

3 Creating trust: foundation values and practices for coaches

A coaching conversation is unlike most other discussions. It involves a high level of trust and candour on both sides. Creating and sustaining this unusual environment is what gives coaching its power. To do it as a coach involves abandoning some of the normal conventions of conversation in our society and replacing them with high-level, alternative skills, all of them about communicating acceptance and respect. In this chapter I look at some foundation principles that are necessary to create trust, returning to the topic in more detail in Chapter 10.

The concept of choice in coaching

One of the ground precepts of coaching that I described in Chapter 1 (page 7) is a belief that the client is resourceful, can make choices and is responsible for him or herself. Underneath this belief are the fundamental principles of choice and self-responsibility. Making these principles explicit has been the great gift of mainstream twentieth-century psychology to the world. They are the foundation, for instance, of the Transactional Analysis (TA) school: that whatever misery and dysfunction there is in your life, you can transform yourself through conscious choice. Its underlying assumption is similar to many in other schools of psychological thinking: human beings, uniquely among animals, are able to look to the future, therefore we are not the prisoners of our past.

The American psychologist Will Schutz, developer of the personality questionnaire FIRO-B™, also skilfully articulated these principles, though from a different perspective. Schutz took the concept of choice to its ultimate in his book *The Truth Option* (1984: 18): 'I choose my whole life and I always have. I choose my behaviour, my feelings, my thoughts, my illnesses, my body, my reactions, and my spontaneity.'

Schutz's philosophy was that choice is not a moral concept, only one which has consequences. If you assume that you can make choices then you take responsibility for your life. You bring areas that are unconscious into the areas of consciousness. For instance, you may feel afraid of your own violent or sexual feelings but your overtly expressed values do not allow you to admit

this to yourself. You conceal your fears in hearty condemnation of people who do indulge their violence or sexuality.

Similarly, if you express fear of your boss or a colleague, there may be no objective reason at all for the fear; your real fear is of being unable to cope. If you see others as the cause of your fear then you will spend a lot of time and energy criticizing, trying to change others or avoiding them. Equally, your life may be filled by anticipation of being humiliated, ignored or rejected, regardless of whether this is actually likely or not. Once you see that the fear is in you, you can work on your ability to cope: a very different strategy, and one that is at the heart of coaching. Essentially, coaching is about the client becoming aware of, staying aware of, and being in control of, their own power.

Avoiding the principle of choice always involves a pay-off. For instance, if I take a lofty line on people who abuse their power, then my pay-off is that I hope to be seen as morally superior. If I claim that the organization is causing me hideous stress by overworking me, my pay-off is that I am a victim and will attract sympathy, attention and possibly financial compensation as well. If I claim to be confused then people may excuse my inability to make a decision. Schutz stressed that accepting the principle of choice does not involve blame, either of yourself or others. At its heart it involves taking responsibility for yourself.

Similarly, you cannot take responsibility for others. I sometimes challenge clients to show me how they could actually *make* someone else happy or unhappy. No client has yet been able to show me how this could happen. We all choose how we respond to any stimulus, often at an unconscious level, but we choose nonetheless. When you take inappropriate responsibility for others, you will quickly get to burnout – something familiar to all experienced coaches whose clients describe the stress that accompanies believing that you have to do everything yourself. This idea also explains the importance of avoiding asking clients 'How did that *make* you feel?' No one can *make* you feel anything and asking the question that way implies that others are responsible for the client's emotional wellbeing. A better question is 'How did that feel?'

If you really accept that people are resourceful then you have to believe in the concept of choice. It follows that you can't be a victim, or be brainwashed or manipulated. As Schutz commented, 'Nothing is stressful to me unless I interpret it as stressful.'

This concept has never been more powerfully illustrated than by the Austrian psychiatrist and neurologist Viktor Frankl in his moving book *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959). Frankl was imprisoned in Auschwitz and other camps during the Holocaust in conditions that were at the most extreme edge of anything human beings can be asked to bear. He did not know whether his wife and family had survived (his wife, mother, father and brother in fact all died in the camps). He had been imprisoned purely on grounds of his Jewishness and stripped of his professional identity, his clothes and even the

hair on his head by his Nazi captors. He was ill, cold, malnourished, surrounded by desperate and dying people, forced to do brutally hard physical work and in constant fear of being murdered. Yet in his book he describes feeling that although his captors had physical liberty, he had more freedom:

... there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance.

(Frankl 1959: 87)

Frankl chose to separate himself mentally from his surroundings. At one stage he had a vision of himself after the war, giving lectures and writing about his experiences. This sustained him and saved him from the 'give-up-itis' described by the Allied soldiers who eventually liberated the camps. They observed that many former prisoners simply lost their will to live. In Schutz's terms, they chose to die. Viktor Frankl chose to live. After the war he founded a still-thriving Institute devoted to his own version of psychotherapy, 'Logo-therapy', wrote many more books and died full of honours in 1997 at the age of 92.

One way of defining coaching is that it is about raising self-awareness as a precursor to exposing the nature of the choices we are making. Realizing that we have choices is in itself powerfully motivating, rather than assuming that the default choice (do nothing), of which we are often unaware, is all that is possible. At the same time, never underestimate how frightening this idea can be when you have hidden inside a belief that somehow others are responsible for your happiness. Most of us secretly or overtly want to have at least a little or a lot of dependency on others and simultaneously want at least a little or a lot of autonomy. If you feel you have cracked this conundrum you are lucky indeed because few of us have.

You insist, I resist

Coaching is about drawing out intrinsic human resourcefulness. It follows, then, that if you do genuinely believe in the resourcefulness of your clients, you will have to find alternatives to giving advice. So the first step to establishing trust is to abandon advice-giving as a coaching tactic.

