

## 10 The heart of coaching: the coach-client relationship

*I see you  
I am here  
(West African greeting – and reply)*

What actually goes on between coach and client? Why does coaching work? What makes the difference between an averagely acceptable coach and a brilliant one? How far is coaching actually the partnership of equals that so many of us say we create? Where are the limits to coaching? I look at these issues in this chapter as well as at some further and possibly more advanced approaches to coaching which need experience, courage and confidence.

Recently I have realized that I am often working with 'coaching divorcees'. These are executive coaching clients who have already had one coaching relationship that has not worked out. All of the coaches concerned in these cases had already been through an initial selection protocol, either by a tendering process or as part of a framework agreement. I know from talking to some of the disillusioned HR people who had hired them that their CVs had appeared impressive. If they had been required to describe what they could do at a 'beauty parade' in front of potential buyers they had talked it up well.

There's a pattern in these failed coaching assignments and it's this: all the coaches involved were over-reliant on 'techniques'.

*Coach A* held her sessions in a branch of a busy sandwich chain, so bad marks already for total lack of privacy. She then insisted on beginning the process with two minutes of deep breathing, asking the client to close her eyes. This must have been entertaining for the other customers, even if it was acutely embarrassing for the client.

*Coach B* had got himself hooked on neurolinguistic programming (NLP) techniques and seemed to believe that visualizing was the solution to every problem. He asked the client, and this was in the first 10 minutes of the first session, to imagine himself standing under a waterfall where 'all your past mistakes and confusions will be washed away'. This coach obviously missed his vocation as an

evangelical preacher. Later on in the session he asked the client to imagine his future life spread out before him. The client responded that she rehearse a challenging problem and asked her what was a man. 'I couldn't be vulnerable', she said, showing remarkable restraint.

*Coach D* spent the two sessions showing him mini-lectures, for instance more of it herself).

From the direct accounts given soberly and with puzzlement by these and other clients it is clear that 'techniques' will solve every client problem. In fact, they have no underpinning psychological theory, therefore nowhere else to go.

This is the paradox: you have to learn to act, also true of learning to act, to play a sport, you have to acquire and then go past merely technical skill. To inspire the orchestra, a conductor needs to be a musicologist before going beyond what is merely technical. A jazz musician must acquire a thorough grasp of the rules before he is able to improvise successfully.

It is the same with coaching. You have to learn to discover where they fit into the true learning of coaching. This learning can only happen in the relationship. This is because the coaching is not just a *subject* to be worked with by an *object*. As the philosopher and writer Martin Buber, who had a major impact on Gestalt therapy, wrote astutely:

The deciding reality is the therapist. The methods one is dilettante. I am for me not to believe in them. Although he is a psychologist, he knows that at a certain moment the patient stands before the inner eye and throws away as much of his theories as an unforeseeable thing that goes on inside.

evangelical preacher. Later on in the same session he asked the client to imagine his future life spread out in front of him and to take a step into it. The client's comment: 'I didn't really know what he was talking about and I couldn't do it - felt stupid.'

*Coach C* ignored his client's account of how unconfident and exposed she felt in her male-dominated organization and suggested that she rehearse a challenging presentation by pretending that she was a man. 'I couldn't be vulnerable with him,' said this client, with remarkable restraint.

*Coach D* spent the two sessions she conducted with the client giving him mini-lectures, for instance on 'Listening' (pity she didn't do more of it herself).

From the direct accounts given soberly and in a generous spirit mostly of puzzlement by these and other clients it is clear that this sort of coach believes that 'techniques' will solve every client problem. When the techniques don't work, they have no underpinning psychological knowledge or insight and therefore nowhere else to go.

This is the paradox: you have to learn technique in order to bypass it - also true of learning to act, to play a sport or a musical instrument. In acting you have to acquire and then go past methods to get to the meaning of the text. To inspire the orchestra, a conductor has to be an accomplished musicologist before going beyond what is simply written in the score. A jazz musician must acquire a thorough grasp of musical technique before being able to improvise successfully.

It is the same with coaching. You have to learn the techniques in order to discover where they fit into the true learning that comes about through coaching. This learning can only happen in the crucible of the coach-client relationship. This is because the coaching client is not an *object* to be worked on but a *subject* to be worked with by another human being. The Viennese philosopher and writer Martin Buber, whose ideas have had considerable impact on Gestalt therapy, wrote astutely:

The deciding reality is the therapist, not the methods. Without methods one is dilettante. I am for methods, but just in order to use them not to believe in them. Although no doctor can do without a typology, he knows that at a certain moment the incomparable person of the patient stands before the incomparable person of the doctor; he throws away as much of his typology as he can and accepts this unforeseeable thing that goes on between therapist and patient.  
(Hycner and Jacobs 1995: 17)

A colleague and I were assessing would-be coaches in order to fulfil a contract we had won. We set up a process where we observed the candidates through a session with willing guinea-pig clients. One would-be coach intruded grossly into her client's physical space, at one point almost sitting in her lap she was so close; she continually pressed her pet solution onto the client; she talked too much.

And yet... and yet her client, correctly identifying that we would probably not be offering this coach a job because of this behaviour, said wistfully, 'In spite of all that, I really liked her and it was actually useful. I will do some of the things she suggested because I knew how much she wanted to help me.' I am not advocating this artlessly naïve and unskilled coaching, as I am certain that this coach would soon have floundered helplessly with many of the demanding clients we had in the pipeline. However, the intention to help in this session was so strongly conveyed that some decent coaching did actually take place.

I have come to see that this wish, when accompanied by strongly-conveyed emotional authenticity, can demolish many of the barriers seemingly imposed by lack of technique. In his enjoyable book *Provocative Therapy* (Farrelly and Brandsma 1974), Frank Farrelly recounts something similar where a student therapist was able to break through the casually callous assumptions of more experienced colleagues that a chronic mentally ill patient could be abandoned 'because he could never get better'. Recounting this, furiously and with angry tears, to the patient, the man was amazed that someone could care so much. He comforted the student, ran away from the hospital and got a job, never to return. As Frank comments, '[this] reinforced my idea that even though you had no business being *right* or effective, you could be' (Farrelly and Brandsma 1974: 9).

### Power in the coaching relationship: the outer signs

Talking about coaching as a relationship of equals has become a mantra in the coaching world. It is one of my own basic principles and values (see page 9). Working in partnership is what gives coaching its power. How far can this pious hope be true in practice?

When you contrast coaching with other professions, there are some startling differences. Where many of the traditional professions are concerned – accountancy, law, medicine – most people would much prefer not to have to consult them. Almost all are associated with an actual or a potential crisis. Coaching clients are always facing change, but they may see this as bracing rather than threatening. Once they get into the swing of it, clients may look forward to coaching sessions rather than approaching them with the dread that a visit to a lawyer or doctor could invoke.

The traditional professions are selling their specialism gives them. Sadly, this has of superiority. The more obviously so overcrowded professions (think of fashion designers) have always had to take a more coaches will go to considerable lengths to well as talking about it. This contrasts with traditional professions treat their clients. Some have been on mutually first name terms with an indeed most commonly have been talked addressed, uninvited, by my first name when addressed as 'Dr'. By contrast, I work with names from the start and expect them to tea, coffee or water, thus introducing the social a relationship of equals.

There are some ways in which the relationship between the client and the coach. Coaches insist that the client comes to them, the client comes to us we have already decided the client is on our territory and, a bit like being he or she is expected to play to our rules. We including the method that says the agenda frame for the length of each session. We see

Against this, we may offset a number of power. The client can and often does negotiate the state of the coach's order-book. The client than the coach in deciding the appropriate the initial session, where most coaches will the agenda for the sessions is entirely in an overcrowded profession, all clients know out there eager for business.

In his devastating critique of psychology, suggested that even the best therapists can and controlling climate because it is so ingrained. The difference with coaching is that our clients they are not, their 'symptoms' are normal dysfunction.

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The traditional professions are selling the superior knowledge that their specialism gives them. Sadly, this has often led to conveying an attitude of superiority. The more obviously service-based and possibly more overcrowded professions (think of financial advisers, architects, interior designers) have always had to take a more client-centred approach. Most coaches will go to considerable lengths to *live equality* in the relationship as well as talking about it. This contrasts with the way many people from the traditional professions treat their clients. So, for instance, I have never once been on mutually first name terms with any doctor to whom I was a patient, indeed most commonly have been talked at as an anonymous 'you' or addressed, uninvited, by my first name while the practitioner expects to be addressed as 'Dr'. By contrast, I work with many doctor-clients, use their first names from the start and expect them to address me likewise. I always offer tea, coffee or water, thus introducing the social nuance of guest and host – also a relationship of equals.

There are some ways in which the relationship favours the coach. Many coaches insist that the client comes to them: mostly this is what I do. When the client comes to us we have already disturbed the balance of power. The client is on our territory and, a bit like being a guest in our house, knows that he or she is expected to play to our rules. We set the method for the coaching, including the method that says the agenda is the client's. We set the time frame for the length of each session. We set the fees.

Against this, we may offset a number of factors that play to the client's power. The client can and often does negotiate fees downwards, depending on the state of the coach's order-book. The client may take a far more active role than the coach in deciding the appropriate number of sessions. Apart from the initial session, where most coaches will have a well-rehearsed protocol, the agenda for the sessions is entirely in the client's hands. And, as in any overcrowded profession, all clients know that there are many other coaches out there eager for business.

In his devastating critique of psychoanalysis, Jeffrey Masson (1990) suggested that even the best therapists cannot avoid creating an exploitative and controlling climate because it is so ingrained in the profession. The critical difference with coaching is that our clients are mentally healthy, and where they are not, their 'symptoms' are normally the ones of familiar minor dysfunction.

Also, certainly where executive coaching is concerned, we are dealing with robustly successful, senior and well-paid people used to having their own way and dealing with suppliers of all sorts as part of their daily lives. For many coaches in the most obviously elevated end of the market, their clients could be earning 10 times or more the income of the coach. Many are also well-known public figures. This makes a difference – the coach will usually approach the client with at least some vestige of the world's

respect and may even be unconsciously basking in power borrowed from the client.

There are other, more subtle, ways in which the coach-client relationship is not one of equals. For the most part, as a coach, you set aside a great many of your opinions during the course of the conversation. The client is allowed to express opinions. The coach is willingly more restrained. It is the coach's responsibility to reach out to the client, not the client's to reach out to the coach. The coach is responsible for setting the climate of the conversation – not the client. The client is invested in his or her own learning – not the coach's. The coach has to affirm the client, but the client has no such responsibility towards the coach.

### Unconscious processes

Throughout the coaching process, there may be some unconscious processes going on which may explain phenomena which are otherwise inexplicable. For instance, why do you instinctively like some clients more than others (or they like or dislike you)? Why do some clients seem to bring odd expectations to the coaching relationship? Some ideas from therapy may help explain at least some of what is happening.

#### Projection

As a coach you remain non-judgemental and unattached to your own ideas about what might be good for the client. This is why self-awareness about the phenomenon known as projection can be so useful. Essentially the assumption is that we all have dark sides which we may not acknowledge about ourselves. We say to ourselves, in effect, 'I don't like this about myself. I'll project it onto someone else and that way I can criticize it because then it's nothing to do with me.' Or there can be positive projection where we fantasize an ideal set of characteristics, the ones we might like to have ourselves, onto another person. The phenomenon of projection may take a number of forms:

- At its simplest, we may project an emotion we are feeling onto someone else. This is because we cannot or will not own the feeling in ourselves. So, for instance, I might say to a friend, 'You seem worried' when actually it is I who am worried, but don't want to face my worry.
- As coaches, we might start thinking, 'This client is hostile to me' when in fact you are feeling hostility towards him or her.
- We may see others as the cause of our problems, especially those closest to us.

