

q Being nice is not enough: adding challenge to support

People who choose a career as a coach tend to see themselves as tolerant, trusting – and curious about human behaviour. We are drawn to coaching because we have a positive view of humanity. We are strongly motivated to help others. Even before we get training, we can probably create pretty good rapport already. When we are beginners we may not always be able to sustain it perfectly or see why it sometimes goes askew, but we grasp the principles. What is much, much harder is to know how and when to challenge. That is the territory for this chapter: why being *nice* is not enough, and how to add challenge to support without destroying the relationship.

One of the reasons that coaching is an unusual kind of discussion is that it includes the possibility of high levels of support and high levels of challenge in the same conversation, all within a framework of respect and rapport and delivered without judgement (see Figure 9.1). This is a rare experience. When you discuss a problem with a close friend, the chances are that the friend will loyally support you. If you are in an uncomfortable dispute, the friend may well reassure you that of course you are right and the other person in the dispute is wrong. Alternatively, you may get into a different kind of debate, one where perhaps a personal relationship has soured or where a boss seems to have taken against you. Here you may experience challenge, but as hostility, spite or rudeness.

Where the client needs and wants to make major changes in their life, it is inevitable that you will have to combine support with challenge. The key word here is *combine*. If all you do is challenge, even when it is done with kindly intent, you will fall into the category of being one more of those people who attack and undermine, and most of us already have at least some of those in our lives. Clients will rarely continue with coaching when this is the case. As a coaching client myself, I had one such coach. He was a perfectly pleasant man, but he always had some little model or theory to give me and somehow it felt as if I should already have known what these were. When he wasn't doing that he was raising what he called *tough questions* about the performance of my department, even though he had actually never been a senior executive himself. I felt constantly reproached and ended the relationship early.

Challenge	High	High challenge, low support Client is undermined, indignant and defensive; coaching likely to end prematurely.	High challenge, high support Client trusts and likes coach; can learn even when uncomfortable. Relationship capable of being long and productive.	
	Low	Low challenge, low support Low impact coaching, just a nice chat; coaching likely to peter out.	High support, low challenge Coach colludes with client; client misses opportunities to learn. Longer term, coaching unlikely to be sustainable.	
Support	Low			High

Figure 9.1 Combining challenge with support

If there is neither support nor challenge, then the coaching will lack impact – it will be another meaningless chat that the client could just as well have with an acquaintance.

As a coach, if most of what you do is agree with the client, nodding wisely, head cocked on one side to show how sincerely you are listening as they pour out their story, then several highly undesirable results can follow. You may be encouraging them to adopt the victim-thinking frame of mind in which everyone else is at fault, but they are the acme of purity. Whatever the provocation, most of us have had at least some hand in our own problems; so when others agree that we are victims, this is rightly labelled *collusion* and it does not help the client one little bit. Agreeing that they are victims reinforces the powerlessness that they already feel: *yes, client, you have been wronged and there is nothing you can do!* Where the client has performance problems, your role is to help them see what these are, or might be, and then to work with them on doing better. If all you do is agree that the client is always right, then when you have been hired by the organization, always a third party in executive coaching, your sponsor is likely to be upset and disappointed that coaching has not delivered changed behaviour.

Clients may also be disappointed. In asking in their initial session how people want to be coached, one of the most common replies is to say, 'I want to be challenged'. Most clients do know at some level that one of the most valuable functions of coaching is to expand their thinking, to shake up pre-conceptions, and to add a different perspective. This is unlikely to happen if all the coach does is to agree with the client.

The only viable option is to combine high levels of support with high levels of challenge. In my own experience as a client with a number of different coaches, the best sessions have been those where I was never quite sure what would happen. I knew I had to stay alert and at the same time I knew I would never be humiliated, however much vulnerability I displayed.

Getting to the crux

Getting to the crux describes the skill of forcing a client to name what is ultimately at stake in whatever the issue is. The relief of being able to talk to another person who listens non-judgementally is such that clients will often begin to ramble. Signs of this are that the client tells you the same thing in several different ways, and you begin to feel bored because you have already heard what the issue is. Your instinct may be that the long story is a way of avoiding the main issues. Notice it when the client starts way back in the distant past history of whatever they are describing and gets lost in all the detail: 'Where was I – I'm losing my thread here!'