This is easy to say and to write, but it is probably the single most difficult task for a coach. Many people who become coaches have had earlier jobs where they have been paid to give advice. Their professional training has positioned them as specialists and a great deal of their professional identity is invested in being an expert.

For instance, human resource specialists are trained to tell managers what the employment law is and to help them avoid making catastrophic mistakes when hiring and firing staff. Doctors are trained to know more than their patients about the human body. Accountants are trained to interpret balance sheets and to give clients the benefit of their advice on personal finance. So when confronted with the messy and sprawling issues that clients bring to coaching, inside, the coach may be thinking:

It's my job to find the solution for this client – I'll have failed if I don't.

I can't bear this client's pain and confusion. I need to help her by telling her what I think she should do.

It's so obvious – he needs to do x or y.

If advice worked as a helping tactic, it might be possible to make a case for it as a prime approach to coaching. However, it doesn't.

Think for a moment about something you do which is generally acknowledged to be unwise. This might be something like smoking, drinking more than the recommended number of units of alcohol a week, driving too fast on the motorway, eating unwisely, being over- or underweight for your height, not taking advantage of health-screening services or getting too little rest. Now imagine a good friend is giving you advice on the topic.

This is what typically happens:

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| You: | I'd really like to give up smoking, but it's so hard! |
| Helpful friend: | Yes, you should you know, it's the one way we can reduce the risks of heart disease – and think of the money you're wasting! |
| You: | Yes, I know, but it's so hard to do. |
| Helpful friend: | The best way to do it is to go cold turkey. |
| You: | Mmm, I tried that four years ago and it didn't work so I don't think I can do that. |
| Helpful friend: | You could! My friend Emma went to a wonderful hypnotherapist and she stopped straight away. Has never had a fag since. |
| You: | Yes, but that's Emma. It may have worked for her but I don't think I could do it just like that. |
| Helpful friend: | Yes you could. |
| You: | Well I'm not ready yet. |
| Helpful friend: | (gives up in exasperation). |

In this example, you and the helpful friend are playing the 'Yes, but' game. The friend makes a suggestion and you say, 'Good idea – but . . .' The chances that you will give up smoking on the basis of this conversation are nil.

The reasons are that, first, however well meant the advice may be, being the recipient of it is probably creating feelings of anger and guilt. No one enjoys being told to change something they already know they should change, so all your energy is going into repelling the advice. When you feel you are being told what to do, your first response is virtually always to defend your existing position. In neurobiological terms, your amygdala is alerted and is ready to resist (see Chapter 2). It becomes impossible to listen carefully to what the other person is saying, however sensible it is.

Second, it is most unlikely that you will not have heard this advice before, as the reasons that people continue to smoke have little to do with ignorance of its long-term effects. Third, the tone of the conversation precludes any real honesty on your part. It will guarantee that you withhold the most important aspects of the issue for you. It neither gets to the reasons why you smoke nor taps into any of the reasons that you might want to stop. Most seriously, the conversation implies that your friend is a well-adjusted human being whereas you are a bit of a sad addict, so, however well meant, the conversation could undermine your confidence.

Furthermore, you have to live with the results of the advice, not your friend. If you do take your friend's advice and it all goes horribly wrong – for instance, days of cold-turkey-hell where your relationships temporarily collapse under the searing anger and misery of withdrawing so suddenly from tobacco, the friend is a handy scapegoat: 'He/she made me do it'. If the advice turns out well, then it reinforces the notion that other people have more willpower, are cleverer, more able and more decisive.

Even at its most apparently straightforward, advice-giving actually runs a significant risk of being ignored. Doctors are respected professionals who complete a long training before being let loose on us, their patients. Their advice carries genuine authority. Yet research has shown that between a quarter and a third of all prescriptions are either never taken to the pharmacy or remain in the patient's bathroom cabinet.

Some advice-giving is about control. Think about the most recent time when you passed on a piece of advice and ask yourself how far it was really an attempt to control the other person through the apparently benign process of giving advice. If you are the parent of a teenager, for instance, this is a particular trap. The wish to save our children from the distressing consequences of their inexperience often leads to a deluge of do-it-my-way counsel. This can be interpreted by its recipient, quite accurately, as an attempt to maintain parental control and can have two sorts of undesirable consequence: meek, under-confident adults who lack robust assertiveness or, at the other extreme, compulsive rebels, still psychologically fighting their parents even in middle age.

Advice-giving can feel generous. It can come from a warm heart. When a client expresses misery, it can be tempting to take refuge in expressing fellow feeling through describing something similar that happened to you. Reading

your own biography into a client's concerns is dangerous for any number of good reasons. Most obviously, you are not the client. However similar your situations may appear, the client's history, personality and circumstances are totally different so his or her responses and choices will also be different. In addition, the client may very well have held back the most important aspect of his or her situation. Here is an example.

CASE STUDY

Penny (coach) and Michael (client)

Penny was coaching Michael, a middle-manager client inside her organization. He came for help on how to move his career on. By the end of their second session, Penny was becoming increasingly puzzled: Michael said he wanted another job, yet he seemed reluctant to think broadly about the possibilities. Penny knew the organization and the whole sector well. She could see that Michael had considerable ability and was outgrowing his current role. She told him that she sympathized. In her own career she said she had hit a similar plateau, saying that in her case she had made a sideways move. This involved taking a job in the same company but in a different city. This had worked for her, so surely it would work for him?