- We imagine that another person probably fails to incorporate into ourselves as we do.
- We may create cycles of unrealistic expectations leading to bitter disappointment in job performance. You can see this in the way that people respond to where an idolized celebrity, previously seen as a role model, has been wholly unrealistic reporting, is unlikely to be successful in their chosen field.

When we criticize other people, whether it is our clients or our bosses, something we most fear could be true about ourselves. When we have these thoughts, it can be useful to stop and ask yourself, 'Are these feelings or thoughts about me or about others?' and 'Am I projecting my own fears onto them?'

Perhaps the most powerful single tool for self-awareness is to notice that how we speak about others always says more about us than about them.

#### Transference and counter-transference

Again, these are concepts from psychotherapy, but they are also useful in coaching. Note that they are roundly rejected by some schools of thought, but accepted by others. I find them useful. The idea of transference is that we unconsciously project onto you and the client our own feelings and assumptions from earlier relationships in our life. These are distortions – they are preventing the other person from being who they really are. Most usually, they may be projections of feelings we had or still have about significant figures from our past. For example, if you constantly rebelled against an authoritarian father figure, you may project this as a coach in the same light as he saw you. If you had a mother who was a mild and pleasant person who did not encourage you, women may create expectations of being nurturing and supportive. Men may trigger both rebellious adolescent behaviour and nurturing.

Counter-transference may also be going on in the client. So a client may do the same to the client. So a client may reawaken ghosts from an early relationship. For example, a client may be standing in for the ghost and you respond to them as if they were the ghost from the past.

The more transparent you are in your responses to the client, the less likely these phenomena are to derail the coaching process. For example, a client who appears to be resisting delivery of a task that has been agreed. Her coach takes up the story and asks the client to explain what is happening.

- We imagine that another person possesses the ideals and qualities we fail to incorporate into ourselves and our lives.
- We may create cycles of unrealistic infatuation which then turn to bitter disappointment in jobs and relationships, leading to cynicism and resentment. You can see this most weeks in newspapers where an idolized celebrity, previously the subject of flattering and wholly unrealistic reporting, is unmasked as being a mere human being after all.

When we criticize other people, what we criticize may be the very thing we most fear could be true about ourselves. Where you find yourself having these judgemental thoughts, it can be a useful discipline to stop and ask yourself, 'Are these feelings or behaviours that are actually true for me?'

Perhaps the most powerful single idea relating to projection is that how we speak about others always says a great deal about how we see ourselves.

#### **Transference and counter-transference**

Again, these are concepts from psychodynamic therapy and you should note that they are roundly rejected by psychotherapists from some other schools. I find them useful. The idea of transference is that clients unconsciously project onto you and the coaching relationship patterns and assumptions from earlier relationships in their lives. These projections will be distortions – they are preventing the other person from seeing you as you think you really are. Most usually, they may transfer to you feelings they have had or still have about significant figures from their past. So a client who constantly rebelled against an authoritarian father may see male figures such as a coach in the same light as he saw his father, even though the coach concerned is a mild and pleasant person who is totally unlike the father. Older women may create expectations of being *mother* or *teacher* to a client and this could trigger both rebellious adolescent behaviour and expectations of being nurtured.

Counter-transference may also be going on – that is when you as coach do the same to the client. So a challenge from a client may painfully reawaken ghosts from an early relationship. For that moment, the client is standing in for the ghost and you respond as you might have to him or her in the past.

The more transparent you are in your working with the client, the less likely these phenomena are to derail the process. For instance, Glenda is a client who appears to be resisting delivery on the actions she and her coach have agreed. Her coach takes up the story.

### CASE STUDY

#### Glenda

Glenda told me that she just hadn't had time to do her 'homework'. This was our fourth session and in each of the last three the same thing had happened. I said, very calmly, 'Glenda, I'm really puzzled and intrigued. I'm also feeling a bit stuck and wondering if you're not doing this stuff because I'm not coaching you properly or in a way you can relate to. This is the fourth session where you've said you haven't had time to do the follow up. I'm wondering what's going on here for you ...' Glenda looked sheepish and then annoyed: 'You aren't my headmistress you know!'

- Coach: No, I'm not. But I'm wondering now if I remind you of one you used to know! (there was a pause and Glenda's face changed colour)
- Glenda: Well, yes. You're about her age when I knew her and I was constantly in trouble for not doing my homework and when I left I swore I'd never let anyone boss me about again.
- Coach: How else do I seem to remind you of her?
- Glenda: You don't – except that you seem very confident and together.
- Coach: What else?
- Glenda: Can't think of anything else!
- Coach: What would you like to say to that headmistress if she were here?
- Glenda: Please respect me. Don't come down on me like that – it wasn't fair, though I know I was a right little pest.
- Coach: In what ways am I different?
- Glenda: Far, far more – in fact you're not like her at all really!

We then had a candid discussion about our relationship and what needed to happen to make it work. I, for my part, was of course quite unable to promise that I would be anything other than myself, including not being like her headteacher. Glenda was able to look at all her troubled relationships with authority in this light. The frankness and intimacy it created were the turning point in the coaching.

#### Paralleling

Closely linked with the idea of transference and counter-transference is the idea of parallel processes. This can seem like a strange phenomenon: the client

reproduces the same behaviour and feelings as whatever incident they are describing. The coach. An example might be that a client is talking about her job. She says it shows itself in impatient reports. As the coach you begin to experience your client: irritation and impatience. He begins coaching, describing how both parallel with her client. Carly had been introduced through a session with her supervisor.

### CASE STUDY

#### Carly

My client is a 28-year-old woman of Asian family. The family had arranged her marriage when she was 18. She is not happy, and she is thinking of leaving, knowing that she is in the culture of which she is a part. She grew up as a child despite strong family pressure to conform. She told me about the dominance of her father in the family and about how being a girl had meant that she did all the chores which her brothers had been allowed to do. The issue for coaching was her lack of problem-solving skills, having come from an immigrant family and had a difficult life. She successfully wriggled free. My client began by saying that he either ignored or bullied her. When I reflected on it, I realized that I had taken on board some of the things Carly had said about her father, probably with projection and projection. As my client went on with her story, I realized that she was whining and complaining. I felt annoyed and asked her, 'For goodness sake, just ask for what you want!' Carly responded, 'Don't be such a wimp.' Although I of course didn't say those dreadful words, I know that an edge of sarcasm had crept in. Unusually, I ended the session 10 minutes earlier than usual, as much more curt than I normally am. I ended the session with a smile and manage it better!

Why does this happen? One cause is that the coach is looking inwardly with the client, inwardly looking for similarities between the coach and the client, tapping into the client's issues. An alternative explanation is that the client, again at an unconscious level, is looking for validation and support from the coach.

reproduces the same behaviour and feelings in their session as they did in whatever incident they are describing. This creates a parallel emotion in the coach. An example might be that a client is describing overwhelming stress in her job. She says it shows itself in impatience and irritation with her direct reports. As the coach you begin to experience the same feeling in relation to your client: irritation and impatience. Here is Carly, a relative newcomer to coaching, describing how both paralleling and projection occurred in a session with her client. Carly had been introduced to the concept of paralleling through a session with her supervisor.

### CASE STUDY

#### **Carly**

My client is a 28-year-old woman of Asian origin, the only girl in a large family. The family had arranged her marriage but the marriage is not happy, and she is thinking of leaving, knowing how badly this will play in the culture of which she is a part. She has successfully avoided having a child despite strong family pressure to do so. She had already talked to me about the dominance of her father in the family and her resentment about how being a girl had meant that she was expected to do household chores which her brothers had been and still were spared. The presenting issue for coaching was her lack of progress in her career. I also come from an immigrant family and had a dominant dad, though I have successfully wriggled free. My client began to complain about her boss, saying that he either ignored or bullied her. After the session when I reflected on it, I realized that I had taken part in a perfect example of paralleling, probably with projection and counter-transference thrown in! As my client went on with her story I began to feel that she was whining and complaining. I felt annoyed. I found myself thinking, 'For goodness sake, just ask for what you want! You deserve to be overlooked! Don't be such a wimp.' Although I of course did not actually utter those dreadful words, I know that an edge of impatience crept into my voice. Unusually, I ended the session 10 minutes early. I probably came across as much more curt than I normally am. Now my challenge is to spot this stuff and manage it better!

Why does this happen? One cause is that the coach is over-identifying with the client, inwardly looking for similarities as an unconscious way of tapping into the client's issues. An alternative, or additional, explanation is that the client, again at an unconscious level, wants to recreate the drama and

intensity of the issue in order to force the coach into finding a resolution. In practice I believe that while both these forces may be at work, the most likely immediate trigger is the coach's uncertainty and panic about how to respond to the intensity of the client's emotion. In terms of managing these parallel processes, the key is awareness. Notice that it is happening. Physically make a change – for instance, in how you are sitting. Break the trance-like state which has most likely taken hold of both of you. Consciously mismatch the client. Suggest a stretch or another drink. Ask yourself if you are getting so hooked up in the client's issues that you have lost sight of the essentials: that it is the client who has to find the solution, not you. Useful interventions when you notice paralleling happening are questions which will enable you to position yourself consciously outside the client's issues, for instance by saying:

So, to summarize, the issues are a, b, c. Which of these do you feel is the most important?

Or

I'm finding myself a bit overwhelmed in the issue here, can we just take stock of where we are with it?

### Being real

In any relationship where helping is involved, there is always a strong possibility of both sides tapping into the deepest roots of human longing. Psychology as a subject has its roots in philosophy, medicine and religion. Magic, superstition, spiritualism and mysticism are lurking just around the corner. When something is wrong, we can crave some magic, whether it is a wonder-crystal with the power to ward off danger, faith healing to save us from death, ley lines which will explain puzzling events, or an exorcism which will banish evil spirits. The power of belief in this respect can be overwhelming.

It is only 150 years or so ago that mental illness was widely believed to be possession by the devil, and there are some religious faiths where people still believe that. The idea that there are people with special powers seems to be something we can all find potentially appealing. It is comforting, if also a little scary, to think of giving yourself up to someone who can reassure through their links to the Divine, or through their special insight . . . sliding smoothly into *second-sight* and *psychic*.

Beware of letting your coaching become contaminated with the same ideas. It is easy, believe me. I have occasionally heard clients introduce me to colleagues at a social event as a 'witch', or slightly less alarmingly as a 'white witch'. In the light of this I go to some pains to demystify the coaching

process. You cannot work as an equal with some kind of secular priest or shaman. Client at first – it might be more comforting to be this cannot be right.

Several studies have shown that interventions contain no drugs) and placebo procedure (such as chest and sewing it up again without any active ingredient) can have almost as much positive benefit as the active treatment. Placebos have sometimes proved more effective than the common drugs used to treat depression than the common drugs used to treat pain. An intravenous infusion of exercise showed that getting a boost from 'super-oxygenated water' after three 5km time trials on average 86 seconds faster. Alternative medicine is concerned, defend that it will maintain that it works despite the lack of evidence that even though no trace of the homoeopathic 'medicine', the water retains a 'memory' of the remedy. The reason why it does work is that the homoeopathic doctor in the remedy and conveys this to patient, despite their disbelief. This belief on both sides thus gives it its power.

If we take the lesson from placebo research, both coach and client believe in the power of the placebo effect, and this is likely to elevate its effectiveness many times. If the client is sceptical about whether it 'works' then you can suggest that the client who is sceptical about coaching will believe that it will be useful for him or her. There is nothing to stop clients to believe in that power. However, it is the relationship itself and in the coaching process that determines the effectiveness of the coach.

Research into therapy, including, so-called placebo research (see the research), for instance by David Elkin, shows that the placebo effect in therapy has nothing to do with the intellectual knowledge or their theoretical orientation. Instead, they are:

- 1 The ability of the practitioner to establish acceptance and rapport.
- 2 The nature of the 'therapeutic alliance' between client and practitioner; the transparency and trustworthiness of the practitioner.
- 3 The context in which the client receives the treatment; the presence of supportive people in their life who encourage them to make positive changes.

process. You cannot work as an equal with someone who believes that you are some kind of secular priest or shaman. Clients may not always welcome this at first – it might be more comforting to believe in the wizardry. But long term this cannot be right.

