

Challenging Coaching – Going beyond traditional coaching to face the FACTS

Part 1 : Feedback

Main points:-

- Tough times call for a more 'results driven' coaching approach
- Why do coaches always listen and ask questions but rarely give honest feedback?
- Overcoming the three biggest obstacles to giving great feedback in a coaching session

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 clients 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. However, all these approaches risk breaking trust and rapport with the client if not practiced with skill and maturity. 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. This month we will start with 'F' for feedback.

The International Coach Federation core competence 'Direct Communication' contains the behaviour 'Is clear, articulate and direct in sharing and providing feedback'. So feedback is a recognised part of coaching, like listening and asking questions. I am sure that all coaches listen and ask questions to some degree but I am not sure that all coaches give feedback to their clients. And I don't mean praise, encouragement and recognition. Unfortunately, I am referring to the sort of feedback that the client may perceive as personal criticism.

How often do coaches take the risk of confronting the client with the impact and consequences of their behaviour? For to do this risks damaging hard won rapport. But not doing it risks something greater – their integrity as a professional coach. In my experience, there are three reasons why coaches hold back on providing feedback to their clients:-

1. Feedback is perceived as judgmental and directive

A coach might believe that providing feedback compromises the non-judgmental, non-directive principles of coaching. However, there is a great difference between giving feedback on your fixed opinion of someone's personality ('you really are very awkward, aren't you?') compared to giving feedback on the temporary impact of someone's behaviour ('when you arrive at our coaching session late, it makes me feel like you are not respecting my time'). Whilst the former is certainly judgmental, the latter is neither judgmental nor directive, it is simply the truth as you, the coach, are experiencing it in that moment.

As my colleague, Ian Day, neatly puts it 'Feedback is a gift to aid self-awareness and to reduce blind spots. The coach has no ego in this situation, and provides feedback on how behaviour is seen and how the coach interprets the actions of the coachee. Feedback on how the coach felt, what he/she thought, and the assumptions made by the coach are valuable sources of

information. If the coach is not willing to share these, then the coachee is destined to remain unaware for how he/she is perceived by others.'

2. The coach is not confident in the process and skills of providing effective feedback

There are many process models for providing effective feedback but these are not always included in coach skills training courses. One, which is well established in corporate life, is the following four stage approach:-

- Observed – what was seen/what happened? (specific, factual, description non-judgemental, “the act not the actor”)
- Impact – what assumptions did you (or others) make as a result? How did this make you feel of this? What are the consequences?
- Invite – ‘How do you see this?’
- Agree Action – What should be done? Future focused and constructive (something can always be done)

Armed with such a process, then the core skill of providing feedback is to hold fast to the Rogerian principle of ‘unconditional, positive regard’ i.e. to come from a place where your pure intention is to help the client through raising their self awareness, rather than from a place where your intention is to defend yourself or ‘score a point’ or some other better disguised, more sophisticated, yet still ego-driven, reaction.

3. The coach does not feel they have the client’s permission to provide feedback

This obstacle is the most simple to overcome. If you are not sure whether you have your client’s permission to give them feedback as part of the coaching relationship, just ask them! Preferably, this question would be asked as part of the initial contracting conversation. I have yet to experience a client who did not wish me to offer feedback as part of my role, yet to ask and contract explicitly on the topic is the first step in making feedback an integral part of the coaching relationship. If the answer ever were ‘No’ then I would probably not be the best coach for such a client and it is better for both of us to find this out sooner rather than later!

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