The coaching ended after its scheduled three sessions with Michael politely thanking her for her help and Penny acutely puzzled. She was aware that the coaching had not been effective. A year later Penny discovered that Michael's wife, also a manager in the organization, was seriously ill with motor neurone disease. At the time of the coaching the illness had been diagnosed but Michael's wife had asked him not to tell colleagues. Staying put geographically was important because they both felt it guaranteed the continuation of the excellent medical care she was receiving.

In reviewing this work with her supervisor, Penny realized that the turning point in the coaching, guaranteeing its failure, was this apparently bland piece of advice-giving, wrapped up as help. She had not been able to establish sufficient trust with Michael to enable him to tell her of his wife's illness. And at the point where this might have been possible she, in her own words, 'blew it'.

Saying 'Something just like that happened to me' can seem like a good idea. It is a disclosure and may therefore seem as if it will create trust. Just occasionally it might. But far more often it seems to be saying, 'This worked for me so it will work for you. Do it my way.' It suggests that you are not really

listening because you are queuing to speak – telling your story is more important than listening to the client's. My friend and colleague Phil Hayes enjoys recounting an achingly bizarre example of this tendency:

- Friend 1: How are you – haven't seen you for a long time?
 Friend 2: No, I've just recovered from meningitis. It was awful and I've only just come out of hospital. In fact I nearly died.
 Non-listening Friend: Oh – I nearly died once.

Less extreme examples of the same behaviour run the risk of appearing to trivialize the client's concerns by not exploring them. Common responses to other people's distress or worry include clichés such as:

- Don't worry, time will heal.
- There, there . . .
- Buck up – it's not that bad!
- You'll get other chances.
- Plenty more pebbles on the beach/fish in the sea.
- Least said, soonest mended
- . . . and so on.

Coaching as rescuing

The human impulse to care for the vulnerable has obviously been essential to our survival as a species. Human infants with their prolonged period of defencelessness need the kind and skilled care of adults. Adults are programmed to respond to overt dependency with tenderness.

I still remember the overwhelming emotion of looking at my tiny firstborn, seriously ill at 10 days old in what looked like a huge cot at University College Hospital in London. His survival was the only thing that could possibly matter, then or ever. Less traumatically, I still remember the fierceness of my response when faced with a tearful 8-year-old saying, 'Mum, Stephen says he'll break my arm if I don't do what he says.' Charities ruthlessly exploit these innate feelings with explicit bids which tap into our urge to rescue. 'Ten pounds will provide clean water/a week's schooling for this appealing child.' 'Twenty pounds will save this donkey/dog/cat from starvation.' Appealing to this instinct is necessary for successful parenting and probably for charity fundraising, but it is a false trail in coaching.

If you step in as rescuer with clients, you deny them their ownership of the issue. By rescuing, you actively or by implication behave as if you feel they are too frail to solve the problem themselves. This can happen when clients are overwhelmed by their anxiety. They pour out their hearts, telling you how unbearable it is to be burdened by such problems. The pressure to help by finding a solution for them can feel monumental. There are two equally unhelpful ways to respond:

- The client spills out his or her anxiety and the coach simply listens and empathizes, without asking the questions which move the client on. This hand-me-down love results in the client skipping away feeling temporarily lighter, though without having increased his or her capacity to solve such problems in the future. The coach, by contrast, feels unbearably stressed: the client has successfully transferred all the anxiety.
- The client asks the coach to find a solution. The client implements the suggested solution and looks to the coach for answers to similar questions in the future. The coach quickly gets to be seen as *managing* the client and the client is subtly demeaned in their own and others' eyes.

Sometimes the client will make an overt request for rescuing. Here is an example.

CASE STUDY

Maria (coach) and Richard (client)

Maria was coaching Richard, a client who was in dispute with his organization. He had applied for a number of jobs unsuccessfully and was now on its *At Risk* list, meaning that unless he found another job within an agreed length of time, a redundancy process would be triggered. Richard had also registered a grievance about his boss's behaviour, alleging bullying.

Maria was finding it hard going with Richard. He frequently broke down in their sessions. When asked to name his goals for the coaching sessions, Maria described him as giving vague answers which essentially amounted to 'I need a shoulder to cry on.' Richard also lavished Maria with compliments, for instance about how easy she was to talk to and about how well she understood the organization.

At their third session, Richard made a specific request. He wanted someone to accompany him to the informal meeting which would start the grievance process. 'You understand me so well,' he said, 'and I don't trust myself to give a good account of all this stuff at the meeting. Will you come with me?'

Maria is in coaching because she likes people and wants to help. She understood Richard's vulnerability because she had been in an apparently similar situation herself. However, she knew that she had to resist because by accepting she would have been colluding with Richard's belief that he was powerless. Agreeing would have implied 'You really are in a bad way'; 'I can step in and look after you'.

Maria wisely refused Richard's invitation, seeing that her true role as Richard's coach was to tackle his lack of self-belief. One of the ways she was able to do this was to help him prepare so that he could represent himself at the meeting with skill and confidence. If she had fallen into the trap he had laid for her, she would also have been stepping spectacularly outside her coaching role. Appearing as an *advocate* for Richard would have made it impossible in subsequent coaching sessions for her to have given him the robust feedback, challenge and confrontation that he needed, in addition to the empathetic support that she was already providing.

You are at risk of rescuing when you find yourself thinking or doing any of the following:

What would they do without me?

I'm not looking forward to this session; it'll be round and round the same loop.

I don't think they are going to get this right – their old pattern is going to assert itself yet again.

Impatience: why can't they just do what I say?

Making harsh judgements about the client's capacity.

Believing that if you were in their shoes you'd do the job better.

Toying with the idea of actively intervening in the client's system on their behalf.

Rescuing implies that the client is a victim and if you act on the impulse to do it, it will further undermine the client. If you do rescue, you may

also find that the ‘victim’ turns on you: ‘You didn’t rescue me cleverly enough!’