Several studies have shown that in some cases placebos (pills that contain no drugs) and placebo procedures (for instance opening a patient's chest and sewing it up again without any other surgery having taken place) can have almost as much positive benefit as conventional drug or surgical treatment. Placebos have sometimes proved many times more effective as treatment for depression than the commonly prescribed drugs and also seem to be powerful in pain control. An intriguing US study carried out by the American Council on Exercise showed that runners who thought they were getting a boost from 'super-oxygenated water' (in fact ordinary tap water) ran three 5km time trials on average 86 seconds faster than a control group. Where alternative medicine is concerned, defenders of homoeopathy, for instance, will maintain that it works despite the intrinsic implausibility of the theory that even though no trace of the homoeopathic element can be found in the 'medicine', the water retains a 'memory' of it. We may speculate that what does work is that the homoeopathic doctor him- or herself believes fervently in the remedy and conveys this to patients who are also willing to suspend their disbelief. This belief on both sides that the 'cure' will work is what may give it its power.

If we take the lesson from placebo research it is possible to see that when both coach and client believe in the power of the coaching process, we are likely to elevate its effectiveness many times over. If as the coach you are sceptical about whether it 'works' then you will convey this to the client. A client who is sceptical about coaching will immediately limit the chances that it will be useful for him or her. There is power in coaching and I want my clients to believe in that power. However, the power is invested in the relationship itself and in the coaching process, not in the supposed supernatural abilities of the coach.

Research into therapy, including, so-called meta-research (research into the research), for instance by David Elkins (2007), shows clearly that success in therapy has nothing to do with the intellectual cleverness of the practitioner or their theoretical orientation. Instead, the common factors seem to be:

- 1 The ability of the practitioner to create a climate of warmth, acceptance and rapport.
- 2 The nature of the 'therapeutic alliance' – how the practitioner and client work; the transparency and clarity of the goals.
- 3 The context in which the client seeks help and whether or not they have supportive people in their lives who are prepared to help them make positive changes.

- 4 Client and practitioner believing equally in the plausibility of any approaches that are used, including many that are intrinsically implausible, and in their mutual expectation that a positive outcome is possible – in other words what we might call a placebo effect.
- 5 The kinds of techniques used.

Of these five factors, the least important seems to be the last, with some researchers estimating that as little as 8–15 per cent of the eventual successful outcome had anything to do with particular techniques. We have yet to see whether coaching-specific research will throw up similar results, but my guess is that it will. Trust and warmth are the essential cornerstones in coaching, as in therapy.

### Permission to be yourself

When I was relatively new to coaching I acted on an unstated belief that I had to remain in some kind of positively neutral gear throughout the conversation. The client could get upset but I couldn't. The client could be boring but I had to simulate interest. The client could give me feedback at the end of the session but I had to be restrained.

I see now how wrong that was.

In fulfilling a contract for coaching with one organization, there was a 'meet the coach' preliminary event at which, unlike three colleagues, I could not be present. I joined the group the next day for the first of their coaching sessions, held within the timetable of a five-day course. One of the managers in the group who had selected me 'blind' to be his coach told me that he had done so precisely because I had not been present the previous day. His reason, he explained, was that he wanted me to be a 'totally neutral coaching machine' and the less he knew about me the better. In my early days as a coach I would have accepted that, but not now. So in discussing this wish for neutrality, it quickly became apparent that this client felt that the more he knew about me, the more he dreaded that I would judge him. I found the idea of being a 'neutral coaching machine' highly distasteful and I also know that this is not how coaching works. In my refusal to stay at the level of personal invisibility, I was able to show him that he could explore his issues with a real person and be accepted for who he was.

The real catalyst for change is in the coaching relationship itself. What the client does with you, he or she will be doing everywhere else. Therefore 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 if not most 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 he descriptions of what is happening with his communicator with others. Is the client client speak with such extreme slowness bored and impatient? Others will be respond try to exert inappropriate control in the others will experience too.

This data is every bit as important as what and people outside the room. It is priceless. It is far more significant than either your motivation, intellectualizing or analysing minute?

### Giving feedback

You have to become an expert in the art of giving feedback. The single most striking way in which a manager, we have no power to hire and fire, have no wish to create or destroy love. Unless we feel we could be putting the friendship at risk, is one of the few occasions where anyone can comment on the immediate behaviour of this with the honest intent to help the client. for self-aggrandizement endows the act of power.

Just to be clear, *feedback* is not the same as *criticism*. Being on the receiving end of criticism

Made me feel like a naughty child . . .

Felt really frightened – wonder if I'm on the line . . .

It was so unfair! I was obsessed by what lay behind it . . .

Criticism attacks the person by making generalizations: *you are* [usually something undesirable]. Criticism uses defensive and aggressive reactions described as *blame*, *accuse*, *generalizations*: 'you are a poor communicator', 'you never think . . .' Criticism is tough on the person because it acts upon the amygdala and the person acted upon because it alerts the amygdala.

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 the client speak with such extreme slowness that you find yourself becoming bored and impatient? Others will be responding in the same way. Does a client try to exert inappropriate control in the conversation with you? That's 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?*

Will you become a coach who can help others live their best lives?

### Giving feedback

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 of the other person. Being able to do this with the honest intent to help the other person learn and with no wish for self-aggrandizement endows the act of giving feedback with enormous power.

Just to be clear, *feedback* is not the same as *criticism*.

Being on the receiving end of criticism is 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 . . .

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 to danger (see page 31), so thinking

processes become less effective. By contrast, feedback is tough on the issues and is given 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.

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
- Agree how you will work on the
- Look for opportunities to offer m especially where a client can sh skill or behaviour has become.
- Choose your words carefully. It is up feeling a bit alarmed about w 'you were intimidating'. There is how the client has had an impact it personally. The whole point about taking it personally even while you of the client on you.

Here is an example.

## CASE STUDY

### Candice

Candice was proud of her track record: an MBA from the London Business School, won her job against stiff competition, the appointment, complaining that she write without recourse to jargon and impact on others. Candice was both annoyed believing that the fault lay with others who understand her.

Both Candice and her coach was on the line. Candice's coach the coaching room was one place where When Candice began to use convoluted language, the coach found himself as baffled glossing it over and pretending to understand every time.

'Candice, can I stop you here? Your words and sentences you are using production flexibility analysis and economic value added, and a lot more long words and technical

- 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.

### CASE STUDY

#### Candice

Candice was proud of her track record in production management, had an MBA from the London Business School, 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 and was generally unaware of her impact on others. Candice was both 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. Candice's coach negotiated an agreement that the coaching room was one place where she could expect real objectivity. 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 *Kanaban* with *JIT systems* and *economic value added*, and a lot of other stuff that followed with more long words and technical phrases and I had no idea what

you meant. Instead of concentrating on what you went on to say I was still puzzling about those sentences. 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 over-investment she had made in being an expert also became part of the agenda 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;
- 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 or even to raise an issue is every bit as important as knowing when you must. I still wonder if I was just too timid to offer feedback to a woman client who had startled me on first meeting with her exceptionally high, girlish voice and lisp. 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. Rightly or wrongly, I felt that I was on risky territory: can such a voice be changed? Possibly, but only with enormous effort. I remained silent on the question of her voice.

## Provocation and humour

I am utterly against the idea of the coach-worship where a holy hush prevails. In Therapy, for instance, it always seems to ramble on for hours while the therapist sits laughing, incredulity and all the other rights offer. (I am aware that this might not actually happen.)

When I first started using humour I thought I was probably a bit eccentric. Or maybe I needed to keep quiet about it. When I read the book *Provocative Therapy* (1974) I realized it was mild by comparison but seemed to work. It offers funny, teasing, intrusive, sexual comments to the client, often using stereotypes and exaggerates them to the point where the client laughs, has to defend him- or herself; or offers 'interpretations' of the client's behaviour with warmth for the client as the cornerstone of results. As Graham Dawes comments on ([provocativetherapy.com](http://provocativetherapy.com)):

The shibboleths of psychotherapists often before he's even given the client and what comes out is everything the client. He even encourages the client to all sorts of advantages their craze (albeit the advantages are crazier than the client with a wealth of justifications are more spurious with), exhorting them to continue to want to stop (albeit cheerfully continuing will be those the client

I don't go this far. But I do sometimes use the same genre. The underpinning hypothesis

- 1 If you provoke the client, using humour and perceptiveness in the opposite direction. In fact this is twisted and turned back to the client

### 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. Frank 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](http://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 behavior will bring to the client (albeit the advantages are crazier than the client's behavior), providing the client with a wealth of justifications for their behavior (albeit the justifications are more spurious than any the client has come up with), exhorting them to continue with the behaviors 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 underpinning hypotheses are these.

- 1 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.

- 2 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**

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 on and off 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 five 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 bogstandard 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 seven 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**

Senior foreign and commonwealth once diplomat fears delegating and doesn't know how to do it. Result: life clotted by 16-hour days, creates bottlenecks for his frustrated staff, wife furious because she sees him so little. Client has offered all the familiar excuses to his coach 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) think you're going a bit barmy  
Coach: (over-solemn face) Of course I'll will single you out for your exce the Prime Minister will persona Client: (snorting with laughter, in spite The Office never will thank me. my wife may have divorced me hope for me. If so please tell sending me up!

*Result: prolonged laughter. Coaching could happen without losing sight of qu that he hadn't known that coaching w myself as the straight-man'.*

It is even possible that Sigmund Freud used a form of provocative therapy. It is clear that he could not strictly-no-reactions rule he suggested for clients. Freud in 1932, is reported as describing his Chow dog, Yofi, to stay in the room. Freud said, 'You see, even the damned dog scratched again to return, Freud said, 'We have a second chance so maybe I should too.'

### **Being open to influence: receiving feedback**

The feedback process in coaching is two-way. It is also a process on the client. You will also be inviting the client to receive feedback. This is unusual in virtually all professional training, coaching's close cousin, training. In asking for feedback, you are modelling how sincerely you believe in the relationship. You can ask about the content and style of the relationship:

How have you found this session?

What worked especially well for you?

What worked less well?

How are we getting on together –

- 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. The Office 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 also 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.'

### Being open to influence: receiving feedback

The feedback process in coaching is two-way. It's not just you pronouncing on the client. You will also be inviting the client to pronounce on you. Again, this is unusual in virtually all professional relationships except perhaps coaching's close cousin, training. In asking for feedback you will again be modelling how sincerely you believe in the two-way nature of the relationship. You can ask about the content and style of your coaching as well as about the relationship:

- How have you found this session?
- What worked especially well for you?
- What worked less well?
- How are we getting on together – you and me?

When people offer you feedback, they may be uncertain how you will receive it, or they may just not know how to do it properly. So the feedback may take any of these forms:

Apparent attack (criticism) – 'You asked a lot of questions but I didn't get any of the advice I need.'

Apparent compliment – 'You're brilliant at seeing beneath the surface.'

Vague hints – 'You're a bit hard to understand at times.'

Don't simper at compliments; don't get angry, defensive, self-justifying or confess 'guilt' if the client has criticisms. Instead, repeat and summarize the feedback and ask the client to tell you more. You may get some pleasant surprises as well as getting vital information about how to improve your practice.

### Tough speaking

Giving feedback is a form of confrontation and most coaching will involve some use of confrontation from time to time. If you never confront clients, then you need to ask whether you are colluding – going along with their view that everyone else is at fault but them or that it is impossible for their situation to improve.

Confronting needs to be done with extreme care: you can destroy the client's trust in a few seconds if it is done clumsily. Even if done well, it may dismay the client. Confrontation may also lead to denial, making the resistance more extreme than it was in the first place.