As a coach, it is not a good use of the coaching session to let the client roam about in all the detail of a story. Getting to the crux is about pinning down what the real issue is – for you and the client. An example might be a client who has spent a long time describing her anger at what she feels was manipulative behaviour on the part of a team member. The client has ended up feeling stupid in front of others. This is not the first time this team member has done this. The conversation between you and the client has begun to take on a circular flavour. As the coach you intervene to say: 'So the crux of it is that you're angry and fed up with this behaviour and want to do something about it?' Naming the real issue allows clients to address the nub and decide what to do about it.

Interrupting

Interrupting people is generally thought rude in our society. As children, we learn that you never or rarely interrupt – it is part of being socialized. Hence, for instance, the mixture of horror, awe and amusement that the tougher journalist-presenters evoke: they break the taboo.

In coaching we also have to break the taboo. The client is paying us to get to the heart of things and coaching time is limited. Also, clients have already probably gone round and round the loop several times with friends. For many clients, there will be a well-rehearsed drone to the story.

Interrupting needs to be done with discretion. There are always caveats to consider. The client may need to get into the detail in order to get the story

straight in their heads. They may need the catharsis of talking at length; there may be detail which you need to hear. However, clients often go on too long as a way of avoiding getting to the real point. Talking at length may be a conscious or unconscious tactic – a way of keeping the coach at bay. These clients may tempt you with distractions they know you will find alluring. This is nearly always because you are on the track of some nodal point for change. One British politician owned up to using this tactic with his personal trainer:

When I am under the cosh being pushed to my personal limit I might suddenly reveal a fascinating piece of low-level gossip to distract him or show intense interest in his life and welfare.

Sometimes, the same clients who play on your politeness may be the first to say later that the coaching was just a lot of pointless talking. Other clients may not know how long is *too long* for talking about an issue and will need your help in establishing it. Some people talk a lot when they are nervous. Interrupting them will reassure them. Clients who are compulsive talkers may know well enough that they are going on too long, but may still have got into the habit of doing it.

You do not need to know all the detail in order to be able to coach effectively – in fact, often you need to know remarkably little – but clients may assume that you need to know a lot of the background. If they go on too long as a matter of routine, both they and you will potentially become dissatisfied. Interrupting in coaching is different from the annoying interruptions we experience in a social conversation because it has a different purpose. In social events people interrupt out of boredom or because they are queuing to speak and get fed up with waiting. Some interrupting is overtly crass and rude: it conveys, '*Now let's get back to the really interesting subject: ME!*' Coaches interrupt in the interests of the client and the coaching relationship.

How to interrupt

- Trust your intuition that it is time to do it.
- Set aside your worries about whether the client will dislike you for doing it – the chances are that they will respect you more. Coaching is definitely not like a polite conversation with a friend.
- Ask permission – 'May I interrupt you here?'
- Use body language to help – e.g. a hand held palm up (traffic-cop style) to the client.
- Follow the interruption with an immediate explanation about your reason for doing it: for instance, 'I'm getting lost here', or 'I'm wondering if I really need to know all the detail?', or 'I'm going to pause

you there because you used a really interesting word just then . . . and I'd like us to explore it'.

Data in the moment

The real catalyst for change is in the coaching relationship itself. What the client does with you, he or she will most likely be doing everywhere else. The most important data you have about that client is how he or she is in the moment with you. This is the data that many coaches pretend to ignore, and it may also be known, but constantly avoided, by most others around the client. Does this client create feelings of fear in you? That is what she will be doing at work. Does this client lose you in his rambling descriptions of what is happening with his team? Ten to one he will be a poor communicator with others. Is the client over-deferential with you? Does a client try to exert inappropriate control in the conversation with you? That is probably what others will experience too.

This data is every bit as important as what the client tells you about events and people outside the room. It is pricelessly valuable. Ignore it at your peril. It is far more significant than either you or the client speculating about inner motivation, intellectualizing or analysing. *How are they affecting you now this minute?*

Giving feedback

To use this data you have to become an expert in the art of giving feedback. This is probably the single most striking way in which a coaching conversation differs from any other conversation our clients are likely to have. Unlike the client's line manager, we have no power to hire and fire. Unlike the client's partner, we have no wish to create or destroy love. Unlike the client's friends, we need not feel we could be putting the friendship at risk if we speak candidly. Coaching is one of the few occasions where anyone is permitted, even encouraged, to comment on the immediate behaviour and impact of the other person. You may sometimes be the client's best hope of being told something of which they seem unaware, something that is holding them back, that everyone around them knows, but that no one is willing to raise. Such things are often about intensely personal aspects of self-care and might include having an unpleasant body odour or bad breath, or that their clothing looks inappropriate in some way: ill fitting, not contemporary, too revealing, dishevelled or grubby. Being able to offer feedback with the honest intent to help the other person learn, and with no

wish for self-aggrandisement, endows the process with enormous power, but you have to be willing to move past your own and the client's potential embarrassment.