In general, when you lose faith in the ability of clients to solve their own problems, you are losing faith in the coaching process, thus ensuring that it fails. That is why it is so important to avoid all the many ways in which we can subtly dishearten our clients through giving advice.

What if clients ask for advice?

Every now and then a client will ask for advice outright:

What do you think?

If you were me, what would you do?

Where you are holding back your advice with extreme difficulty, this can be a seductive invitation. What you do depends on the circumstances because nothing in coaching is an absolute rule.

An experienced client will even challenge you on your home territory:

Come on, I know coaching isn’t about advice, but I’m actually begging you to tell me what to do!

There are any number of possible ways you can avoid the advice-giving trap when invited to fall into it by a client.

- Ask the client, respectfully what it would do for them to know what you would do. This challenges a client’s belief that the answer is ‘out there’ rather than in themselves.
- Say, ‘I could tell you what I would do, but you and I are very different people, so I’m not sure that would help. The answer you come up with yourself is the one that will work for you.’
- Say, ‘I will tell you, but let’s explore what ideas you have first,’ by which time the client has usually lost interest in hearing the advice.
- Avoid a direct answer and go straight to a dilemma-solving technique such as identifying all the options and then rating them all for pluses and minuses.

Conditions that need to be in place to give advice

There are occasions when it is appropriate to give advice. Here are some of the conditions that need to be in place before offering it:

- There are clear right/wrong answers to a question the client is asking
 - e.g. on the legal, medical or financial position.
- It is a crisis and needs rapid action.
- The client's physical, financial or mental wellbeing will be in danger without having the piece of advice.
- The client is not in a position to make their own decisions – for instance, may be temporarily overwhelmed by the impact of some crisis.
- You are offering facts, not opinions.
- The client has specifically asked for information and has made it clear that they will make up their own mind on how to use it.
- The subject is genuinely bewildering and needs expert guidance for the client to be able to understand it. You have unquestionable expertise, rather than just another personal opinion, in the area on which the client is seeking advice.
- Giving the advice is unlikely to create dependency, to humiliate or to encourage unwise optimism.
- Your own motivation does not include any of the following:
 - a wish to impress and show off
 - wanting to control
 - being too lazy to use coaching techniques
 - feeling a need to pay the client back for some slight.

Even here you need to be careful. It is always better to offer what you say as *information*, making it clear that the client has to make up their mind about using it to make a decision and positively inviting the client to comment: 'These are the facts as I see them, but what do you think?' Or, 'This is the law on this point but what's your reaction to hearing that?' It may also be helpful to suggest that the client might like a second opinion, checking out your advice with another expert.

In practice, these guidelines can seem fuzzy. Here is an example.

CASE STUDY

Liz (client) and John (coach)

Liz had lost her local authority chief officer job because of a merger. As her coach, John had helped her come to terms with the initial shock. She had a strong commitment to public sector work and thought initially that she wanted to stay inside local government. John and Liz revamped her CV and also did some interview coaching. She soon landed an offer for an interesting-sounding change-management job in

a profit-making organization allied to her old specialism. This did wonders for her battered self-esteem but she still felt her heart was in the public sector and that perhaps she wanted to be a chief officer again after all. But did she want it or not? At an emergency coaching session she and John looked at the upsides and downsides of accepting or rejecting the job, including the possibility that in a tight jobs market this was likely to be the best offer she would get. She was still no clearer about whether to accept or not.

The next day she was on the phone for perhaps an hour of agonizing. 'I want you to tell me what to do,' she begged. True to the principles described above, John said that he could not do that. The core of John's dilemma was that privately he strongly felt that she should accept as it was probably the best offer she was likely to get in her current market.

She turned the job down.

Three months later she still did not have a permanent job and was miserably doing a series of temporary projects. She bitterly regretted having rejected the private sector job.

So should John have 'told' Liz to accept? Of course he, too, agonized about this, but came to the conclusion that he was right to stick to his principles. First, there was no knowing whether she would have taken any notice of his advice. There was a strong chance that if she had accepted the job she would have been as unhappy and regretful about leaving the public sector as about her eventual decision to try and stay in it. As part of the coaching, she and John had examined all the options, including how realistic it was that she would be offered another local government job that she really wanted. It was her gamble, her life, and she made her choice.

In this case, as in all good coaching, John was clear that he was responsible *to* but not *for* the client.

Authentic listening

Genuine listening is about acceptance. Genuine listening is also rare. Mostly what we experience is pretend listening. One of the worst offenders I have known here was a former client of mine, in most other respects an excellent fellow, but who had a phenomenally low tolerance for boredom. He anticipated boredom in most conversations, so his coping tactics included roaming restlessly around his magnificent office, opening his fridge to take out a drink or a bar of chocolate, looking out of the window or adjusting the volume on

the speakers of his iPod while all the time protesting, 'Go on, I'm listening . . .!', often while he had his back to his guest. As a way of ensuring that his visitors never stayed long, it was successful. As a way of communicating acceptance it was disastrous.

Rapport and congruence

Just as there are urban myths that sound plausible the first time you hear them, there are what I think of as *management trainer myths*. One of the most popular is that 'research' has demonstrated that X per cent (think of an extremely big number somewhere near 100) of all human communication is non-verbal. I have many times seen trainers proudly show PowerPoint pie charts demonstrating the alleged breakdown of percentages. The trouble is that there is no such research. If it were true then no one would ever need to learn a foreign language – we could just smile, scowl and gesticulate away. Despite this, the myth persists because it is so plausible. Like all other animals, we do indeed communicate non-verbally, though not on the scale suggested by naïve trainers whose myths have been treasured through several generations of predecessors. Teaching so-called 'body language' has become a cliché of management training courses, often reduced on these events to a trivialized exercise in mimicry of body posture.

