

Three rarely seen coaching skills

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Like me you are probably fed up with the 'four steps to becoming a perfect coach' type articles, so I will make this different – and provocative. My thoughts are based on three principles:

Coaching when done well, (all too rarely) really pays off with powerful outcomes

Most coaching is hugely over-priced, and is very unhelpfully clock-driven

To be a real coach takes time and skills few possess – including far too few coaches

After the best part of four decades in the learning business, and following a much reflection and observation of practice, I believe real coaching requires three really important and rarely seen skills...

Understanding context

The most important thing I have learned about real coaching is that you can't help anyone you haven't come to understand, in terms of circumstance, motivation, ambitions, and all the other unique mix of factors that make up an individual's specific context.

Thus coaching absolutely requires something most who claim to be a coach don't have – a will to genuinely understand the person they are helping to learn and develop. Doing this properly takes time, time is usually tight and costs, which in turn means that the value of any help is far less than if context was understood.

When I work with someone as explained below I take all the time that a real coaching relationship needs to get to grips with as many of the significant forces that impact on the client's ability to get the most from any developmental activity.

Without being intrusive, this may well involve domestic as well as working relationships. Some of course will be more willing than others to reveal and divulge, and the best coaches know when to push for informed insight and when to back off.

Finding all the time it takes

Time as shown above is required to get to know your client, and time is needed in serious quantities to then explore thoroughly and truly work out what will help by way of forward progress. For me, there is a seriously inhibiting tension between the typical coaching charges per half hour and the space a client needs to genuinely and fully unpack issues and consider better, high value options of enhanced behaviours and performance.

A ticking clock limits this by ridiculous per minute costs inhibiting the value any client can gain from a helping relationship.

This is why in my own practice I work with a small number of clients on an 'all the time you need for three months' basis. If this causes an army of clock-driven 'coaches' to throw up their arms in shock and alarm, then so be it, real coaching is a test of those who genuinely see themselves as vocationalists first, and business people after that. Those that see coaching as a 'product' are selling time and are often not driven by a desire to help people to learn.

For many who call themselves coaches this means a need to move from 'how much can I make?' to 'how much can I help?'.

Being led by the client

Coaching works best when advice is carefully considered, in the context of a thorough understanding of context, needs, key impacting issues and aspirations. This requires a relationship based on an interest and concern for the client, not what principally what they will earn the coach.

During the as long as it takes period in which I and a client see if we will get on, and make a success of the relationship, I 'lose' more than I take on. In some instances I let the would-be client know they aren't for me, and remarkably, I get such news too!.

A real coach knows the client must lead this process. Many of my coaching interactions are frustrating, even annoying, because it is clear that the client is unready to move at a pace I might like on their behalf. To be a genuine helper the coach must judge skilfully when to offer direction, options, questions, and explore significant matters, and when to simply let the client speak – because no-one else shows that respectful interest.

Any coach that sees their purpose as the provider of wisdom and advice can be drawn into unhelpfully over-managing, equally, a coach is not a 'there there' therapist, the few true coaches know how to be led by a client whilst at the right time and in the right way, interjecting with high value input that accelerates learning, saves time, and adds real and tangible value.