Anthony

Anthony was a gifted IT specialist who was desperate to move from his current role but was finding it difficult to get past the shortlisting stage. I noticed immediately that he never smiled and frequently covered his mouth with his hand. Despite this I could see, as no doubt everyone else could, that Anthony's teeth were extremely discoloured and seemed to be crumbling.

'Anthony, is it OK to give you some feedback, even if it might be something difficult to hear?' Anthony looked apprehensive. 'Mmm, yes . . . OK.' 'I notice that you're covering your mouth with your hand and it looks as if you've got some serious problems with your teeth.'

After a moment of hesitation, Anthony's reply rushed out. He had a severe dental phobia, had not seen a dentist for more than 30 years and had constant discomfort with his mouth. Shame about his mouth had led him to avoid intimate relationships and he was chronically lonely. His belief was that never smiling – or hiding his mouth behind a hand – hid the problem. He was unaware that a mouthful of dental decay and periodontal disease could pose a serious threat to his general health. My feedback told him that his problem was perfectly visible to others and that it also raised the possibility that he was someone who neglected his health and might therefore have other issues with self-management. Such was his fear of the whole topic that Anthony did not know that there are skilled dentists who specialize in this type of patient and who can use hypnosis or sedation to promise pain-free treatment. Together we did an internet search and devoted two sessions to the topic. When we met again several months later I have rarely seen such a dramatic transformation, physically and psychologically, in a client, and within a short time Anthony had begun dating, had found a new job, and had almost doubled his salary.

Just to be clear, *feedback* is not a synonym for *criticism*.

Being on the receiving end of criticism can be devastating:

Made me feel like a naughty child . . .

Felt really frightened – wondered whether my career was on the line . . .

It was so unfair! I was obsessed by the unfairness – couldn't hear what lay behind it... Even as he was speaking I was plotting revenge: how dared he talk about me like that!

Criticism attacks the person by making generalized judgements. Criticism is an opinion: *you are* [usually something unpleasant]. This brings out all the defensive and aggressive reactions described above because it contains hurtful generalizations: 'You are a poor communicator'; 'You are sloppy'; 'Everyone thinks...' Criticism is tough on the person and is most unlikely to be heard or acted upon because it alerts the amygdala in the brain (see page 69) so thinking processes close down. By contrast, feedback may be positive or negative. When it is negative it is tough on the issues and is given, as all true feedback is, for one reason only: to help the person learn, and at a point where the feedback-giver judges the other person can hear it. Feedback is also about the things that we can change. It would be pointless, for instance, to give someone feedback about their height, their racial origins or their gait. Criticism looks to hurt and is usually a way for the criticizer to unload their anger.

Positive feedback is not the same as *appreciation*: vague, oversimplified compliments which are generally meaningless – for instance, *You are so clever*, or *You handled that meeting well*.

In giving feedback:

- Ask permission every time: 'May I offer you some feedback here?'
- Stick to factual descriptions of what you have seen, using phrases like 'I noticed...', 'I saw...', 'I observed...', 'I heard...'

I noticed that when you were talking about X, you seemed really alive and animated.

You leant forward and thumped your papers.

I heard you giving X a really straightforward explanation of what she needed to do – and I noticed how her face relaxed immediately.

- Don't interpret. Describe what you have seen without attributing a motive. So avoid saying something like:

So I knew you were angry with X...

I saw that you wanted to leave the room straight away.

Instead, ask a question, using phrases like 'I'm curious about...'. This asks the client for his or her motivation, rather than you making a guess at it. So say something like: 'I wondered what was going on for you at that moment?'

- Describe the impact on you:

When you leant forward like that I felt alarmed just for a second. I wondered if you were angry with me!

You started your presentation with a story and I was completely absorbed in it – I wanted to know what happened next.

You touched your face a lot while you were talking and that had the effect on me of wondering whether you were really confident about what you were saying.