I was reminded of this recently when I had an introductory gym session with a personal trainer. This young man leaked boredom. He said the right things and asked the right questions (though only when, it seemed, he had mentally jerked himself awake enough to remember them). His eye contact constantly wandered away from me and over my shoulder. His smile looked false. I knew with absolute certainty that his 'interest' in me was faked and my indignation at his courtesy intruded unpleasantly into my ability to learn from what he was telling me. I daresay he had been on a course where he had been taught the 'techniques of rapport'. But rapport, congruence and empathy are not 'techniques'. They are *ways of being* with a client.

Real rapport is more than copying body posture, though two people who are actually in rapport will indeed mirror each other in how they are sitting or standing. When you are in rapport, you will be matching the other person: body, voice volume, breathing, gesture, space, language, pace and energy. You are entering that person's world. 'Mirror neurons' (see page 43) will be doing their work. To an observer it will look like an elegant dance, first one leading and then the other. In an ideal world this would happen naturally. The coach's world is often not ideal because all kinds of intrusions make it difficult to sustain rapport.

Real rapport comes from unconditional acceptance of the client. This is not the same as liking the client, though in practice you will probably come to like the majority of your clients. When you unconditionally accept a client you will be congruent and when you are congruent you will be in rapport.

Unconditional acceptance means that you are curious about the client. You want to know what it is like to inhabit their emotional world. You accept not just the nice bits – that is, the admirable parts, the behaviours that spring from values just like your own – but the parts that are less admirable and about which the client may feel ashamed or worried. Most of us grow up learning that acceptance is conditional. Some examples might be that love and acceptance depend on being nice to people all the time and putting their needs first; being quietly spoken and modest or alternatively lively and entertaining, always smiling; being 100 per cent successful 100 per cent of the time. An important part of the coaching process is to uncover what these conditional assumptions are – I describe some approaches to this in Chapter 7.

Coaching works when it offers clients the opportunity to discover that they can be valued as a whole – moving past the conditional assumptions that have cramped their growth. The coach will not judge. This is so rare in our society that clients may doubt at first whether they can trust it; hence the cautious feel that many first and second sessions have. It does mean, of course, that as a coach you have to know, deal with and move beyond your own assumptions about what is ‘worthy’ and what is not. If you cannot, you will find yourself *simulating* congruence instead of *being* congruent – a distinction immediately obvious to any client.

Ten traps: when rapport and congruence break down

These are the 10 most common reasons for loss of congruence.

Fear

The coach fears not being good enough and fear floods the internal system. Extreme self-consciousness then prevents the coach from managing the rapport at a conscious or unconscious level. There may be some congruence and rapport but unfortunately it will consist of the client leading the coach most of the time, rather than the graceful *pas de deux* that happens when there is genuine rapport.

Overwhelming need for the client to like you

We all need to like and be liked, but if the wish to be liked gets out of hand it will prevent you challenging appropriately. This feeling again arises from fear and lack of self-confidence. ‘If I challenge, this client won’t like me.’ In ordinary conversation with friends we may have cheerful disputes, but in general we keep profound disagreements to ourselves – and most probably select our friends because they share our opinions and prejudices. A coach often has to disagree, but the disagreement comes from the security of knowing that when it is done respectfully it will be totally acceptable to the client and you will maintain rapport and congruence.

Believing you already know

The client starts their account and the coach immediately jumps to the conclusion that they already know the answer. 'I've heard all this before', or 'I know what he/she should do'. As soon as this thought kicks in, you stop listening.

Judgement

The coach cannot suspend judgement about some perceived aspect of the client – maybe their profession ('I never did like journalists/bankers/estate agents'), their values, their clothing, their nationality, race, religion or their personality. This sort of disapproval, that originates in prejudice, will leak out in all kinds of ways and is usually perfectly apparent to the client.

Imposing actual or implied values onto the client

The coach dominates the process with values that overwhelm because they are projected so strongly through their behaviour, normally through showing enhanced or withdrawn attention. This imposes new restrictive conditions on the client so that the client feels, 'I am only valued when I talk about my successes', or 'This coach likes it best when I cry', or 'I feel I have to over-dramatize my problems – that's what he/she seems to respond to'. Forcing the client into incongruity in order to please the coach is one sure way to damage the coaching process.

Psychologizing and interpreting

The coach attributes simple behaviours to some past trauma ('I can see that this reminds you of your abusive father') or to heavy underlying significance, when in fact they are just simple behaviours.

Compulsive explaining

The coach loves to offer the client little box and arrow diagrams which encapsulate his or her pet theories; interrupts the client in order to offer endless potted versions of favourite management or psychology textbooks.

The wish to reform the client

The coach sees that the client has certain unhealthy or undesirable habits such as smoking, over-eating, working too hard, not exercising enough and cannot refrain from offering suggestions about people who might help – or new wonder-methods of controlling the pesky habit.

Preoccupation on the coach's part

The coach has so many issues going on in their own life that it is impossible to concentrate on the client.

Unawareness on the coach's part

The coach does not know that they are fixed in particular ways of talking and communicating. For instance, when training coaches, one of the most common ways that I notice an inexperienced coach gets this subtly or

dramatically wrong is in mismatching the client's pace. The client is languid in style but the coach is energetic – or vice versa. Another example would be that the client has an unusually quiet voice, but the coach remains loud. Yet another might be that the client's language shows a liking for a particular sort of metaphor but the coach does not spot it and uses his or her own version of the same words instead.