#### Reasons for confronting

Usually there are three types of situation that you and your client could explore:

- 1 Discrepancies between espoused values and values in action. This is where the client says one thing but does another. An example might be a client who says she believes in equal opportunities but actually recruits and selects people on the basis of stereotype or old boy/girl networks.
- 2 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 the current role and want to leave but make no actual attempt to seek another job.

- 3 You have serious doubts about the course of action you are taking. You are overwhelmed with anger about what is happening and storm into the boss's office the next day to tell him he has got it all wrong and not get him the outcome he says he wants.

For confrontation to be successful you must be clear about what you wish to help. If there is even a smidgen of doubt, then you must back you up. Rumour, gossip and scuttlebutt will undermine your credibility. Ideally you need to have experienced what you are doing and be able to hand. There must be a relationship of trust between you and the client, so confrontation is not usually the first stage of the process. You must have a handle on the client's needs, including the ability to create real rapport and have a meaningful conversation.

#### How to confront

Introduce the subject straightforwardly, without preamble. State the results that the client wants, alerting them to what you are going to say something which may be uncomfortable. Stressing how much you value and want to help the client. Make sure you say on data; keep it descriptive and not 'what should be', then ask how the client feels about the implications. Ask what will happen if the client does nothing, and brainstorm solutions, including offering alternatives. Make it clear that it is the client's choice to accept or not accept the changes.

### Humility

I was working with a client who was in denial about his health. He was talking calmly and optimistically about the single most therapeutic part of his medical treatment. In our conversations he had with his oncologist. She was very honest about the limits of her knowledge as well as stressing the importance of the treatment. She adopted the position of treating patients with optimism and honesty. Optimism with honesty about her own mortality is a hard act to carry off. Do it too much and you will be seen as arrogant and you will be too invested in protecting your client's confidence in you.

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- 3 You have serious doubts about whether the client's proposed course of action is actually 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.

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. You must also have reliable data to back you up. Rumour, gossip and scuttlebutt do not amount to reliable data. Ideally you need to have experienced whatever you are talking about at first hand. There must be a relationship of trust and liking between you and the client, so confrontation is not usually a technique to be used in the early stages of the process. You must have a high level of skill in giving feedback, including the ability to create real rapport and to manage any fallout from the conversation.

#### **How to confront**

Introduce the subject straightforwardly and make the link to the stated results that the client wants, alerting the client 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. And explore the implications. Ask what will happen if the situation does not change and brainstorm solutions, including offering any bright ideas of your own about alternatives. Make it clear that it is the client's choice whether or not to make the changes.

#### **Humility**

I was working with a client who was in long-term remission from cancer. In talking calmly and optimistically about his treatment, he remarked that the single most therapeutic part of his many visits to the hospital were the conversations he had with his oncologist. This woman had acknowledged the limits of her knowledge as well as stressing her confidence in what did work. She adopted the position of treating patients as fellow adults, mixing judicious optimism with honesty about her own and her profession's limitations. This is a hard act to carry off. Do it too much or in the wrong circumstances and you destroy your client's confidence in you. But act all-seeing and all-knowing and you will be too invested in protecting your image. Coaching is full of

paradoxes and this is one of the most profound: we have to be powerful and powerless simultaneously.

The critical test is: is this in my client's interest? If yes, then:

When you are puzzled, say so:

I'm feeling puzzled about the connection between what you've said about x and what you've said about y: what's your take on that?

When you feel confused about where the conversation or session is going, raise it:

I notice we've spent nearly an hour on what you've done since we last met; we still haven't set any goals for this one! How do you feel about that?

If you feel caught in a dilemma, describe it:

I'm in two minds here about what to do.

Or

I'm caught between a number of different ways of responding here.

When we met for our last session I feel I pressed you too hard on x issue. I did notice that you seemed uncomfortable but I still carried on didn't I? I'm sorry. That was a mistake.

I'm not sure I know what to do here.

When you have made a mistake, acknowledge it and apologize:

When you feel out of your depth, declare it:

Owning up to apparent weakness or uncertainty may have more impact than you realize. As a coach you need a high degree of self-management. You must be centred, self-aware and with a high degree of all the many intelligences that the role requires: analytical, emotional, spiritual and systems intelligence. Yet at the same time you are human; there are things you don't know and areas where you are uncertain. Conveying these to clients whose lives have often been lived in dread of such 'weakness' may have only beneficial effect.

### Acknowledging

We are often the only witnesses to enormous acts of courage and learning. What may seem like small steps to others are often huge leaps for a client. So a client who has overcome her genuine phobia and fear of HIV infection to have much-needed electrolysis may only have you to tell. A client who has

given up what to him was the scalding his nails may only feel able to glory in the sole recipient of an email from an who wants to tell you joyfully about presentation to her board. A client with profoundly disabled child may not feel this death was a sad event, it was also not the tragedy that the rest of the world

Acknowledging is yet another way 'normal' conversation. In acknowledging aspect of who the client is rather than The coach is acknowledging the being s

### CASE STUDY

#### Peter

Peter is a client who has struggled with and professional change. He has had team and get to know a new boss at bereavements.

Peter: These last few months have been

Coach: Yes, I'd like to acknowledge you're going.

Peter: (surprised and pleased) Oh, th

In acknowledging, the coach notices a client: humour, energy, clarity, courage, humility, and so on. Note that, in acknowledging, compliments. Lack of authenticity will b

### When the client cries

We can cry with laughter – or with sadness and joy. Crying is just at one end of the spectrum. We are dealing with the whole person in the we will see tears from time to time.

Trainee coaches often express unease do when a client cries. It is unusual for

given up what to him was the scaldingly shameful and lifelong habit of biting his nails may only feel able to glory in his achievement with you. You may be the sole recipient of an email from an apparently confident senior executive who wants to tell you joyfully about having overcome her fear of giving a presentation to her board. A client who has experienced the death of a profoundly disabled child may not feel able to tell anyone else that although this death was a sad event, it was also welcome, received with relief, and was not the tragedy that the rest of the world assumes.

Acknowledging is yet another way in which coaching is different from a 'normal' conversation. In *acknowledging*, the coach recognizes an important aspect of who the client is rather than noticing what the client has *achieved*. The coach is acknowledging the being self, not the doing self.

### CASE STUDY

#### Peter

Peter is a client who has struggled with an enormous amount of personal and professional change. He has had to start a new job, recruit a new team and get to know a new boss at the same time as coping with three bereavements.

Peter: These last few months have been the toughest I can remember.  
 Coach: Yes, I'd like to acknowledge your courage and resolution in keeping going.  
 Peter: (surprised and pleased) Oh, thanks. Gosh. I feel great!

In *acknowledging*, the coach notices and mentions positive qualities in the client: humour, energy, clarity, courage, doggedness, willingness to learn, humility, and so on. Note that, in acknowledging, we are not giving empty compliments. Lack of authenticity will be immediately obvious to the client.

### When the client cries

We can cry with laughter – or with sadness. We can laugh with anger or with joy. Crying is just at one end of the spectrum of human emotion and since we are dealing with the whole person in the coaching room it is inevitable that we will see tears from time to time.

Trainee coaches often express understandable anxiety about what to do when a client cries. It is unusual for a relative stranger to break down in

front of you. Also, adults may feel that crying is childish or shows that you are out of control or incompetent and can't cope. It certainly exposes the vulnerability of the person who is crying and some clients may find it humiliating.

However, in my experience, the person who is most likely to be worried about the crying client is the coach. The reasons may be a mixture of embarrassment at seeing an apparently well-adjusted person break down, or a fear that the client may discomfit themselves then or later by their tears, regretting having shown apparent weakness. Some coaches describe a dread that they may join in.

As coaches we may also worry that we have in some way caused the tears through clumsy coaching. The language here is often telling: 'I made him cry', implying that it is our responsibility. My own view is that crying is one of the multitude of choices that clients make during their work with us. Coaches cannot *make* clients cry – any more than they can make them laugh, or bored, or command them to feel any other emotion. The client chooses, unconsciously perhaps, but chooses nonetheless. Often the coach's worry about whether the client can cope is just a way of projecting their own worry – 'Will I be able to cope with a client who cries?'

The biggest trap for a coach with a weeping client is to imagine that your role is to fix the tears. Ask yourself what message it would give your client to do anything at all which implied that their tears are not legitimate. Through their tears the client is giving you a privileged opportunity to understand more about them. Platitudinous there-thereing does not help, nor does any of the range of mumbled clichés about time healing, or 'a good cry does you good'. The second biggest trap is to join in. There is a place for your own emotional reaction, but if you are crying as helplessly as your client you will be in no position to help.

Your most appropriate response depends on that split-second moment of judgement that only you can make:

You're looking upset – do you want to go on?

Of course you can cry – this is one place where you can.

If it would help to cry, that's absolutely fine.

You've been through a horrible experience, so of course you feel upset.

These feelings are so strong – of course they will produce tears.

Silence: sometimes you can best convey empathy and acceptance simply by saying nothing.

Clients who prefer to contain their who do not, may let go and cry. It is always manage the moment with you. A possible you like – tell me when you're ready to go.

Far from feeling that tears are an embarrassing to be swept out of sight as soon as possible, conspiring in the illusion that nothing has happened. That tears are wonderfully useful material to have some time after the coaching has finished. These moments are the ones that stick in the mind and are helpful in the entire process.

## CASE STUDY

### Martyn

Martyn and I worked together on and off over a variety of jobs and roles. He remembered the first and only time during one of our sessions:

I'd suddenly fallen out of love with myself, bringing it up because I felt that I was not as always on top of things. I was feeling anxiety and I took the risk of letting you know how I was feeling. You responded to me with that and realized that I was OK. You accepted that it was OK for me to see myself as a potential failure.

Our discussion later of what had happened that it would in no way affect our relationship was one of the best moments in our work together. I realized I did not have a totally optimistic attitude all the time. I was feeling what felt like an abyss at the time, but you responded to me with compassion and released the anxiety and straightened out my perspective.

What this story shows is that by accepting the legitimacy of the emotion, you show the person that you care.

Clients who prefer to contain their tears will stop at this point. Clients who do not, may let go and cry. It is always a good idea to invite clients to manage the moment with you. A possible response here is: 'Take as long as you like – tell me when you're ready to go on.'

Far from feeling that tears are an embarrassing intrusion into the coaching, to be swept out of sight as soon as possible with both coach and client conspiring in the illusion that nothing happened, the skilled coach realizes that tears are wonderfully useful material for the work. When I meet clients some time after the coaching has finished, many of them will tell me that these moments are the ones that stick in their memories as among the most helpful in the entire process.

### CASE STUDY

#### Martyn

Martyn and I worked together on and off for a number of years through a variety of jobs and roles. He remembers the moment when he wept for the first and only time during one of our sessions.

I'd suddenly fallen out of love with my job. I'd been dreading bringing it up because I felt that it was important for you to see me as always on top of things. You encouraged me to name the anxiety and I took the risk of letting my emotion show. I trusted you with that and realized it was OK to fail sometimes because you accepted that it was, and you accepted me in spite of my seeing myself as a potential failure.

Our discussion later of why I felt that, and your response that it would in no way affect your view of me, was one of the best moments in our work together – a real moment of learning because I realized I did not have to be a brilliant performer or totally optimistic all the time. We had looked together into what felt like an abyss at the time. In a weird way, crying released the anxiety and straightaway afterwards I'd got it into more perspective.

What this story shows is that by accepting the intensity of the moment and the legitimacy of the emotion, you show that you accept the legitimacy of the person.

### Traumatized, bereaved or stressed clients

To live our lives with reasonable confidence we have to assume that the world is a safe, predictable place. Essentially we believe in our own value and right to exist. All of this is overturned in psychological trauma. I would define trauma as an event or series of events where the client experiences feeling out of control and chronically unsafe. Their assumptions about justice, personal safety, health or cause and effect are often replaced by the confusion of betrayal and bewilderment. They may feel exhausted, powerless and needy. Feelings of being essentially a good person may be replaced by feelings of being essentially a bad person because 'bad things only happen to bad people'. In effect their psychological contract with the world around them is experienced as breached.