- Link it to the client's goal by using a phrase like 'I'm wondering how this links with...'
- Ask for the client's view of what you have said.
- Agree how you will work on the material that this incident generates.
- Look for opportunities to offer more positive than negative feedback, especially where a client can show you how vastly improved some skill or behaviour has become.
- Choose your words carefully. It is better to say something like 'I ended up feeling a bit alarmed about what you might do next', rather than 'You were intimidating'. There is a fine line between feeding back how the client has had an impact on you and seeming to have taken it personally. The whole point about your feedback is that you are not taking it personally, even while you are describing the personal impact of the client on you.

Here is an example:

Candice

Candice was proud of her track record in production management, had an MBA, and was pleased to have won her job against stiff competition. But soon her boss was regretting the appointment, complaining that Candice was unable to speak or write without recourse to jargon. Candice was annoyed and hurt by this accusation, believing that the fault lay with others for not being clever enough to understand her.

Both Candice and her coach understood that Candice's job was on the line. When Candice began to use convoluted sentences with her coach, the coach found himself as baffled as her colleagues. Instead of glossing it over and pretending to understand, the coach stopped her every time.

'Candice, can I stop you here? I notice how many very long words and sentences you are using. Just now you described *production flexibility analysis* and *Kanban* with *JIT systems* and *Economic Value Added*, and a lot of other stuff that followed, and I had no idea what you meant. Then I began to feel stupid and that I somehow should be understanding you and it was my fault for not being able to. I wonder if this is an example of the effect you have on colleagues?'

After several more examples along the same lines, Candice began to realize that her coach was no different from her non-specialist colleagues, and that stepping back to ask, 'What does a non-specialist really need to understand here in very simple terms?' would significantly change her impact on colleagues. Because no one else had felt able to take this intrusively detailed and high-risk approach, Candice had resorted to the all-too-human defence of denial. To Candice, being an expert mattered to her above all else, and this is what had led to her exaggerated reliance on technical jargon. The overinvestment she had made in being an expert also became rich territory for the coaching.

To use this approach you have to intend to look at everything: how clients greet you, how they come into the room, what they say in the first few moments, how they treat you, the language they use, the feelings they arouse in you throughout the session. You also need to recognize the data when you experience it and know the difference between how much of this data is generated by you and how much is being created by the client.

Knowing when NOT to give feedback is every bit as important as knowing when you must. I still wonder about a woman client who had startled me on first meeting by being dressed from top to toe as a man, creating immediate puzzlement: Was she actually a transgendered person? Or biologically a woman but presenting herself in male clothing? Or a gay woman who was merely rejecting conventional female attire? The reason it mattered was that this client was constantly getting on shortlists for jobs and failing at the interview. My guess was that interviewers who were meeting her for the first time would feel exactly as I did, and that the distraction this created ensured that she never got the job. At the time I felt that such an extreme choice of appearance was too closely linked to core identity to be challenged with feedback, but now I think it was just failure of nerve on my part.

Who else would have entered this territory without the wish to be hurtful? The key questions here are:

- Is this something the client can do something about?*
- How prepared might they be to tackle it?*

If the answers to both these questions are no, then the issue is best ignored. If the answers are yes, then you have a *duty of care* to the client, a concept from the practice of medicine that I find it useful to remember in such circumstances.

Provocation and humour

I am utterly against the idea of the coaching room being some kind of place of worship where a holy hush prevails. In the early years of Person-Centred Therapy, for instance, it always seems to me that clients were encouraged to ramble on for hours while the therapist stifled boredom, anger, pity, irritation, laughter, incredulity and all the other responses which the rest of the world might offer. (I am aware that this might not be a totally fair description of what actually happened.)

When I first started using humour and provocation in my coaching, I thought I was probably a bit eccentric. Other coaches might disapprove, and maybe I needed to keep quiet about it. When I read Farrelly and Brandsma's book, *Provocative Therapy* (1974), I realized that what I was doing was relatively mild by comparison, but seemed to work for similar reasons. Farrelly offers funny, teasing, intrusive, sexually provocative and impertinent comments to the client, often using street language; takes the client's fears and exaggerates them to the point where the client, often spluttering with laughter, has to defend him or herself; offers surreal, outrageous and whacky 'interpretations' of the client's behaviour, but does all of this with care and warmth for the client as the cornerstone and with remarkably positive results. As Graham Dawes comments on the Provocative Therapy website (provocativetherapy.com):

The shibboleths of psychotherapy shatter. Farrelly's mouth opens (often before he's even given the client a chance to explain the problem) and what comes out is everything you've been told never to say to a client. He even encourages the client in their craziness, throwing out all sorts of advantages their crazy behaviour will bring to the client (albeit the advantages are crazier than the client's behaviour), providing the client with a wealth of justifications for their behaviour

(albeit the justifications are more spurious than any the client has come up with), exhorting them to continue with the behaviours they say they want to stop (albeit cheerfully confirming that the consequences of continuing will be those the client is most anxious to avoid).