All of the above are bigger and more common traps than you might suppose. Success as a coach always involves high levels of self-awareness and ruthlessly exposing yourself to your own prejudices and assumptions. In just the last few weeks I have worked as supervisor and trainer to three relatively experienced coaches who ruefully discovered that their coaching had been less effective than they had hoped:

The coach had had a highly successful career in banking as one of the few women to make it to the top. Working with a much younger woman client also in banking, she found herself responding disapprovingly to the client's decision to prioritize a personal relationship with a man rather than ruthlessly pursuing her career.

An American coach confessed to being lured into arguing with a British client about healthcare systems in the two countries.

A doctor coach with strongly-held feminist principles was coaching a more junior fellow doctor for the first time and realized she had felt instant prejudice on the basis that her Muslim client was wearing the *hijab*.

Real congruence starts with a buoyant and sincere wish to understand the other person – to see the world as they see it. At the same time you have to be self-aware and self-accepting, letting your own barriers down, free of the need to defend yourself. When you no longer fear others you will not feel the need to protect yourself from difference and when you are able to do this you will probably find that everything else follows. You may also have to accept that there will indeed be times when your own values and the values of the client are at odds in ways that make it impossible to work on the issue they present. You can respect the client's right to hold such values, work on understanding the values, and also reserve the right to say 'no' (see page 220).

Mismatches

When you mismatch someone, you break rapport. Sometimes it is possible to mismatch without there being any malign intention, but the client may easily misinterpret what they see. For instance:

- fiddling with your watch, pen or ring may suggest impatience;
- looking at a clock or watch may seem to imply that you want to move on to something else;
- staring unblinkingly at the other person can seem aggressive;
- wagging your foot may suggest nervousness or impatience;
- sitting with crossed arms can look as if you are defending yourself against the other person's ideas;
- sitting with crossed legs; sitting hunched may look as if you are trying to make yourself smaller and therefore as if you lack confidence;
- turning your chair slightly away from the other person may seem to indicate a lack of interest or (depending on other body language) lack of confidence;
- sitting back in your chair when the other person is sitting forward may suggest lack of involvement;
- touching your face while talking can imply timidity, especially if the hand is actually in front of the mouth;
- rubbing your nose, looking away – some people feel this indicates lying;
- scowling or frowning may look like disapproval though for many people this is just a habit they have got into when concentrating;
- avoiding eye contact can look like lack of interest or of confidence.

Constant mismatching will distract and dismay your client. But occasionally a deliberate piece of mismatching is very useful. Here is an example from a colleague.

CASE STUDY

Jane

I had been asked to coach Jane, a senior television producer whose boss reported that she could not manage her team. Allegedly, Jane's influencing tactics could be reduced to one style: tell people what to do and if they don't do it, bawl at them. Jane appeared for an introductory discussion looking distinctly hostile with 'What's all this about?' and 'I don't want to be here' conveyed in every aspect of her appearance.

Throughout the meeting, Jane huddled in her chair with her shoulders pointing away from me, avoiding eye contact and radiating anger with an abrupt and loud voice. Feeling uncomfortable, I made a conscious attempt to match her posture and voice volume. After 10 minutes I deliberately broke whatever rapport there was, sat up

energetically in my chair, then immediately softened my voice and slowed it down, asking her to tell me about the feelings that this apparent organizational assault on her confidence was creating for her. It was hard to keep doing this conscious mismatching in the face of such resolute resistance. However, after a few minutes, she slowly swivelled around to face me for the first time and her own voice dropped. We were then in genuine rapport for the first time, and the real conversation could begin.

Mismatching is also useful when you want to punctuate a coaching session by moving from one agenda topic to another, or where the client appears to have got stuck in a mood that does not seem helpful. Sometimes this break can be something as obvious as 'Why don't we get up and have another cup of coffee?', or just a more subtle change in your own posture and energy level.

Is this manipulation? No, because to work it depends on your thoroughgoing commitment to 100 per cent respect for and curiosity about your client.

The three levels of listening

It would be rare to confess to being a poor listener – about as rare as owning up to being a bad driver or to having no sense of humour. However, coaches can't afford the luxury of self-delusion. A high standard of hard-nosed honesty is the only possible tactic.

I like the framework proposed by the Coaches Training Institute because it allows for a hierarchy of listening effectiveness, all of which depends on the self-awareness of the coach. It is described in an excellent book by Laura Whitworth, Henry Kimsey-House and Phil Sandahl, *Co-active Coaching* (1998) and like many other coaching concepts it has its origins in psychotherapy.

Level 1

This is the client's level. As the client you are self-absorbed. You don't have to worry about anything except getting your story out. As a client this level is fine. As a coach it is disastrous. You will be thinking about yourself, not the client. Signs that you are at Level 1 include:

- finding yourself asking the client for more facts: 'how many; when; who; what's the structure; what's the history', when the client hasn't mentioned them;
- noticing that you are getting flustered, that your inner dialogue is about your own anxiety:
 - What can I ask next?
 - Was that a good enough question?
 - Will this last for the whole session?
 - Does the client like me?
- wanting to give advice;
- talking about yourself: lots of I and me.

Sample Level 1 conversation

Client: I need to get better at delegating. I'm working 70 hours a week at the moment.

Coach: Yes, that's really not a good idea; you'll wear yourself out.

Client: But I can't really see what else I can do, we're so busy.

Coach: You'll probably find the whole way you're doing it is a bit wrong. I've got a really good handout I can show you. It's worked for lots of clients so it should work for you.

Client: Mmm, well . . .

Coach: It starts from an analysis of how you typically spend your day. I've got a sample here. Shall we work on it now?