Enter this area only if you are confident, experienced and know the boundaries of your own skill. In fact you may be thinking that this is exactly the sort of territory in which any coach should think twice. Of course the immediate response may be to feel alarmed and frightened by the extent of the client's distress: *this is too much, I'm out of my depth*. When, on mature reflection, you trust that feeling, you must strongly encourage the client to consult a specialist in this area. In fact, see your task as coaching the client around the issue of finding specialist help. Be suspicious, equally, of over-eagerness to get involved because you are enjoying the drama of it all without necessarily having the skills and awareness that you need.

It is obviously true that there are many potential snares. You may be deluding yourself about your levels of skill. You may meddle with techniques which you only half understand. The client may endow you with skills and knowledge which you do not in fact have. You may make a mess of it.

The case for not backing away in terror is that when all the following conditions are in place, you may want to go ahead.

- The client has previously been stable and functioning well.
- The trauma is not overwhelming the client – this may be the case even when it has been precipitated by real tragedy.
- The client chooses you as the person who can help them.
- The client believes that there is no other obvious source of help (note that this is probably not true and one of your roles could be to refer them to specialized helpers).
- You can work comfortably and openly alongside other professionals with whom your client is in touch.
- The client makes this choice because you have probably worked with them over a long period of time, maybe several years through a number of different jobs and roles.

- There is a high level of trust and safety between you and the client.
- The traumatic incident occurs in the context of a longer-term coaching programme.
- You know enough and have had experience of the kind of issues the client brings.

Over a long coaching career, all of these symptoms will occur at some point. Examples from my own practice include a client who became caught up in offering consular services to tourists who had been involved in a disaster which had happened while he was on holiday. Another client was a senior partner whose stress levels got well out of proportion after his firm was formally investigated in the aftermath of a medical director whose personal reputation had been damaged by crisis events in his hospital – and too many other examples. In fact, they all leave their jobs in the aftermath of a merger or acquisition. The examples I have described here are those of clients who will meet much milder versions of the same symptoms. These include the abrupt discovery of a major health problem, a son or daughter who develops a serious illness, a partner who leaves, a son or daughter who develops a drug problem, and so on.

These are the symptoms to look out for:

- *Flashbacks*: reliving an event as if it were happening again, triggered by an innocent reminder such as a single word in a newspaper.
- *Nightmares and poor sleep*: for instance, unable to sleep because it is impossible to get back to sleep.
- *Numbing and avoidance*: a client who cannot bear to go near a few metres from her own home.
- *Hyperarousal*: another client described being seeping with sweat in a film where he was some distance from the event in which he had been involved. News stories added to this feeling.
- *Intrusive negative thoughts*: imagining the worst possibilities. For instance, a client imagined scenes of public disgrace, such as being thrown out of his hospital with his belongings, his name in the medical register, his pension denied, his name mentioned in every newspaper.
- *Survivor guilt*: Where the client has survived a disaster while others have lost their jobs, been killed or injured. After a period of euphoria, there can be feelings of guilt: *Why me? Could I have done more?*

- There is a high level of trust and liking between you.
- The traumatic incident occurs while you are in the middle of a coaching programme.
- You know enough and have had sufficient training to deal with what the client brings.

Over a long coaching career, all of this may happen more often than you expect. Examples from my own practice include a diplomat unexpectedly caught up in offering consular services to British survivors of a major natural disaster which had happened while he was on holiday in the same country, a senior partner whose stress levels got well out of control when his accountancy firm was formally investigated in the aftermath of a political scandal, and a medical director whose personal reputation was seriously compromised by crisis events in his hospital – and too many clients to list who suddenly lost their jobs in the aftermath of a merger or downsizing programme. The examples I have described here are those of obvious crisis and trauma, but you will meet much milder versions of the same phenomena on a more frequent basis: the abrupt discovery of a major health problem, a partner who suddenly leaves, a son or daughter who develops a drug problem, a career-threatening episode, and so on.

These are the symptoms to look out for:

- *Flashbacks*: reliving an event as if it is happening all over again, often triggered by an innocent reminder from someone else or from seeing a single word in a newspaper.
- *Nightmares and poor sleep*: for instance, waking early and finding it impossible to get back to sleep.
- *Numbing and avoidance*: a client who had been attacked by a mugger a few metres from her own home talked of feeling 'hollowed out'. Another client described being separated from the experience, as if he was in a film where he was somehow outside the whole traumatic event in which he had been involved. Seeing himself on the television news added to this feeling.
- *Intrusive negative thoughts*: imagining catastrophe; ruminating about the worst possibilities. For instance, the medical director client imagined scenes of public disgrace where he was summarily ejected from his hospital with his belongings in a bin bag, struck off the medical register, his pension denied him and a hostile article about him in every newspaper.
- *Survivor guilt*: Where the client has survived an incident in which others have lost their jobs, been injured or killed, after an initial period of euphoria, there can be feelings of unworthiness and guilt. *Why me? Could I have done more? Was I selfish? Am I a coward?*

- *Preoccupation with 'if onlys' and 'what ifs'*: The client whose reputation was at risk repeatedly went over the events leading up to the crisis, asking himself what would have happened if only he had not done or said particular things.
- *High levels of arousal*: jumpiness, irritability, hyper-vigilance, rapid heartbeat, sweating.

These are difficult phenomena to deal with. At their most extreme, they are properly described as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It's not surprising that clients will report anxiety and depression along with loss of appetite. Using alcohol, tobacco or drugs as a way of seeking to anaesthetize yourself against the distress is also common.

I like the guidance given by the psychological trauma specialists, the Centre for Crisis Psychology, as published in the classic book, *Coping With Catastrophe*, by Peter Hodgkinson and Michael Stewart (1998). Essentially this is that an empathetic but directive and structured approach sustained over a period of time is what will work. The directive approach is justified by the helplessness that such clients report. Temporarily, they are not in the resourceful state in which coaching will work. There will be an educative element to it where you will be in the role of teacher with a client. Tell the client that this is what they will experience and ask for their consent to it. Tactics that I have used successfully with such clients include:

- Normalizing the client's reactions: for instance through explaining the change cycle (see page 157).
- Encouraging them to read self-help material on PTSD such as the pamphlet by Martina Mueller of the Oxford Cognitive Therapy Centre (2007).
- Reconstructing the whole story with them, concentrating on its factual aspects first and creating the environment where the strong feelings that this will create can be accepted and contained: be wary of assuring the client that you 'understand'. You don't and can't 'understand' because you have not been through the experience, though what you can say with truth is how their story is affecting you. When my accountancy client was describing his dread of what the investigators would find and his fear of humiliating collapse during the process of being interviewed, I said something like, 'This sounds so difficult and I can see the hurt and stress it's causing you. Just listening to your story, I'm feeling some of that tension and anxiety.'
- Facing the fears created by avoidance and consciously filling in any missing factual elements: for instance, the client who had been mugged had somehow got to the point where she believed that her

assailant had followed her for Discovering, through reading been a random and opportunist recovery.

- Teaching de-arousal techniques breathing and classic muscular
- Teaching techniques which show ruminating, for instance through
- Respectfully and firmly question client whose son had drowned close to me could be in danger 'it will be bad luck to be near everyone'. Challenging the group enormously helpful to this client these patterns, see page 172).
- Creating, with the client's help, activity to be followed every day
- Strongly encouraging the client short-term recourse to medication symptoms.
- Recommending trauma specialists as progressive desensitization, here where they have developed photo list of such specialists).
- Giving the client a relaxation record
- Suggesting the value of keeping a diary of whatever is happening – for sympathy they are receiving from

These are not one-off interventions. Consider being prepared to offer telephone basis and to follow up through a structured approach needed, agreed with your client, but only confident of your skills.

### **Knowing when too far is too far**

The coaching relationship is delicate. Too much pressure will fracture. Too little and the coaching will not lead to the changes the client wants. Knowing when to press and when to hold back is a split-second judgement.

assailant had followed her for weeks, marking her down for attack. Discovering, through reading court accounts, that it had actually been a random and opportunistic crime was an important part of her recovery.

- Teaching de-arousal techniques such as steady diaphragmatic breathing and classic muscular relaxation.
- Teaching techniques which show the client how to interrupt negative ruminating, for instance through physical or mental distraction.
- Respectfully and firmly questioning flawed logic: so for instance, a client whose son had drowned had come to believe that 'anyone close to me could be in danger'. From this, he had rapidly moved to 'it will be bad luck to be near me so I'd better keep away from everyone'. Challenging the grossly faulty generalizations here was enormously helpful to this client's adjustment (for more on spotting these patterns, see page 172).
- Creating, with the client's help, a programme of simple physical activity to be followed every day.
- Strongly encouraging the client to consult their GP and to consider a short-term recourse to medication as a way of managing the worst symptoms.
- Recommending trauma specialists who can deploy techniques such as progressive desensitization, helping people to re-enter situations where they have developed phobic responses ([uktrauma.org.uk](http://uktrauma.org.uk) has a list of such specialists).
- Giving the client a relaxation recording to play before going to sleep.
- Suggesting the value of keeping a daily journal of the positive aspects of whatever is happening – for instance, the levels of support and sympathy they are receiving from others in their lives.

*These are not one-off interventions. If you find yourself in this position, consider being prepared to offer telephone and email support on a no-limits basis and to follow up through a structured process over as many weeks as are needed, agreed with your client, but only if, again, you are experienced and confident of your skills.*

### **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, suggesting that it will not lead to the changes the client wants to make in his or her life. Knowing when to press and when to hold back is a matter of the finest and most split-second judgement.

**CASE STUDY****Robert**

Robert was a miner's son, left school at 16 and began teaching himself some of the principles of para-legal work while he worked in a solicitor's office. At the age of 40, by now an experienced solicitor himself, 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 nice, 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 described 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 was a long pause – perhaps 12 seconds. Robert looked at me, looked tense, wrung his hands slightly and looked at his feet. Very slowly he said: '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 pondered this exchange, wondered him harder, discussed it with my supervisor been right to hold back. Eight weeks later, me that with no warning or previous the swallowing a lethal dose of paracetamol. He terminal cancer (she hadn't). Robert's judgement state was totally correct, including a diagnosis shared with me. What he had not anticipated would implode. His weighing up of what he his wife was also correct. And my judgement was correct, though I did not have anything

Subsequently, in training new coaches, eagerness to help can stray into too much warning signs from the client which say 'The client's energy goes into repelling what he than into learning and change.

**Handling these moments**

- When the client tells you straight stop, stop.
- Be alert to the evidence from the client looking away.
- You can't go on with a task-based pause or the resistance becomes the focus.
- Name it: 'I notice we seem to have for you?'
- Agree jointly how to handle it.

**Talking about yourself**

Coaching is a unique kind of conversation. It kinds of exchange. In a conversation with a friend our kinship with the other person by emphasising similar experience. For instance, here is a conversation between a coach and a friend:

Friend: I'm really worried about my scan results.  
 You: Oh, don't worry too much about it. It was months ago and it was nothing probably just the same.  
 Friend: Oh, that's a comfort, perhaps mind

Later I pondered this exchange, wondering whether I might have pressed him harder, discussed it with my supervisor and concluded in the end that it had been right to hold back. Eight weeks later, Robert called me, devastated, to tell me that with no warning or previous threats, his wife had killed herself, swallowing a lethal dose of paracetamol. He discovered that she believed she 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 attack, rather than into learning and change.

### **Handling these moments**

- When the client tells you straightforwardly that they want you to stop, stop.
- Be alert to the evidence from the client – 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: 'I notice we seem to have hit a pause here. What's going on for you?'
- Agree jointly how to handle it.