I don't go this far. But I do sometimes use approaches that are recognizably in the same genre. The two underpinning hypotheses are these: First, if you provoke the client, *using their own internal frame of reference*, with humour and perceptiveness, the client will tend to move in the opposite direction. In fact, this is the typical response to advice-giving twisted and turned back to the coach's and client's advantage. Second, if you urge the client to continue doing their evidently self-defeating behaviour, the client will tend to move towards a healthier alternative. The overt tone is teasing, joyfulness, lightness, bounce, chutzpah and challenge.

Example 1

A gloomy chief executive client, sinking ever lower in chair, avers that a slight blip in performance could mean the end of his career. I have worked with him for some years, and I know the internal dialogue he will be creating:

Coach: Hmm, yes I agree [copying and grossly exaggerating the client's slump] your life is over. I can see it now, Kim [wife] is getting up at 5 to go and scrub floors in that beer-stinking local pub. Your kids are standing at the door crying and saying that they hate their bog-standard comprehensive school, and you're lurking upstairs feeling like crap because it's all your fault.

Client: [sitting up in chair, trying not to laugh]. That is SO cheeky. Of course it wouldn't be as bad as that. [now actually laughing] At the very least Kim could be getting up at 7 and making me a cup of tea while I loll in bed before she goes off to scrub floors at an office!

Result: exaggeration has forced the client to self-correct. Gloom has vanished and never reappears in the session.

Example 2

A senior diplomat fears delegating and doesn't know how to do it. This has resulted in a life clogged by 16-hour days, bottlenecks for his frustrated staff, and a wife furious because she sees him so little. The client has offered all the

familiar excuses to me about why delegation is 'impossible', thus revealing his inner frame of reference.

Coach: [Exaggerated righteousness] Absolutely. These staff are hopeless. Whoever appointed them? [Jabbing finger at client] You could lose control here. It's correct that you should do all their work as well as your own. [Loudly] You're a saint for sacrificing yourself like this! To risk your health and marriage is so noble! Only you can do all this work to your own high standards. The organization will thank you – in fact you'll probably get a knighthood in the next Birthday Honours ... or maybe even the Royal Victorian Order as well, the Queen will personally ...

Client: [Interrupting, looking confused and startled but beginning to smile] I think you're going a bit barmy here – are you serious?

Coach: [Over-solemn face] Of course I'm serious. I think the Foreign Secretary will single you out for your exceptional devotion. And why stop at that? The Prime Minister will personally thank you.

Client: [Snorting with laughter, in spite of himself] OK, OK, I get the picture. They never will thank me. I won't get the knighthood. And if I did my wife may have divorced me by then. I assume you think there's hope for me. If so, please tell me what I should be doing and stop sending me up!

Result: prolonged laughter. Coaching resumes with focus on how delegation could happen without losing sight of quality standards. Client comments later that he hadn't known that coaching would involve 'surrealistic comedy with myself as the straight-man'.

It is even possible that Sigmund Freud himself was an exponent of provocative therapy. It is clear that he considered himself exempt from the strictly-no-reactions rule he suggested for others. Dr Roy Grinker, an analysand of Freud in 1932, is reported as describing the great man's practice of allowing his Chow dog, Yofi, to stay in the room. When the dog scratched to go out, Freud said, 'You see, even the damned dog is bored with you.' When the dog scratched again to return, Freud said, 'Well Yofi has decided to give you a second chance so maybe I should too.'

Tough speaking and confrontation

There are several types of situation where tough, frank speaking might be useful. First, there might be discrepancies between what the client says they value and what the client actually does. An example might be a client who

198 COACHING SKILLS

says she believes in equal opportunities but recruits and selects people on the basis of stereotype or old boy/girl networks. Then there are those times where the client agrees that a change needs to take place, but postpones the moment when it will happen. For instance, the client may say they are fed up with their current role and want to leave, but makes no actual attempt to seek another job. There may also be times where you have serious doubts about whether the client's proposed course of action is wise or desirable. For instance, the client may be overwhelmed with anger about a boss's behaviour and be prepared to storm into the boss's office the next day. You feel certain that this will not get him the outcome he says he wants.

