

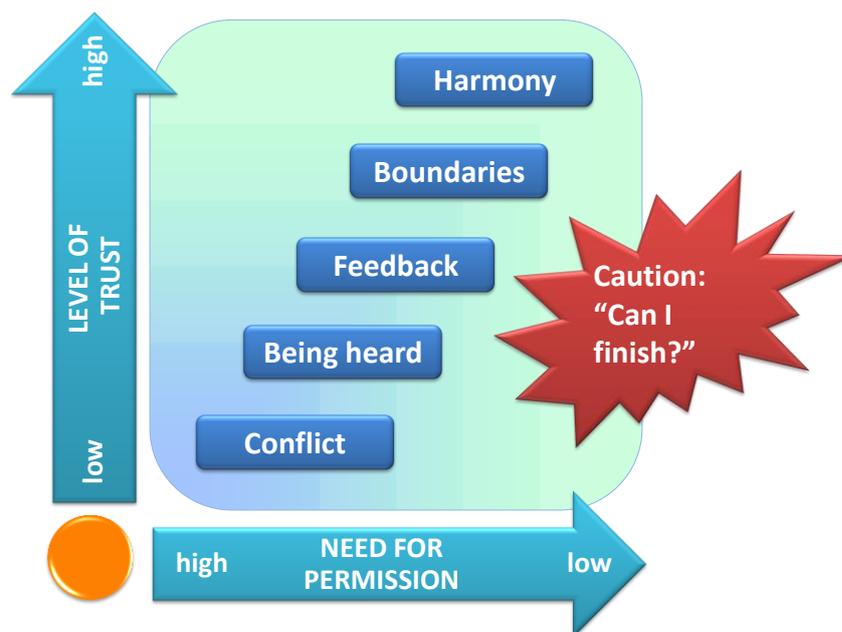


PERMISSION PROTOCOL: A COACHING APPROACH

Permission is one of the most useful, if largely unidentified, tools in coaching and management. People who usually experience a high level of rapport with others tend to ask permission frequently, although they and their colleagues will probably be unaware of it.

Asking permission can be effective at a number of levels:

Permission Protocol



When we travel to other countries, we often notice differences in culture. These are not hard to identify and we try to respect them. However, people of similar race, culture and background may have different customs too, arising from their experiences in life: for example, out of two families which live next door to each other and are outwardly similar, one may have a cold and critical culture at home, while the other may be positive and easy going; in some families there is a lot of shouting, in others voices are never raised. These values are less easy to grasp than the ones we meet abroad when travelling, and it is easier offend without realising it. Asking permission respects the boundaries we cannot see, like showing a passport to request permission to enter. Preceding a coaching question with the question 'can I ask you ...' from time to time can soften the exchange can soften the process, helping people to feel comfortable safe, which enables them to think more clearly.

The diagram above shows the use of Permission as a tool in five different aspects, ranging from situations where trust is low to those where trust is high:

1. Resolving conflict: Can I tell you?

Permission is the unsung hero of conflict resolution. Think of the person who irritates you the most; you may have vowed before a meeting that you will be ultra polite in order to avoid the usual conflict yet, in the event, the person becomes more upset with you than ever. What is missing here is permission, both spoken and implied in your body language to each other. 'What I think we should do', however politely said, is not going to turn enemies into friends. If you can grit your teeth and rephrase it to: 'Can I tell you what I think we should do?' the barriers will start to crumble and rapport will grow.

2. Being heard: "Can I add something to that?"

In a situation where one or more people are 'talking over' you and not making it easy for you to make your contribution, try the phrase 'Can I add something to that?' People will stop talking and listen to you, because you are respecting what has just been said.

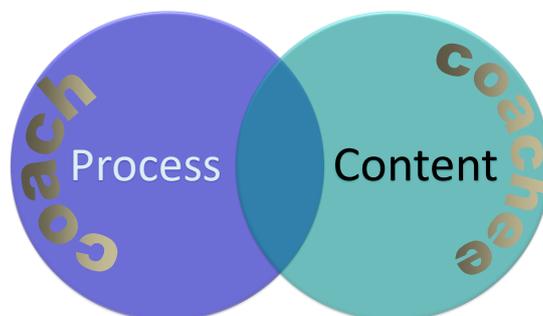
The opposite of 'Can I add something to that?' is 'Yes, but ...' which implies dismissal not only of everything that has gone before, but of the person who said it, laying the foundation for resentment. 'Can I add?' carries the message that we have heard and understood what has been said and found it so valuable that we want to expand the topic instead of introducing a new one. Other people will then have a sense of hearing more about their own ideas rather than ours. It validates what they have said.