### **Talking about yourself**

Coaching is a unique kind of conversation. It differs from other close, intimate kinds of exchange. In a conversation with a friend, we often aim to demonstrate our kinship with the other person by emphasizing that we, too, have had a similar experience. For instance, here is a sample conversation you might have with a friend:

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| Friend: | I'm really worried about my scan results. Perhaps I've got cancer.   |
| You:    | Oh, don't worry too much about that. I had a similar thing a few months ago and it was nothing to be concerned about. Yours is probably just the same. |
| Friend: | Oh, that's a comfort, perhaps mine will be all right too!  |

A coaching conversation would be different:

**Client:** I'm really worried about my scan results. Perhaps I've got cancer.  
**Coach:** Yes, I can understand that concern. Say more about the worry . . .?

New coaches often ask how appropriate it is to talk about your own experience. The urge to do so can be strong. It could help create empathy. It could show that we, too, have our vulnerable side and it could help discharge the emotion that a distressed client can create in the coach.

Coaching is about the client's issues, not the coach's. Talking about yourself will readily distract the client into discussing your experiences and concerns – or even trying to coach *you*. Your experience could trigger a powerful emotional reaction in your client, and not always a helpful one. For instance, the client may, at that stage in the coaching, feel that he or she needs to see you as someone above the hurly-burly of human emotion.

A client once told me towards the end of our coaching programme that the reason she had selected me rather than the other two coaches she had considered was that I had appeared 'very calm and therefore probably a whole person, not a fragmented mess like me'. This client's starting-out issues concerned managing the turbulent emotions she experienced in her workplace. If I had appeared to burden her with any of my emotion then it could have implied that there was no hope for her either. Sometimes, the wish to share a client's pain can seem overwhelming, particularly where the client is describing a loss or trauma that you feel is akin to something you have experienced yourself. There are two related points to make here. The first is that you will be making assumptions that your experience is actually a close parallel to the client's – never the case, however similar it might seem. The second is that you may appear to be making a bid to usurp the client's experience – 'my tragedy is worse than yours'. Alternatively, the client may interpret your comment as 'Well I've coped with my difficulty, so you can jolly well cope with yours – forget it – move on!' It will also be harder to re-establish coaching conventions – the conversation may veer towards a nice friendly chat.

In the initial 'Hello-and-how-are-you?' part of the session, a client will virtually always politely ask you how you are. Ninety-nine per cent of the time a conventional 'fine' or 'very well' is the appropriate answer. Exceptions could be when you know the client well enough to share a major triumph or upset in your life and feel that the client has the right to know that he or she may observe tiny changes in your usual demeanour. Without hearing your explanation for such changes, the client might well misinterpret your behaviour as being some reflection on him or her. Equally, giving yourself brief permission to talk about it will, paradoxically, help you manage its impact on you.

With experience, you may feel that, as in these very rare cases, the benefits of talking about your own issues and experience could outweigh the

disadvantages and benefit the client. How  
*experience, don't risk it.*

When there is *profound challenge* in your work, it is important to be aware of it and deal with it. In dealing with the death of a beloved young god-daughter in the middle of a coaching session, I found myself feeling very vulnerable. None of my clients responded with the same level of sensitivity. None recoiled in embarrassment – I might not have been aware of any embarrassment. I had done good enough work during these times. It took me a while to get everything in the way of essential preparation sorted. When I was with my client, I gave myself up wholly to the view that only by remaining detached from my own feelings could I help my client. I took the rawness of my emotion and asked for some understanding, tolerance. As a result, I increased my understanding and tolerance I could offer the client.

Client relationships in coaching are delicate. 'I'm not a professional,' said one client sternly, 'but I do think I'm a professional' in the sense that I do what I do well. I do not forget them the moment they are gone; nor do I forget them somewhere in that shadowy territory between us. However briefly, for a moment of trustful connection, I am entirely right.'

As coach with a client, my basic belief is that I do not want to be an omnipotent, detached observer. I am in the middle of the human struggle along with my client.

### Managing boundaries

One of the reasons that therapy has acquired a bad reputation is that it has become clear that there are some therapists who have sexual relationships with their clients. The number of such cases is a very small number but that they are there and that they do happen. All the regulatory bodies for psychology and psychotherapy have strict rules about this. As with doctor-patient sexual relationships, it is important to respect the boundaries and to do so in a way that is right for both parties. This is because where the relationship is based on a power differential, and to cross the boundary is seen as a violation of the client's rights and is rightly regarded as abusive. Virtually all of the cases of sexual abuse of clients by therapists are cases of their behaviour as acts of altruism. The therapist's motivation is usually to help the client, to provide support and guidance, and to help the client to overcome their difficulties. As with all abusive relationships, the core issue is the lack of respect for the client's autonomy and the vulnerability of the abused person.

disadvantages and benefit the client. However, *when you are still building your experience, don't risk it.*

When there is *profound challenge* in your life, it must be right to share at least some of it with your clients. In dealing with two bereavements, the death of a beloved young god-daughter in the middle 1990s and the death of my dear husband in 2010, I found my clients responded with delicacy, tact and fellow-feeling. None recoiled in embarrassment – as far as I was aware – and of course I might not have been aware of any embarrassment they did feel. I believe I did good enough work during these times. It took hugely more effort to do virtually everything in the way of essential preparation or record-keeping. But once I was with my client, I gave myself up wholeheartedly to being there. Contrary to the view that only by remaining detached can you be helpful, I confirmed my belief that the opposite was true. I took the risk of disclosing some of the rawness of my emotion and asked for some modest support back: empathy, understanding, tolerance. As a result, I increased the amount of empathy, understanding and tolerance I could offer those clients: take some, give some.

Client relationships in coaching are delicate. 'I'm paying you to be nice to me,' said one client sternly, 'but I do think you mean it.' They are not purely 'professional' in the sense that I do what one former mentor advocated and forget them the moment they are gone; nor are they friendships. They grow somewhere in that shadowy territory between the two. Turning to clients, however briefly, for a moment of trustful comfort and understanding felt entirely right.

As coach with a client, my basic belief is that we are all in this together. I don't want to be an omnipotent, detached coach. I want to be there in the middle of the human struggle along with my clients.

### Managing boundaries

One of the reasons that therapy has acquired a bad name in some quarters is that it has become clear that there are some therapists who have inappropriate sexual relationships with their clients. The current evidence is that those who do so are a very small number but that they are serial abusers – that is, they do it often. All the regulatory bodies for psychotherapists explicitly warn against it. As with doctor-patient sexual relationships, it is grounds for being struck off. This is because where the relationship is one of healer-afflicted there is a power differential, and to cross the boundary from healer to lover is thus rightly regarded as abusive. Virtually all of the abusers are male. They justify their behaviour as acts of altruism. The relationships take place, they say, out of pity for the client, usually when the female client believes she is unattractive. As with all abusive relationships, the core of the abuse is in the exploited vulnerability of the abused person.

Remember, too, that power has aphrodisiac qualities and if our clients attribute power to us or we to them, then this dynamic may be at work – see any scandal in which a famous politician's bedroom secrets are revealed. When the press ponders aloud, 'How did someone as physically unattractive as x draw a beautiful woman like y?' the answer is usually his fame and assumed power.

Although I believe it would be rare indeed for anything similar to happen in coaching, it is still possible. As in therapy, clients may reveal matters to us that they have told no one else. Several clients have told me that I know more about them than anyone else except their partners, and sometimes they have shared secrets with me that they have not shared even with a partner. Where this is linked through the coaching with permanent and positive change, it is perfectly natural for the client to have feelings of gratitude and warmth towards the coach and for the coach to delight in being on the receiving end of such feelings.

The intensity of the one-to-one relationship in these circumstances may often have some erotic undertones. When you take a whole-life perspective, you will inevitably get to know something about the client's personal life, and this may include his or her sexual relationships. Talking about it puts it on the agenda. So where coach and client get on well, that powerful instinctive drive to love and be loved may well be in the air, especially if one or both of the parties has some sexual dissatisfaction in their lives.

Examples might be a coach and client of the same age and background finding that there is some sexual chemistry between them at a time when both have unhappy marriages. Another example might be an older male client who may not often have the experience of being listened to intently by an attractive younger woman – and in this case she happens to be his coach. An older female client may enjoy being coached by a younger man for the same reasons. There is the same potential for disaster lurking here as there is in therapeutic relationships. Being listened to with unconditional acceptance is a rare event for most people: it is gratifying. Just as in therapy, a woman client whose self-confidence is at a temporarily low ebb, or who has been abused in the past, may believe that sex is her only gift or that a sexual exchange is a reliable way to find affection. An older male coach could in theory be as tempted to 'rescue' a vulnerable young woman client with sexual reassurance as his misguided therapist counterpart could do. Some clients undoubtedly do use seductive behaviour and this can be destabilizing, especially at times of upheaval in your own personal life. Beware especially of wanting to seem attractive to your clients in the absence of feeling attractive to your own partner, friends or family. If you find strong sexual feelings intruding into your coaching, it is time to end the relationship.

In any professional relationship, there may be other possibilities for the exploitation of trust. So there are doctors, solicitors and accountants who steal

from their clients or who exploit a lack of power in persuading them to make bequests, a less likely scenario in coaching where the relationship is finite.

Note that a client may also abuse a coach by abusing a client. However, it is possible, to encounter clients whose distress is overblown and becomes the target. One colleague described

### CASE STUDY

#### Anna

Anna arrived for her session with the coach on finding a new job. She spent most of the session telling me that her life was a mess and that she was angry and agitated, shouting at me, shouting at her employer, shouting at her husband. Her employer was mad to see the spectacle of seeing her cry just as everyone assured her that I was not enjoying it, she was finding it distressing but also relieved that the initial storm had passed. I realized afterwards that Anna was probably the first ever target of her husband's displaced vengeance from years of domestic abuse.

An American contact once described how she was stalked. The client in this case, through decision in work with her coach, had rejected her partner. The rejected partner had stalked the coach. Ultimately this man had been arrested and supervised medication but only after a year of terrifying threats. Clear breaches of trust had occurred.

The saving grace in coaching, and the much rarer, is that the power is so much more likely to come to us for healing and are therefore less likely to be used for abuse on the part of the client.

from their clients or who exploit a lonely client's need for friendship by persuading them to make bequests, and so on. Where the professional concerned has acted out of veniality, they are rightly punished. All of this is less likely in coaching where the relationships are more commonly short and finite.

Note that a client may also abuse a coach. This is even rarer than a coach abusing a client. However, it is possible. Just occasionally my colleagues and I encounter clients whose distress is overpowering and where the coach becomes the target. One colleague describes such a client.

### CASE STUDY

#### **Anna**

Anna arrived for her session with the stated aim of getting coaching on finding a new job. She spent most of the first hour crying, telling me that her life was a mess and that she was sure I couldn't help her. As she warmed to her theme of how I couldn't help her she became angry and agitated, shouting at me, telling me that my fees were outrageous, her employer was mad to pay them, that I was enjoying the spectacle of seeing her cry just as everyone else in her life had done. I assured her that I was not enjoying it, suggested we stop the session if she was finding it distressing but also offering to carry on once the initial storm had passed. I realized afterwards that I was receiving the displaced vengeance from years of disappointment and sadness. I was probably the first ever target of her rage who just sat still without retaliating.

An American contact once described to me the ultimate horror: being stalked. The client in this case, through her own well-thought-through decision in work with her coach, had ended her partner relationship.

The rejected partner had stalked the coach, blaming her for the decision. Ultimately this man plea-bargained his way to five years on probation and supervised medication but only after subjecting the coach to over a year of terrifying threats. Clear breaches of the law should always be reported to the police.

The saving grace in coaching, and the reason abuse is bound to be so much rarer, is that the power is so much more evenly balanced. Our clients do not come to us for healing and are therefore less likely to regard us with the awe that could lead to abuse on the part of the coach.