When you feel you should confront the client, introduce the subject straightforwardly and make the link to the stated results that the client wants, alerting him or her to the possibility that you are going to say something which could be difficult to hear but stressing how much you value and want to support the client. Base what you say on data; keep it descriptive and non-judgemental; talk about 'what is', not 'what should be', then ask how the client sees it. Ask what will happen if the situation does not change, and discuss solutions. Make it clear that it is the client's choice whether or not to make the changes.

For confrontation to be successful your own motivation has to be a sincere wish to help. If there is even a smidgen of feeling that you want to get at the client, or teach them a lesson, don't do it.

When clients make mistakes

Senior executives carry weighty responsibilities. Since they are merely human, the chances are that, at some point in their careers, they make mistakes which can have serious consequences – whether such mistakes are massive gambles on a strategy which turns out to be a bad misjudgement, or errors of management involving individuals. In these circumstances it takes a very mature person to accept accountability without simultaneously feeling crushed by guilt. These clients may turn to you for help:

Fenton had not listened carefully enough to a whistleblower who had drawn attention to a fraud. When the whistleblower turned out to be right, Fenton had lied about his own part in the cover-up.

Emma had been part of an executive team which had signed off a massively expensive IT project despite her own strong private doubts about the supplier and the viability of the project at the point where the contract was let. She had not spoken up. The project ran wildly out of control with the whole team receiving severe criticism from the National Audit Office.

A coach walks a fine line in these circumstances. There are so many ways of seeming to help which are not in fact helpful. Trite clichés about everyone making mistakes will not comfort the client. Nor is it probable that the client will truly and privately go along with it if you convey that you believe your client is innocent – it was everyone else who got it wrong.

Even less are you likely to know enough about the case to act as judge and jury on your client's behaviour. But agreeing that a client did something wrong is sometimes as important as reassuring them that they did something right. So a client whose vulnerability was concealed behind a façade of loud sarcasm finally found the courage to ask, 'Do you think I'm a bully?' Since I never saw him at work there was no way of knowing the answer, but my reply was that the behaviour he willingly recounted would certainly have been enough to intimidate me had he been my boss. Another client asked, tremulously, 'Do you think my time in this organization is over?' She had described being systematically excluded from meetings and emails and had just received a highly critical performance review. There was no way I could read her boss's mind or know the answer to her question, but nor could I give her false reassurance, knowing how often it was the case that such events were usually the precursor to a forced exit, and that it was certainly my duty to convey this to her.

The Christian tradition of confession to a priest who will keep your secrets may also alert us about how to work with clients who have made serious mistakes. A confession is a voluntary act and is intensely private. Christianity distinguishes between the sin and the sinner. When it is clear that a client wishes to tell you about something which the rest of their world would condemn, you are doing the client no favours to brush it aside, nor to go to the other extreme by expressing pompous disapproval. As a client there can, paradoxically, be a relief in having someone you know on your side and who then agrees that, yes, you have betrayed self-set standards, and no, this does not define you as a moral failure for the rest of your life. Trust the client to know what he or she needs from you, and ask this question explicitly:

What help do you need from me on this?

Depending on the answer, I have found that the coaching often becomes a discussion about how to forgive yourself and recover moral equanimity, including making amends where this is possible.

When it's always someone else's fault

There are some clients who can seem fixed in the role of victim. You will find this client extremely difficult to work with; the victim position is so very attractive because if others have to change before you do, then you can wait

for ever. To have a client determined to blame others for their own disappointments invariably takes me to the boundaries of my skills. Suggesting therapy is always a possible alternative, but many clients are not so obviously extreme in their distress as to warrant this tactic.

Carys

At the time we worked together, Carys was a disappointed woman. As a senior accountant she had expected to get the finance director job in her organization. It had gone instead to a colleague she liked but who she also judged to be less competent than herself. Our work initially focused on getting another job as Carys felt she could not stay in the original organization – it would have felt too humiliating.

