

Challenging Coaching – Going beyond traditional coaching to face the FACTS

Part 2 : Accountability

Main points:-

- In tough times, society has become less tolerant of leaders who do not meet minimum standards of accountability
- Coaches can anticipate and adapt to this trend by acting as stronger 'agents of accountability' in their coaching relationships
- Holding the coachee accountable requires the coach to risk disrupting the relationship and rapport they have built
- Coachees can be held accountable not just for taking actions but for broader, holistic responsibilities

In March, I wrote an article for the Training Zone titled 'Coaching in Challenging Times'. The essence of the message was that, in the boom times, coaches had colluded with their clients to build cosy, personal relationships that made coachees feel valued and recognised rather than focusing upon delivering 'bottom line' business results. I suggested that the new economic reality would prompt a reappraisal of the balance between 'building great relationships' and 'delivering great results' as the core purpose of coaching.

Topics such as feedback, accountability, challenge, tension and systems thinking are all relevant to the role of a coach in delivering great results. At 121partners, we have coined the acronym FACTS™ to summarise these skills. The purpose of this series of monthly articles is to explore the FACTS™ approach in more detail in order to help coaches and buyers of coaching to understand and evaluate a 'results driven' coaching approach. In this second article, we will focus upon the 'A' for accountability.

To understand the role of accountability in the FACTS approach, we need to first reflect upon the wider attitude towards accountability in society at large. Events such as the public reaction to the MP's expense scandal and the disgust at the financial industry bonus culture seem to suggest that there is a shift in attitudes going on in the wider world. What trends are driving this change?

Firstly, technology and the internet are making information more freely available to a global audience in an uncensored format. In parallel, the 'Generation Y' population is growing up with a less deferent attitude towards those in authority; they are much less likely to give people respect based on a job title alone and have higher expectations of standards of behaviour in our worldly institutions. When these trends are combined with a deep recession then the public's lack of tolerance for leaders who are perceived to be 'unaccountable' reaches a new high.

If the coaching profession is to anticipate this trend rather than react to it then coaches would be acting as strong 'agents of accountability' in their work with business leaders and their teams. We too would be less tolerant and less accepting of coachees who fall short in areas where they have responsibilities and commitments to uphold. In the good times, maybe we were tempted to accept

our coachees and their failings too easily, 'to meet them where they are at'. The FACTS approach encourages coaches to shift the balance and act with courage to hold accountable the most powerful senior leaders if, in the moment, this is what the situation calls for.

Exactly what is it that coaches would be holding coachees accountable for? Clearly, commitment to actions that the coachee has agreed to complete are a simple example. Beyond this, the coach can also hold the coachee accountable for any discrepancy between words, feelings, body language and actions. For example, a coach might find themselves observing "*when you were describing that situation, I noticed your eyes looked down and I remembered how you have previously expressed strong negative opinions about leaders who adopt similar practices. What is going on here?*"

The coach can also hold the coachee accountable to commitments they have made implicitly by being leaders in a wider organisational context. For example, most organisations have a clear mission statement, strategy, set of values and corporate social responsibility agenda. In the FACTS approach, a coach may observe "*I am aware that one of the values of this organisation is 'honesty'. You are clearly involved in a situation here where you don't feel that everyone involved is 'walking the talk' regarding this value. What are you going to do to be honest about this with others?*"

Those banks that failed all had CEO's who were responsible for leading them into that crisis. Imagine that you were a coach to one of these leaders and let's conduct a 'thought experiment': The second coaching session coincides with the day that the bank's share price reaches its peak; happy days! The CEO looks to you to take the lead:

"How have you got on with the actions you committed to take from our first coaching session?" you boldly venture.

"Could you just remind me what those actions were?" he replies.

"Well, you were going to speak to your HR Director to review the bonus scheme for senior managers".

"Look, I've really been rather busy." he replies sharply, "I've been tied up with some important pension negotiations. I haven't had the time to do any of those actions."

So, as the coach, what do you now do?

Part of you is screaming to let it go and not risk the rapport that you have so carefully been building. Another part of you is urging you to be brave and hold him accountable, to explore the precedent that is being set and to not become just another fawning acolyte. You are wishing that you had been more explicit about accountability in your initial contracting session with him.

Most of all, ask yourself if your response would have been different if you knew that in six months time your coachee would be splashed all over the newspapers and pilloried for all that is wrong in the financial services sector. What sort of coach would you have been proud to have been when this bank went down? How would you contract to have permission to be this sort of coach with all of your coachees going forward?

John Blakey and Ian Day are co-authors of 'Challenging Coaching'. For more information see www.challengingcoaching.co.uk