### Can we do harm?

If we believe in the power of the coaching relationship then it may follow that we may be able to harm our clients. A lot of coaches worry about this. I have doubts about how far we can truly hurt a client. We may waste a client's time. We may bore clients. We may annoy them. We may do embarrassingly poor coaching, but serious, lasting injury? Some of the muddled thinking on this topic has probably come from comparing coaching with psychotherapy and from comparing psychotherapy with medicine, dentistry or nursing. Unlike a doctor, we do not prescribe drugs with the risks of getting the dose or the drug wrong; unlike a surgeon we are not doing operations which can be bungled. The danger of iatrogenic (clinician-caused) harm is very real. What is the equivalent in coaching? It can only be the belief that our clients are too immature or fragile to manage their own responses to our behaviour. My own view is that the psychological fragility of clients, whether for therapy or for coaching, is greatly exaggerated. Indeed, it may also be exaggerated by clients. If part of your way of staying stuck is to erect a mighty wall around yourself labelled, 'keep off - fragile', then this may be an extremely skilled way of manipulating the world around you to ensure that your self-protective delusions and fantasies remain intact. In fact, the client may be tougher than the coach. If you give in to such apparent fragility, you may in effect be handing control of the session entirely to the client. But the ultimate protection for clients is that in coaching we avoid advice-giving and interpreting; we treat the client as an equal at all times and protect the client's dignity. Our aim is always that the client makes their own well-based decisions.

It is easy to believe so profoundly in the power of coaching that we overestimate both its power to do good and to do harm. We can only ever work within the limits of the material that clients are willing to give us. Similarly, we work with clients at their own unique stages of their life journeys and with whatever skills we have at that particular time.

### Can a client become a friend?

Just occasionally a client may become a friend. Clients are often drawn to us and we to them because there is some essential like-mindedness. With coaching becoming increasingly specialized, this will be even more likely. As coaches we operate most successfully, in the business sense, in the worlds we understand from our own past experience. This is where our networks, contacts and expertise are rooted and this is what gives us credibility with our clients. All of this makes it more probable that some of our clients will be drawn to us because they have a lot in common with us psychologically and by history.

Signs that a client might become朋友 encompass any two or three of the following: motivation is to spend social time with themselves, not because it might enhance their performance.

- playing sociable games like squash
- sending or receiving a birthday card
- sharing gossipy emails which have been passed around the office
- socializing on home territory;
- going to major sporting, cultural or social events because it is 'corporate entertainment'
- attending Christmas or leaving

I have done all of the above with some clients. When a client becomes the dominant pattern, you can say that you have crossed the line from client to friend. The line between friend and family is. Coaching is about outcome, not outcome for the empathetic objectivity that is true of friendship. When I am with friends, I do all day; I don't want to do it in my leisure time. I expect to be paid for it, not expect it of me. However, rules are bend them frequently. As I write this, I have seen a former client, now friend, who has just come to see me. This woman has generously accepted my offer to have the session at my apartment and even made it clear that she expects to pay the same amount as if I were charging her for the session, though I am not sure where that we might both enjoy as much as I do.

In general, coaches are less fretful and worried about issues than therapists. However, we are involved in continuing relationships, sometimes over several years, and your client will get to know each other. You probably know the client a lot better than the client does. The sign that it has passed into a friendship is when the client discloses personal feelings and circumstances. If this is not the case, real spark, real liking, playfulness, is likely to grow. There will be a closeness with the client that had at the outset. This was forcibly brought about when a woman client with whom I had worked on a project became well acquainted during this time with her son and daughter-in-law enough to properly enjoy her personal life as well.

Signs that a client might become a friend could include events that encompass any two or three of the following on either side where the motivation is to spend social time with the person because you like them for themselves, not because it might enhance the business relationship:

- playing sociable games like squash, golf or tennis;
- sending or receiving a birthday, Christmas or condolence card;
- sharing gossipy emails which have nothing to do with the coaching;
- socializing on home territory;
- going to major sporting, cultural or other events purely for fun, not because it is 'corporate entertaining';
- attending Christmas or leaving parties and weddings.

I have done all of the above with some clients, and enjoyed it. But when this becomes the dominant pattern, you cannot be coach to that person. They have crossed the line from client to friend. Friendship is a coach-free zone, just as family is. Coaching is about outcomes, learning and change. The client pays for the empathetic objectivity that the coach provides. None of this is true of friendship. When I am with friends I am off duty as a coach – it's what I do all day; I don't want to do it in my leisure time and I hope my friends do not expect it of me. However, rules are sometimes difficult to follow and I bend them frequently. As I write this, I have just entered a date in my diary to see a former client, now friend, who has persuaded me to agree to a one-off session. This woman has generously acted as advocate for me over the years we have known each other, referring dozens of her colleagues to me. In saying yes, I have already reminded her of all of the above, have told her that we will have the session at my apartment and end with a nice glass of wine. She has made it clear that she expects to pay the going rate, but I will not, of course, be charging her for the session, though I may demand a pleasant dinner somewhere that we might both enjoy as my 'payment'.

In general, coaches are less fretful and more relaxed about these boundary issues than therapists. However, we are in grey territory here. As coaching continues, sometimes over several years and through a variety of jobs, you and your client will get to know each other well. Bear in mind that you will probably know the client a lot better than he or she knows you and in fact one sign that it has passed into a friendship is the point where you find yourself disclosing personal feelings and circumstances to a client. But even where this is not the case, real spark, real liking, playfulness, grace, trust . . . all these are likely to grow. There will be a closeness which is unlike the relationship you had at the outset. This was forcibly brought home to me with a distinguished woman client with whom I had worked on and off for five years. I had been well acquainted during this time with her struggles to survive her cancer long enough to properly enjoy her personal life and to get her organization back on

track. The news of her sudden death was shocking, though thoughtfully conveyed to me by her deputy before I could be taken by surprise through reading of it in the next morning's papers. At her memorial event I felt overwhelmed with sadness during the skilfully put-together video tribute made by her colleagues. I still think of her often with a pang of loss and feel privileged to have known such a remarkable woman.

When it is unequivocally clear that a client has become a friend, it is best to draw attention to what has happened and to explain why the coaching relationship cannot continue, rounding it off gracefully. In practice it is unlikely that the client-friend will want to continue and a bigger danger is that the coaching will just peter out. If there is still a need for coaching, you might want to make a recommendation about another coach, but of course the decision rests with the client. Be chivalrous about your replacement. Don't ask about the coaching and do control any irrational twinges of jealousy you may feel about your successor.

### Dependency

I hear a lot of worrying about 'dependency' from the coaches I train. Maybe they have been affected by tales of clients who develop unhealthy reliance on their therapists: how often this actually happens I have no idea, maybe as rarely as it does in coaching. Possibly, as with so many themes in therapy, this concern goes back to the early days of psychoanalysis where patients were expected to attend hour-long sessions several times a week. In 21 years of practice with clients of wide-ranging ages, types and professions, I have yet to encounter a client who appears dependent on me. Supposing for a moment that this is possible, what would the signs of dependency be? You would probably see any of the following: constant pressing for advice, referring every decision big or small to the coach, exaggerated deference to the coach's view, pushing boundaries by trying to convert the coach to becoming a friend, wanting extra sessions when there is no apparent agenda. All of this is extremely unlikely in coaching. Coaching is not about *curing* or *fixing*. It is overtly a non-hierarchical relationship. It is expensive and most clients will have to justify how this expenditure adds value, even if only to a sceptical spouse. I have sometimes suspected that it may be more likely for the coach to be dependent on the client than the client on the coach.

In practice, I would turn this concern on its head by saying that there is everything to be said for healthily close relationships between coaches and clients because this roots the coaching in emotional connection, the only way real change is likely to happen (see Chapter 2). I positively encourage contact between sessions by email, text and phone to keep the momentum going. Doing this makes the work so much more productive and enjoyable. So for

instance, my clients A and B, both in organizations, lost their jobs in the same cuts. They both knew they needed coaching and to find new jobs. A, whose finances were state, funded herself and paid me for 10 sessions at my fee range. B, an existing client, negotiated a package which included a year's worth of coaching. It involved networking and coming close to a number of potential employers. This made it clear to her that she could keep in touch with me and we exchanged emails, texts or messages over the following six months. I also gave her a minute coaching for the interview which she had to go through. I had made it clear to A that this was a gift of self-interest, telling her that I hoped she would be successful in her search. She found a job as a coach when she eventually found a job. We had monthly two-hour sessions with me during her search. After six months of unemployment, she found an ideal job. During the extensive period of searching, we met three times a week via email or on the phone most days. When she found a job, we celebrated with a celebratory glass or two of champagne.

Was any of this *wrong* or showing a lack of professional judgment? I don't think so. I have never taken a client on board without being paid. On the contrary, I have assumed that if they have not paid for, there will be one way or another that they expect clients to play their part in managing what they do.

### Endings

Coaching is expensive and most coaches wonder what the organization or individual can afford. How many hour sessions and sometimes fewer than the agreed programme end? Some coaches find that they have a quota of pre-paid sessions. When this happens, the client may feel cast aside and rejected. Where the coach wishes to end the relationship, the client may feel cast aside and uncomfortable: they do not really need or want to carry on. They may fear that they may hurt the coach's feelings. Coaches may continue to meet when both would rather end up doing what neither really wants.

instance, my clients A and B, both in their late forties, and in different organizations, lost their jobs in the same month as a result of brutally abrupt cuts. They both knew they needed coaching to recover their self-confidence and to find new jobs. A, whose finances I knew to be in a somewhat perilous state, funded herself and paid me for 10 hours of coaching at the bottom of my fee range. B, an existing client, negotiated a generous leaving package which included a year's worth of coaching from me – as and when he needed it. A carefully spaced her sessions but at the end of them, despite skilled networking and coming close to a number of jobs, was still unemployed. I made it clear to her that she could keep in touch with me for as long as it was useful and we exchanged emails, texts or brief phone calls on a weekly basis over the following six months. I also gave her a pro-bono session of last-minute coaching for the interview which eventually landed her an excellent job. I had made it clear to A that this was 90 per cent altruism and 10 per cent self-interest, telling her that I hoped she would continue to work with me as her coach when she eventually found a job. B scheduled fortnightly and then monthly two-hour sessions with me during his first five months of job-searching. After six months of unemployment, he was headhunted for his ideal job. During the extensive period of courtship between himself and the potential employer, we met three times and at the final stages were texting, emailing or on the phone most days. When the job was in the bag, I took him for a celebratory glass or two of champagne.

Was any of this *wrong* or showing a need for dependency on either side? I don't think so. I have never taken an egg-timer approach to my work. On the contrary, I have assumed that for every client who gets time they have not paid for, there will be one who pays for time they never use. I expect clients to play their part in managing our relationship and by and large they do.

### Endings

Coaching is expensive and most coaching programmes will be limited by what the organization or individual can afford, often no more than six two-hour sessions and sometimes fewer than that. How should a coaching programme end? Some coaches find that the client does not take up their full quota of pre-paid sessions. When this happens, coaches can feel both guilty and rejected. Where the coach wishes to end the coaching but the client wants to carry on, the client may feel cast aside and hurt. Clients may also feel uncomfortable: they do not really need or wish to carry on, but do so out of fear that they may hurt the coach's feelings. Sometimes both coach and client may continue to meet when both would really like to stop – so, in this way, both end up doing what neither really wants.

Where you sense that you have reached a full stop, always raise it. The client may or may not be prepared to be honest with you.

### CASE STUDY

#### Roger

Roger claimed to be a highly self-aware person, but he had received what he saw as a crushing disappointment in his career. He had already worked with two other coaches and a therapist. He told me mournfully that he was not a rich man and although he had found the therapy helpful, he had not been able to afford to continue paying his therapist for the weekly sessions. (Our programme was being funded by his organization.) In fact this history should have alerted me to the unlikelihood of success with me, and with the benefit of hindsight I should have taken a lot more time than I did to explore his previous experience of both coaching and therapy. After four sessions of frustration and a strong feeling of no progress, I eventually challenged him and said: 'Roger, I've reached the end of what I think I can do. We keep coming back to the same point where you seem to be trying to rewrite your history. I think we ought to stop.'