I encouraged Carys to contact headhunters and to alert her networks to her wish to move. Soon there were two potential offers on the horizon, both of which paid much the same as the job she had failed to get. Carys took one of these jobs, but as our coaching went on into her new job, it was clear that a sense that ‘it was unfair’ still pervaded her life. She complained about the new job; it was lonely, the office was stiflingly hot, the chief executive did not appreciate her. In every session it seemed that we would inevitably come back to the unfairness of not getting the FD job in her old organization, even a year later.

What can be done for clients like Carys?

Some possible approaches

First you must notice the pattern. The giveaways are that the client comes to coaching looking for a way of changing someone else and evades questions about what they, the client, have contributed to the situation. You might notice a lot of sentences beginning:

- If only they would ...
- If only it hadn't turned out like it did ...
- My life would be fine if only others would let me ...

There may also be generalizations suggesting that mostly other people are getting things wrong around this client: ‘They always ...’; ‘They never ...’;

plus a constant sense of weariness and disappointment. Whatever good things seem to be happening, nothing is ever quite good enough.

The next step is to *offer the client feedback*:

Carys, I notice that in this session, as in so many others, we keep coming back to that old sore of the FD job. You've mentioned it twice in this session, just as you did in our last one. What's going on here for you?

In Carys's case, she was ahead of me. ‘I must be a very annoying client because I'm always blaming someone else, aren't I?’ So Carys could intellectualize her dilemma, but still could not move on.

Some clients will deny that they are contributing anything. The therapist and author Irvin Yalom suggests saying something like, ‘OK let's accept that 99 per cent of this is someone else's fault. Can we work on the 1 per cent that's yours?’ Along with this, it is helpful to expose the fallacy of devoting time and energy to the goal of having a better past. The past has gone and can never be rescheduled, reworked or remodelled. There is only now.

For most clients one or all of the approaches I describe here will work – one way or another. If they don't, I will have one last tactic to try: I will expose the client to my own dilemmas about how to help them. So with a client like Carys, having tried all of the above tactics without any apparent success, I might say:

Carys, I feel at my limit here. I really want our coaching to succeed for you yet I'm feeling frustrated by my inability to help. We've tried a number of things, yet I notice you still seem attached to that original dream of the job you didn't get. What would you advise me to do?

Note that the risks here are of a client like Carys believing that I, too, am persecuting her and will be about to reject or abandon her. I will refuse to play that game, stressing my continuing support for her as well as putting half the responsibility for our relationship back on her. I know such people to be vulnerable, despite what is often an appearance of cockiness and certainty. Whenever I have taken on such clients, despite my private doubts, the coaching usually comes to an abrupt end at the point where their view of themselves as helpless victims is challenged.

Being attacked

Very, very occasionally you may find that the client is deeply upset by your conversation and attacks you and your competence. This happened to Jon,

a coach still in training. He had carried out a bespoke 360-degree exercise for the client (page 123). He already knew from her boss that she was new in her post, struggling to attract the loyalty of her team. His report suggested, as tactfully as possible, how and why this might be happening. The client read the report; she raged, she shouted. She accused Jon of using flawed methodology, sneered at his careful use of language ('What do you mean *some* people thought this, *some* people thought that . . .?'). In his supervision session Jon thought this, *some* people thought that . . .?). In his supervision session Jon told me that he had quickly understood that he was not the target and had managed to remain steady, despite the provocation. He described how he had used the martial arts tactic of the unexpected. He agreed with her that the methodology was flawed because it was carried out by a human being. He said he believed the report was valid nonetheless. He asked her how she might like to check it out. He volunteered to have another coach carry out the same exercise again, at no cost to the client.

He describes what happened next.

'There was a short silence. Then I said, "I don't think we can go on working together while you feel like this, I feel under attack and I have to say that it feels unfair."

The session ended abruptly.

To Jon's surprise this client contacted him again a month later. Bravely, she had shown the report to her boss. She apologized to Jon. She and her boss had agreed that she was in the wrong job and that she could transfer back to her old post as a technical expert where she did not need to run a team.

Accountability

Accountability is a tricky concept. It can seem too much like teacher-pupil or boss-subordinate if it is done in the wrong way. It does not mean finger-wagging if the client fails to carry out their commitment. I was shocked when a close colleague told me that his hypnotherapist, someone who also claimed to be a coach, had irritably terminated the relationship because he had not carried out some small piece of 'homework' as part of his attempt to give up smoking. A client also showed me an email he had received from a previous coach, a relationship that did not survive this communication, where the coach had baldly informed her that 'If you don't do your homework I shall be very displeased'.

