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Six Tips for Coaching Success

By Omar Khan

Coaching is as much art as science. To stimulate your coaching potential, keep six key steps in your mind, heart, and in the interactions you have with the clients you coach.

Prepare Yourself

If, as Werner Heisenberg suggested, we alter reality by perceiving it, then we affect it even more by participating in it. Coaching is a shared dynamic, so your preparation plays an important role in creating a successful outcome for your client.

Many times, after an overnight flight, I have to get ready to engage a client who expects and deserves my very best. These are critical hours he (or she) has allocated, requiring my imagination, energy, and alertness. Therefore, I have to do whatever is necessary—physically, mentally, and emotionally to be fully present.

When I'm at home, this means ample rest, and maybe a good workout. I need time to organize myself and to gear up emotionally. On the road, I may rest and then take a brisk walk to get my blood oxygenated. I must be mentally clear to be of service.

Ensure That the Client's Larger Future Is at Stake

For coaching to engage both the coach and the client, the stakes have to be high enough. If you assume that the current trajectory of the client's professional life will take him to a predictable future, then you are hoping to intervene to make his future larger, more creative and expansive.

Therefore, you and the client have to identify this transformation to an extraordinary future, and agree together to call it forth. This future vision becomes your report card for measuring success.

I coached a new leader who was taking the reins from his mentor. He worried about articulating a vision that honored the past while also painting a compelling future.

We concluded that an uneasy handover to the new leader was possible. So we decided to commit fully to creating a handover that honored the wisdom and relationships of the past while engaging others to create a powerful set of priorities that would be the focus of the leader's attention.

Together, we worked with others to share and evolve the leader's new vision. In one of our early sessions, a jaded old-timer said, "In my 25 years of corporate life, I have to say this is the best vision communication I've ever been a part of."

We knew something important had been achieved.

Connect to the Person

Once a breathtaking future has been envisioned, the success of a coach depends on the strength of the client relationship. You have to connect deeply with the person you are coaching. Learn to see your client, and be capable of looking outward with him, to see the world as he sees it. You may not agree with his perspective, but you can't help him shift that perspective if you can't appreciate it.

A key skill involved in connecting with a client is called "pacing." This means taking the lead from the client, entering her world and adjusting your own tempo and rhythm to her needs. When you meet clients where they are, then you can invite them to experiment with other paradigms, cadences, and reflexes.

I coached a client whose style was bombastic. He was mercurial, bright, intuitive, and sharp-witted. For many people, he was also intimidating. As a result, some talented next-level leaders became acolytes rather than the type of allies the leader needed.

By engaging with the client, in his preferred modality, I helped him channel his extraordinary energy and insight into mentoring others. He learned to use his intelligence and insight as healthy provocation, and to make his statements more invitational and less magisterial.

Part of his genius is his larger-than-life persona. But he's learned to mellow it at times, redirect it in a more collaborative way. He has shifted from scaring people to stimulating them.

Be Alert to the Situation and Sensitive to the Context

Even when you have built rapport with clients and have a larger future to develop with them, there are still days where something else is on their minds. You may notice they are not in the game.

You have to be flexible, empathetic, and aware. Create relationships that let clients confide in you. The coach is a client's partner in progress, who has to be ready, willing, and able to incorporate the vagaries of life into achieving the client's purpose.

Therefore, find out what is most important to that person *that day*. Although this may lead to an off-ramp, ultimately it will wind back to the larger purpose.

I worked with a client who traveled up to fifteen days a month, while juggling responsibility for her three children. She reached her limit when she had to direct her family's move to a new house. With the pressures of her work and home life, she questioned her choices. It would have been inhuman to try and stick to our pre-determined coaching agenda on that day.

We spent time letting her emote and concluded that there were conversations she had to have with her husband about their respective roles, and some requests she had to make of her bosses. She left a little more ready to move forward.

Always Bridge from Today to the Larger Future

Not every coaching interaction is so emotionally charged. However, your job is always to link your interactions to the larger aim. That "end in mind" has to jolt you out of ruts, challenge your progress, inform your judgments, and validate the energy you've expended that day.

Your goal should be to make today's achievement a building block for the client's larger success. Otherwise you may pep up your clients; you may even serve as an important emotional support. But, you are short-changing them.

I always ask clients, "As a result of our time together and what you've been doing, is your larger future more real? If so, in what way?"

It also helps to ask clients, "Despite the progress, in what way is that future less real than we might have wanted it to be?"

We have to take aim at both: amplifying progress and continuing to explore and constructively challenge areas of inertia and avoidance.

Agree on Action and Clarify Support

Finally, every coaching session should conclude with specific actions agreed upon and a clear plan for the support the client needs.

The actions should flow from the current discussion, and clearly link to the client's larger future. You must work with the client to define what support is essential, including how you will support the client to help the client make the larger future a reality.

When a client reports: "I'm excited by the next steps, I feel empowered to take them, and I feel good about what we've done," then coaching has succeeded both as science and as art.

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