'Funny you should say that,' said Roger, and then in a moment of real candour, 'I got to exactly the same stage with Lucy [his therapist] and she told me that unless I was prepared to stop "sitting in my own shit", as she put it, she couldn't go on with me.' I asked him: 'So are you prepared to stop sitting in your own shit?' He replied: 'Yes, yes, and I'm finding these sessions really helpful.'

I felt dubious, but we made another date. Roger failed to show for this date. When I called his office he was apologetic: 'I'm terribly sorry, I completely forgot it.' I told him to call me again when he was ready.

He never did.

Another client whose presenting issues were around how to develop as a leader in his financial services company set a date with me but cancelled it at extremely short notice, then agreed another which was also cancelled. Then there was silence. My two or three enquiring emails and voicemails were stoutly ignored. It nagged at me. It was unsatisfactory: was it me? Had something major happened in his life, but if so what? Discreet enquiries among his colleagues led to a dead end. After a while I forgot him. Three years later, I had a call from a senior HR person in his firm based in the US where he was now working. The question was, could I recommend another

coach for this man? I took the opportunity given up on me. 'Ah yes,' she said, 'you want to do as an alternative to his career with it. He freaked. He'd always assumed for life.' I could never have guessed that question could have had this major effect on trust with this client for him to be honest. I have spotted the problem and dealt with it. I take my own advice about probing for feedback.

One useful tactic may be to agree an assessment point halfway through, matched by an interview to include the mutual opportunity to assess:

- How far are you toward reaching your goals?
- What tangible evidence is there that you are making progress?
- How are you and I doing in our coaching relationship?
- How much more coaching do you need?

I rarely regard a coaching relationship as truly finished. I often check in with clients when they have new jobs or challenges, or even years after the formal coaching has finished. I might ask them to reflect on the final session of any one stage with a review of what has changed since then. I might think back to the issues they initially presented and ask them how those have changed, including any feedback that they have had from others. I will also ask for their feedback on the coaching process and ask them what they liked about it.

- What were the real high spots for you?
- What encapsulates the learning?
- What would you advise me to go on to do next?

Where the coaching has begun with a client who has moved on to a new role, the line manager, repeating the process is a good idea (see pages 136–139 for more on this). After the client has moved on, I might send a note to the client's line manager, clients with a friendly note, expressing the hope that they will stay in touch. In general, managing and marking the end of a coaching relationship is better than letting it peter out.

coach for this man? I took the opportunity to ask if she knew why he had given up on me. 'Ah yes,' she said, 'you raised the question of what he might want to do as an alternative to his career with us and he simply couldn't cope with it. He freaked. He'd always assumed till that moment that it was a career for life.' I could never have guessed that what to me was such an innocent question could have had this major effect and clearly I had not built sufficient trust with this client for him to be honest with me. I wondered how I might have spotted the problem and dealt with it more effectively. For instance, did I take my own advice about probing for feedback at the end of the session in question?

One useful tactic may be to agree an initial set of sessions with a review point halfway through, matched by an invoice point. The review point will include the mutual opportunity to assess:

- How far are you toward reaching your goals?
- What tangible evidence is there that there is change in your life?
- How are you and I doing in our coaching relationship?
- How much more coaching do you feel you would find useful?

I rarely regard a coaching relationship as truly over. Clients frequently return when they have new jobs or challenges, or email me with their news sometimes years after the formal coaching has finished. However, I do like to mark the final session of any one stage with a review. In this review I will ask clients to think back to the issues they initially presented and to look at what has changed, including any feedback that they have solicited from colleagues. I will also ask for their feedback on the coaching process and on me, always asking:

- What were the real high spots for you?
- What encapsulates the learning?
- What would you advise me to go on doing, adapt and change in my coaching?

Where the coaching has begun with a three-cornered process involving the line manager, repeating the process is another useful way to round it off (see pages 136–139 for more on this). After that session I will normally email clients with a friendly note, expressing the hope that they will keep in touch. In general, managing and marking the ending is a lot better for both sides than letting it peter out.

## Finally

### The place of insight

It matters as a coach to have psychological insight. Feeling that you have useful insight into others is probably one of the main reasons that people become coaches. Insight is closely linked to curiosity about people, another important qualification for being a coach.

However, it is also important to keep the question of insight in proportion. Mind-reading is an inexact art. There are two principles here. First, the best and most valuable insight to have is into yourself. Second, it is far more important for the client to have insight into themselves than for you to do so. This quote from Carl Jung's book *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* ([1933] 2001) says it all:

Nothing is more unbearable for the patient than to be always understood. It is relatively unimportant whether the psychotherapist understands or not, but everything hangs on the patient doing so.

Also, while you are searching for insights, you will be distracted from your main task of listening at Levels 2 and 3 to your client. You will be worrying about yourself and how to ask *clever* questions. The point about coaching is to ask *wise*, not clever, questions and to keep out of the client's way.

This means that you do not have to labour to make connections for the client. Instead, say, 'What connections do you see between x and y?' You do not have to read a client's motivation. Instead, say, 'What was your motivation then?' You do not have to grasp all the content of the client's issues – effort spent on trying to discern all the nuances will tend to pull the client's effort into helping you understand what they already understand. This will pull you away from *experiencing* what the client is telling you – a more useful emphasis. You do not have to offer insights to the client. Instead, say 'What insight do you have now into that incident?' Or you can ask, 'What learning did you gain from that?' – another way of asking the same question.

This does not prevent you from having insights – sometimes a coach will experience an intuitive moment when an insight appears which is potentially useful to the client. My rule here is that I try never to present it to the client as a profound truth. Instead, I might say something like, 'Can I offer you a potential insight here? It may or may not be right, but it's occurred to me that . . .' – and then I describe my insight and ask, 'How does that seem to you?' If you are wrong, the client can then tell you so. If you are right, then the client has the benefit of your ideas.

Often, insights that seem inspired and brilliant to the coach are about the coach's gratification and rarely have meaning to the client. What seems clever

to the coach is often blindingly simple and connections that clients make for themselves are often the most meaningful.

### Going beyond technique

In general, as a coach, your best instruments and techniques and many others cannot use your authentic self you will work you do.

As with so much else in coaching, there needs to be a balance. You need to be fully present, yet not intrude too much. You need to bring your own personality into the coaching room without losing sight of the client. You have to know all the techniques and tools available, yet not use them except when they are totally appropriate. You need to maintain a relationship of intimacy with the client, yet not let it develop into a friendship while the coaching is still going on. You need to be about yourself and your own interventions, yet not let them dominate. You need to maintain a high level of alertness to everything that is happening, yet not let it distract you from keeping a degree of control over the overall process. You need to be in control as well. Coaching is about feeling rather than thinking, yet, to work, both coach and client have to think. One way to think about it is to accept that coaching is about *feeling* rather than *thinking*. It will be far harder than just *being a coach*, because it is stressful because you are trying so hard, yet it is fluid because you trust the process.

### Letting go of the need to be right or to find solutions

The heart of this approach to coaching is to let go equally of the need to find solutions and the need to be right. Those beliefs into your every interaction with clients are often ones that beginner coaches dutifully mouth the words of their mentors, yet do not fully believe in them. They give advice to their clients but then feel bad when they see the client struggling or not making progress. This is what is considered to be 'progress'. The inevitable result of this is that the coach's energy surely begins to do most of the work in the session, leaving the client feeling drained away. An even more exaggerated version of this is where coaches feel compelled to be right, where, in their need to feel useful, the coach becomes a problem solver for the client. You don't need to be right every session with a neatly packaged action plan, yet you do need to be right with or without the solution and that is all that matters.

to the coach is often blindingly simple to the client, whereas the insights and connections that clients make for themselves are part of what coaching is all about.

### Going beyond technique

In general, as a coach, your best instrument is yourself. You will need all the tools and techniques and many others described in this book, but if you cannot use your authentic self you will be consistently disappointed in the work you do.

As with so much else in coaching, this is the central paradox. You have to be fully present, yet not intrude too much. You have to bring the full force of your personality into the coaching room, yet it must never overwhelm the client. You have to know all the techniques, yet restrain yourself from using them except when they are totally appropriate. You have to be able to form a relationship of intimacy with the client, yet it must never cross the boundary into a friendship while the coaching is continuing. You have to be vigilant about yourself and your own interventions while simultaneously maintaining a high level of alertness to everything the client says and does. You have to keep a degree of control over the overall process, yet allow the client to take control as well. Coaching is about feeling and acting in a more powerful way, yet, to work, both coach and client have to stay together in powerlessness. One way to think about it is to accept that if you see yourself as *doing coaching*, it will be far harder than just *being a coach*. Doing coaching is intrinsically stressful because you are trying so hard, whereas being a coach is easy and fluid because you trust the process.

### Letting go of the need to be right or to find solutions for the client

The heart of this approach to coaching is to let go of the need to be right and to let go equally of the need to find solutions for the client, and then to knit those beliefs into your every interaction with them. Time and again I see beginner coaches dutifully mouth the words about partnership or about not giving advice to their clients but then getting overwhelmed with anxiety when they see the client struggling or not apparently making what the coach considers to be 'progress'. The inevitable result is that the coach slowly but surely begins to do most of the work in the session and the client's energy drains away. An even more exaggerated version of the same phenomenon is where, in their need to feel useful, the coach begins to lecture or in some cases hector the client. You don't need to be right. The client does not need to leave every session with a neatly packaged action plan. Sometimes clients choose confusion, inactivity and procrastination. The client is the one who will live with or without the solution and that is always their choice.

### Being centred

As a coach, you need to be as centred as possible. This means that your own concerns and anxieties have to be banished during a coaching session. This is difficult, but it is a state to strive for. If you are not centred, you will find intrusive worries affecting your behaviour and therefore your effectiveness with your client. These might be thoughts and feelings such as:

Am I good enough? Am I asking clever enough questions?

I don't like this client.

I'm afraid of this client.

I'm too important to be working with a junior/young/not very bright client like this.

I need to take control to prove who's in charge here

and so on.

One way of putting this is that there is a spectrum of possible places to be mentally during coaching. At one end is the anxious, defended, protected ego, described by Thomas Crane in his book, *The Heart of Coaching* (1998), as 'Fortress Me'; at the other is the centred person who can stay relaxed and alert. Fortress Me is self-conscious rather than self-aware, critical and judgemental rather than accepting and discerning, arrogant rather than self-confident, spiteful rather than inquisitive and controlling rather than adaptable. Fortress Me tries to be perfect. The centred coach will accept good enough as the norm but with the aim of keeping on learning. The paradox is that you cannot really have the aim of *doing* brilliant coaching without a self-serving element creeping into your work, though you can have the aim of *being* an excellent coach.

### Becoming, and staying, centred

There is no one right way. Each coach has to find their path. Experienced coaches find that any or all of these help: meditation, prayer, yoga, listening to music, moderate physical exercise such as walking, cycling, jogging or swimming, when the mind can be suspended.

Most of the world's great religions are about releasing the grip of the ego on the personality. You do not need to subscribe to any of them to find your own path, but as a coach you do need to be able to detach yourself from the needs of your ego, to set your own needs aside and to listen deeply and non-judgementally.

We meet ourselves time and path of life.

In the West African greeting I quoted a wonderful acknowledgement of the seeing – really seeing each other; being is what the best coaching is all about.

We meet ourselves time and again in a thousand disguises on the path of life.

Carl Jung

In the West African greeting I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, there is a wonderful acknowledgement of the importance of two people meeting and seeing – really seeing each other; being present – and being fully present. That is what the best coaching is all about.