In this example, the coach is over-concerned to position herself as the expert. She wants to be helpful, but she is not listening because her own agenda is getting in the way and she has resorted to giving advice before she has established what the client wants.

Level 2

At Level 2, coach and client are seamlessly locked into an absorbing and intensely concentrated conversation. They are most definitely in rapport, their body posture, voices and energy levels subtly matched. The conversation will flow but the client will be doing most of the talking. The coach's questions are skilful, picking up on the language the client has used, working exclusively from the client's agenda and never giving advice. The questions explore, clarify, summarize and probe, always extending the client's thinking and willingness to learn something new. As the coach you hear what is not being said as well as what is. You are listening for the underlying meanings and are aware of your own impact on the client.

If you can remain at Level 2 for most of a coaching session you are doing well: it is the level at which the majority of effective coaching takes place.

Sample Level 2 conversation

Client: I need to get better at delegating. I'm working 70 hours a week at the moment.

Coach: That sounds tough. How should we work on this?

Client: Well, I think I'm doing it OK, but my staff tell me I'm not. I don't know what they mean really. I find myself getting anxious about it.

Coach: What exactly do they say to you?

Client: An example would be that my assistant tells me I'm constantly checking up on her, but how else am I supposed to find out how things are going?

Coach: Checking up . . . So that's her feedback. 'Finding out what's going on . . .' And you say you're getting anxious about it. Do you want to stay with this one as a useful example?

Client: Yes, OK.

Coach: So what's this anxiety about, exactly?

Here the coach is following the client's agenda scrupulously, using his words, deepening the conversation and generating useful data for the conversation that follows.

Level 3

At Level 3 you are doing what has been described as 'radio-field listening', aware not just of everything that is happening at Level 2, but also of the emotion, of the risks it might be possible to take in the conversation, of the underlying choices and of what could be at stake for the client. You trust your intuition. You feel connected with the client at an emotional as well as an intellectual level, even if no emotion has been named. You see the whole coaching relationship stretching out behind and in front of you and it feels special. These are moments of real connection – of a kind that few of us ever reach in a 'normal' conversation with a friend.

Sample Level 3 conversation

Client: I need to get better at delegating. I'm working 70 hours a week at the moment.

Coach: That sounds tough. How should we work on this?

Client: (small silence and a laugh)

Coach: (gently) So? (another pause) That laugh sounds strained.

Client: (long hesitation) It is. I can't take this pace. My staff tell me I'm 'interfering', but I don't know how else to keep everything under control. It's ruining my personal life and if I don't watch it my health as well. My wife complains she never sees me and I don't know when I last put our daughter to bed because I'm home so late. I'm awake

every morning from 4.00 a.m. and then I can't get back to sleep worrying about work. It's an enormous strain.

(another silence)

Coach: So this is an enormous strain and it feels as if there's a huge amount at stake for you, job and home.

Client: Enormous. It's a burden I don't want.

Coach: Burden is a heavy-sounding word! What does that mean for you?

Client: Unbearable – literally, like a load I'm carrying and that I'd like to put down because I can't control it.

Coach: So this is about a burden you don't want and would like to put down. Shall we explore how you might do just that?

Through working at Level 3, the coach has established a whole-life perspective and has focused the client's mind on what is at stake through continuing to work so many hours. She has done this through listening for the silences and hesitations, by listening for the metaphor and for the emotion behind the words. She has left spaces inside the conversation which the client can fill if he wishes. By doing this she makes it clear that she neither condones nor condemns the long working week, but is simply accepting and respecting the position the client finds himself in. She has spotted the underlying need that the behaviour serves. By noticing the negative energy that his stress is creating she has also harnessed a willingness to begin the change process.

The therapist Fritz Perls had a phrase that I like when he talked about this level of listening. 'A good therapist doesn't listen to the content of the bullshit of what the patient produces, but to the sound, to the music, to the hesitations' (1969: 57).

Working from the client's agenda

Implicit in all of this is the assumption that it is the client's agenda that matters, not the coach's. The minute you stray into Level 1, you will be working from your agenda, not the client's. Coaching starts and finishes with the client's agenda. This is because coaching is about change. Clients come to coaching because they want to change their lives and get results which show that change has happened. Clients know their lives in a way that the coach never can, so only the client can say what the agenda for change is.

The coach's role is to ask the questions which uncover the client's agenda and make it explicit, turning this agenda into the goals which the client can work on and safeguarding it as the only agenda for the coaching. The coach links the agenda with the client's core values and beliefs and works with the client to identify and then move past the blocks and fears which are holding them back.

Being worthy of trust: a two-way process

As a coach, I ask my clients to trust me. I am always aware of what a huge assumption this is. Why should they trust me? What can I do to accelerate that trust? Equally, my starting place in the relationship is that I will trust them. Where trust is broken, it can of course be repaired, but as with a piece of shattered china, the repair will always be there, even if apparently invisible, and it will never be so strong as it was when unbroken.

Trust may grow slowly, depending on the skill of the coach and the willingness of the client to be open. This is hard for many clients. They have become accustomed to defensiveness and sometimes to performance. Realizing that they do not have to perform for you is often the turning point in the effectiveness of the coaching: realizing they really can trust you with their failures and uncertainties and that you will not condemn or judge. Equally, they realize that you will acknowledge their achievements and their efforts to change.

As with so many other issues in coaching, this is a two-way process. What does trust really involve? The answers must be honesty, predictability, commitment and reliability.

The client's side in creating trust

First, the client is consistent in what he or she says. When the client describes a particular set-up, they will describe it in roughly the same way each time. If I get to see the client in action with their team, I will see the situation they have described – plus a great deal more, but the client's tale will still ring true.