Accountability in coaching is totally different from boss-subordinate, teacher-pupil or parent-child accountability. It does mean that you, the coach, *hold clients to account for what they have said they wish to do to make changes*. It is their agenda and their ideas of where they want to change that is at the core but the clients design the items for accountability, not the coach and clients also design *how* they want to be held accountable. As a

coach you have no attachment to whether clients have carried out their tasks/homework. You have no stake in their doing things to please you. There is no place for value judgements or blame, as whatever has happened there will be learning in it. There may be exceptions when the client consistently fails to commit to what they have promised, in which case you will indeed need to discuss what is going on for them, but in a mature and respectful way.

Follow-up

I enjoy keeping in contact with clients between sessions and encourage phone calls, texts and emails. This can be especially useful if you and the client have focused on some important impending event in which new behaviour will be tried. If you and the client prefer not to do this, in the next session, ask: 'How did it go on those points we agreed last time?' When the client has achieved them all, congratulate them warmly and acknowledge whatever effort it will have taken to do it.

When the client has not achieved them, ask:

- What got in the way?
- What would you do in a different way another time?
- What did you learn from not doing them?
- What could help achieve them in the future?

Knowing when too far is too far

The coaching relationship is delicate: too much pressure on the client and it will fracture; too little and the coaching will feel inert. Knowing when to press and when to hold back is a matter of the finest and most split-second judgement.

Robert

Robert was a miner's son, left school at 16 and began teaching himself some of the principles of paralegal work while he worked in a solicitor's office. At the age of 40, by now an experienced solicitor, he had done brilliantly well and had become head of legal services for a local authority. His starting issues for the coaching we embarked on together were to bring more finesse into his managerial style – a bland, safe topic.

Soon, however, it became clear that the underlying issues were his profound lack of self-confidence and his acute social isolation. He had no friends at work and no social life. He had married his childhood sweetheart at 19 and his wife had opted to stay at home, even though they had no children. The relationship was one of mutual dependency, but at the point where Robert started the coaching he was expressing a strong wish to break out of the stifling pattern he and his wife had created: 'I want to get out at weekends, go to football, meet more people, but if I do she will feel it's a threat. She just wants me there so that we can do the garden, watch a video, just the two of us together.'

As his coach, I felt we had reached a crossroads.

JR: What do you really want?

Robert: I do want to have a better social life and one that's outside this charmed circle of just me and her.

Robert describes how this would look, sound and feel in response to the question, 'If you could have this ideal life what would be happening?'

JR: So what are the blocks to setting about this?

There is now a long pause – perhaps 12 seconds. Robert glances at me, looks tense, wrings his hands slightly and looks at his feet. Very slowly he says: 'I can't move on it. If I discuss it with her, she'll panic. It will raise the whole question of the relationship and I can't do that to her.'

What does a coach do in these circumstances with a client who has described what he wants so vividly yet also describes a total block to action? Challenge? Suggest a tiny first step? Withdraw? After a few moments more of silence, I asked how Robert felt about staying with the idea of doing nothing. 'Fine – for now', was his reply.

Later I thought long and thoroughly about this exchange, pondering whether I might have pressed him harder, but feeling in the end that it had been right to hold back. Eight weeks later, Robert called me, devastated, to tell me that totally out of the blue with no warning or previous threats, his wife had killed herself, swallowing a lethal dose of paracetamol. He discovered that she believed she had had terminal cancer (she hadn't). Robert's judgement about his wife's fragile mental state was totally correct, including a diagnosis of agoraphobia, which he had not shared with me. What he had not anticipated was how violently her feelings would implode. His weighing up of what he could cope with if he had confronted his wife was also correct.

And my judgement about what would have been too far was correct, though I did not have anything like all the relevant data at the time.

Subsequently, in training new coaches, I have seen how easily the coach's eagerness to help can stray into too much intimacy too soon, ignoring the warning signs from the client which say 'keep off'. When this happens, the client's energy goes into repelling what he or she perceives as an intrusion, rather than into learning and change. When the client tells you straightforwardly that they want you to stop – stop. Be alert to the evidence from the client that this might be the case: small frowns, a tapping foot, looking away. You can't go on with a task-based agenda when this happens – the pause or the resistance becomes the agenda. Name it, saying something like, 'I notice we seem to have hit a pause here. What's going on for you?' Then agree jointly how to handle it.

Challenge is essential to good coaching. It is closely linked to giving information and advice, the subject of the next chapter.