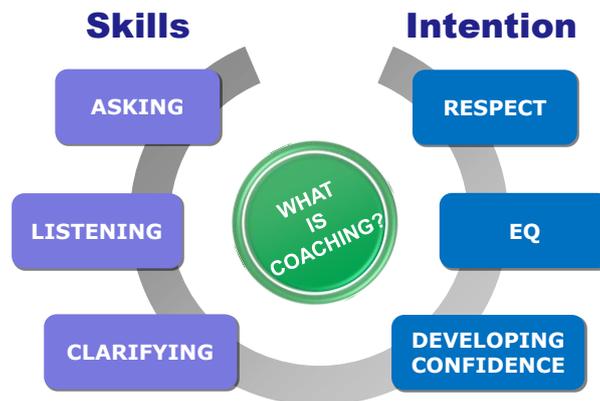
- Offer your suggestion only after the coachee has run dry.
- Ask permission before giving advice, for example: "Could I offer something from my experience/intuition here?" This marks a boundary where the coach is stepping out of

coaching and into consulting. It also gives the client permission to reject the coach's suggestion without fear of causing offence.

- Aim for suggesting no more than 10% of the time.

It is assumed here that 'suggesting' is as far as 'directive' coaching will go, and I think that advice is usually offered in this way in all schools of coaching today. Coaches never tell their clients what to do.

There is a fourth guideline for managers who seek to lead in a coaching style rather than deliver formal sessions: there are times when your reports just need a straight answer. Learn and practise your coaching skills until they are fully integrated, then trust your intuition about whether to ask or tell. I believe that there is a misconception that coaching is purely about skills like 'active listening' and 'effective questioning'. This assumption ignores the intention behind the words, which is key; if your intention as a manager is to exhibit Emotional Intelligence (as described in Daniel Goleman's books), with an eye to supporting and developing your teams, then you can probably be an effective coaching manager without learning any coaching skills (and more so if you do). However, if you learn the skills and this intention is not in place, you may well come away saying 'I'm using Open Questions and my staff still hate me'!

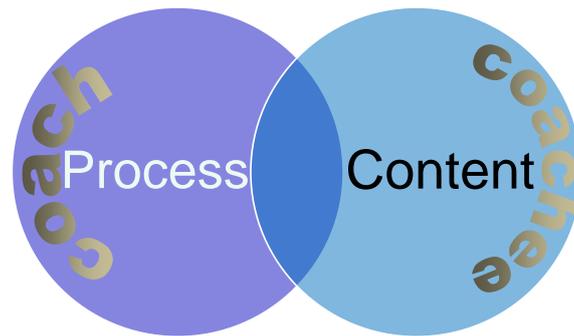


My belief is that both asking and telling can be done in a coaching style as long as they are grounded in Emotional Intelligence rather than, say, bullying, or a desire to appear clever or to 'help' by providing a solution.

If we want to get into semantics there is also the question of what we mean by Directive Coaching, raised by AC coach Angela Dunbar:

'Any question is going to be at least partially directive, isn't it? We shine a light on a particular aspect of a coachee's experience and, by doing so, we are directing their attention on some aspect that we have decided to focus on.' - Angela Dunbar
(www.cleancoaching.com)

I would say that coaching is directive in terms of the process, but not the content:



Once a coach is tempted over the line, she is no longer coaching. The caveat to this is that useful content can be offered after asking permission, as I recommended above, which sets a clear boundary between the coach's agenda and the client's. The key is to be aware enough to make a choice.

AC member Stephen Burt describes the difference as a continuum rather than opposing processes:

"Directive and non-directive are two ends of a spectrum, not two discreet options. We can tell, advise, suggest, offer, speculate, feedback or ask." – Stephen Burt (stephen@thefaradaypartnership.co.uk)

This is echoed in my 'Coaching-Mentoring-Managing Continuum' which represents the different aspects that an effective manager needs to be able to move between smoothly. Whereas Blanchard's Situational Leadership model describes these as different styles of leadership, I believe they can all be done in a coaching style, delivered with respect and with the intention of building the confidence in reports rather than limiting it:



Of course, this is not a question which occurs only in the UK. Management styles vary across the world; for example, Western cultures are said to exhibit more open aggression than Asian ones at work. My experience of delivering coaching skills training to managers

from all over the world (including Americans, Malaysians, Chinese, Indians, Australians, Europeans, and Eastern Europeans) is that different cultures experience varying challenges in introducing a coaching style, but that once the managers successfully assimilate the skills, they can communicate with each other more easily regardless of cultural differences. For example, an Indian manager recently said to me “I was afraid that I would lose my authority if I managed by ‘asking’ instead of ‘telling’. However, in practise I find it reinforces my authority”.

In his “Global Coaching Survey”, Frank Bresser finds:

“There is an overall balance of directive and non-directive coaching approaches in the world. The predominant coaching style is directive in 28 countries, non-directive in 24 countries. In 110 countries, this is undecided”.

AC member Edna Murdoch describes the subtle influences which occur in and empower the coaching relationship, and the pitfalls that lie therein:

“There is a living, energetic, embodied connection between us which quietly - or not so quietly - influences every intervention, pause, powerful question, comment and shrug of the shoulders! That connection also influences the coachee’s perception of us and their capacity for learning in coaching sessions. If we are not mindful of the power of relationship, we may be blind to its influence which might then ‘muddy’ the clean spaces that we seek to create and affect the coaching much more than we had originally intended.” - Edna Murdoch (www.coachingsupervisionacademy.com)

Coaching is a fledgling profession and I am struck by how often a participant on a foundation skills course will come up with a new take on something, thus adding to my own store of knowledge. The real learning takes place out in the field when putting the skills into practice and I believe that once the foundation principles have been absorbed, every new coach or coaching manager has the possibility of contributing some wisdom to this inspiring and growing profession.

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