When clients commit to the process of coaching, this means treating the coach as respectfully as they expect to be treated themselves. In a healthy coaching relationship, what the client says and what the client does are one and the same. The commitment to the coaching is more than just words. If we agree 'homework' it is done and, even if it is not done, there will be learning in why it has been put to one side for the moment. When clients say that they will continue to ponder some theme we have discussed, they do. When they say they will give me candid feedback, they do. One of the specialist services I offer is weight loss coaching and the programme starts with the client getting a full assessment from their GP, including blood pressure and blood lipids. One client broke this trust when he assured me that he had been to his doctor and had emailed me the results. A few moments of discussion made it obvious that none of this had happened – and that was the swift end of the relationship.

What the client says outside the sessions is also important. What is said inside the sessions should be consistent with what is said outside. Where this is not the case, trust will be destroyed. An example of this happened to one of my colleagues who had coached an angry senior manager made redundant by

his organization and still smarting from the hurt and rejection. My colleague had asked for feedback at the end of each session and the client said that he had found the sessions 'very useful' and spelt out the usefulness in some detail. Yet two weeks later my colleague heard that the client had described the coaching to a third party known to both of them as 'pointless navel-gazing'. When respectfully challenged about this at their next session, the client blustered and equivocated. Not surprisingly, that was their last session.

Clients gain my trust and respect where they are willing to give the coaching process a go. Signs that they are willing to do this would be, for instance, if they are ready to explore previously forbidden emotional areas or hear tough feedback and to sit out the resulting discomfort without attacking me as the bearer of bad news. Coaching demands an unusual degree of openness from both client and coach. Clients who are prepared to make themselves vulnerable through honest disclosure will earn my confidence.

Lack of commitment is betrayed in many large and small ways. For instance, a client who consistently cancels the date at the last moment for what seem like implausible reasons is indicating for sure that they do not give a high priority to the coaching. A client who arrives for sessions late, ill-prepared and bemused about the agenda tells you that their mind is on other things. Such clients could be showing that their interest in learning with you is fragile and may be waning.

The coach's side in creating trust

All of these conditions need to be equally present in the coach. The first step is to look at your own assumptions about how far you can trust the client. You don't need to like every client in the way that you would like a close friend – in fact it is impossible to do so. You will respect the many aspects of the client which are admirable, but will also be curious and interested in the many self-protective barriers which the client has skilfully erected around him- or herself.

Many clients may present initially as disagreeable people. For instance, a client who bullies or manipulates represents a style of management that I particularly dislike. However, I have worked successfully with many such clients, though I would not have lasted a week with them if they had been my boss. At the other end of the spectrum are the clients who lack assertiveness. They may be condemned by their colleagues as 'weak', or, more kindly, as 'lacking toughness'. With these clients, too, I can usually work well, yet if I worked with them as colleagues they might exasperate me.

What is the difference? As clients I am intrigued by their dilemmas and difficulties. I want to know what self-imposed barriers they have created to success. I accept their pluses, their quirks and failings unconditionally. My role is to encourage well-grounded belief in their own talents and resourcefulness. I don't have to like them in the way I need to like a close friend.

As a coach what you say and what you do have to be consistent. At the simplest level, you must deliver on your promises. If you say you will email an interesting article, you must do it. If you declare enthusiasm for coaching, you must be enthusiastic. You will give the client 100 per cent of your attention in every session, just as you expect 100 per cent attention back. It will be immediately obvious if you are drifting off or coaching on autopilot.

You will refer to clients respectfully outside the sessions, never belittling them with other coaches or saying anything that could identify them as a client, unless you have their specific permission to do so. Where you feel you cannot work respectfully, then the coaching must end. As you expect from your client, you will never cancel or arrive late for a session on spurious or trivial grounds.

You do not need clients to be just like you to be able to work with them successfully. My own assumption is that I will be able to work with more or less any client until circumstances prove otherwise.

You will strictly adhere to your promise of confidentiality. Any betrayal here will find its way back to your client in very short order. A colleague of mine describes the most common approach to confidentiality as 'only telling one other person'. As coaches we need to do better than that. If there are limits to confidentiality, tell the client what they are. Clients need to trust that we will not gossip or betray any of the many secrets we hear in the coaching room. This may range from early knowledge of a company takeover, with its potential to buy shares cheap and sell them dear later, to other kinds of insider knowledge about adulteries or people's sexuality.

The openness you expect from a client needs to be matched by openness on your side. This might mean *very occasionally* trusting the client with your own vulnerability, but this will always risk the possibility of you and your client changing places (these themes are explored in more detail in Chapter 10). It does mean staying open to the client's views, listening without judging, *walking a mile in the other person's moccasins*, helping the client to voice views that it might otherwise be difficult for him or her to express.

It also means that you are open to any request or challenge from a client. So, for instance, in one session the subject of a client's difficult marriage was on the agenda, and she suddenly stopped in mid-flow to say, abruptly, 'I need to know that your marriage wasn't always perfect.' There was no way we could continue the conversation until the feeling behind this request had been candidly explored. This turned out to be not so much a request for intimate confessions from me to her, as a sudden feeling on her part that somehow I was judging her. Exploring honestly what that feeling was and staying open to her feedback was essential to re-establishing trust.

Finally, as a coach you will demonstrate willingness to learn from your clients. This is something that is taken for granted by the best coaches in other fields – for instance, singing and sport. An outstanding opera singer will

usually have a singing coach. The best theatre companies employ voice coaches, even for distinguished actors. These coaches will tell you how much they learn from their coachees. Similarly, as life or executive coaches, when we stay open to influence from our clients in the same way that we expect them to be open to influence from us, the coaching relationship will be infinitely the richer.