3. Giving feedback: "Can I share something I have noticed?"

When you have to give some learning, or 'negative' feedback, asking permission to do so will soften the blow and relax people, so that they will be more ready to listen and cooperate with you. The most effective way of delivering feedback is to ask people to give themselves feedback before offering yours. However, there are times when it is necessary to be more direct, and the use of permission will ease the situation here.

4. Creating boundaries: "Can I make a suggestion?"

In a coaching conversation, it is the coach's responsibility to manage the process and the coachee's to provide the content. If the coach strays inadvertently over this line, the coach is no longer helping the coachee.



However if you, as the coach or manager, have some useful information or experience, or your intuition is flagging up a message, it would be churlish not to pass it on. Preceding your offering with a question creates a boundary between eliciting information from the coachee and giving your own. It eliminates intrusiveness and turns your contribution into a gift which can be used if helpful or discarded without any awkwardness if not.

The coach must not be attached to the outcome of his or her suggestion; if it does not appeal to the coachee, it must be put aside. A general rule of thumb is to offer suggestions no more than 10% of the time, and only after the coachee's own ideas have been exhausted.

Permission also works well in creating boundaries in team situations, demonstrating respect and that people are willing to listen and take account of each other's views.

5. Harmony

Think of an exchange with your best friend or most trusted colleague; the actual words of permission are probably rarely used because permission is inherent in the relationship. It will however be evident in voice tone and body language. The higher the level of trust, the less permission needs to be overtly stated and vice versa.

When is permission not permission?

We have all heard politicians say 'Can I finish?' when interrupted by an interviewer or opponent. This is a statement which appears to comply with all the criteria of asking permission yet which produces conflict. This is because of the intention behind it; there is an implied criticism and the question is not a request but a demand. It is essential to keep in mind that coaching is a mindset and attitude rather than a set of tools; the underlying intention must be aligned with coaching values, which are to respect people, help their development and build trust.

More about Permission

Unlike most coaching questions, asking permission is of its essence a closed one. Its power is in the fact that people can say 'no', although this is rarely the result. Of course, one has to be prepared to accept a 'no' if that is the reply. However, the reason this is unlikely to happen is because what we are giving the person is control, and control is a fundamental need of the human race, going back to the time when control of our environment meant the difference between survival, being eaten by an animal or freezing to death. Our sense of safety is increased when people ask permission. This is reflected in the fact that the safer people feel at work, in terms of a blame-free and supportive environment, the more risks they will be prepared to take, the more confident they will feel and the higher their performance will be.

Fundamentally, permission is a tool which creates and respects the non-aggressive types of boundaries essential for harmony in relationships. The importance of positive boundaries has been recognised for centuries in different cultures all over the world:

"Good fences make good neighbours" – English proverb

"There must be a fence between good neighbours" - Norwegian proverb

"Between neighbours' gardens a fence is good" - German proverb,

"Build a fence even between intimate friends" - Japanese proverb,

"Love your neighbour, but do not throw down the dividing wall" - Hindi proverb

"Love your neighbour, but put up a fence" - Russian proverb.

“Bonum est erigere dumos cum vicinis” (“It is good to erect hedges with the neighbours”) – Medieval Latin proverb

References:

Wilson, C. (2014) Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training. London, Kogan Page.

At Culture at Work we provide global coach training and leadership development programmes at all levels, including C-Suite, for organisations in 27 countries and in all main business languages. We can provide in-house courses by webinar, open coach training courses in London, ILM Endorsed, Level 5, Level 7 and Diploma coach training qualifications, manager-as-coach courses, plus general leadership development and team building programmes.

If you are interested in bringing a coaching culture into your organisation, [click here for details of our in-house courses.](#)

For details of our coaching workshops and presentations [click here.](#)

For details of coaching keynotes and conference speaking [click here.](#)

For open become-a-coach training [click here.](#)

Find out how to develop a Coaching Culture Strategy for your organisation [here.](#)

For Train the Coach Trainer [click here.](#)

We deliver in-house programmes [worldwide and in all main business languages.](#)

Download free coaching articles [here.](#)

Contact us through our [contact form](#)

Or on info@coachingcultureatwork.com

Or call +44 20 7022 4923

About the author:

International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is Managing Director of Culture at Work and a Fellow of the ILM, the Professional Speaking Association and the Association for Coaching, where she is a member of the Global Advisory Panel. A cross-cultural expert, she designs and delivers programmes to create coaching cultures for corporate and public sector organisations all over the world and has won several awards for coaching and writing. She is the author of ‘Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training’, featuring Forewords by Sir Richard Branson and Sir John Whitmore, ‘The Work and Life of David Grove: Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge’ and ‘The Coaching and Feedback Handbook’, an internal publication for IKEA. She has contributed to several other books and published over 50 articles including a monthly column in Training Journal.

www.coachingcultureatwork.com

info@coachingcultureatwork.com