

4 Simple but not easy: the skilled language of coaching

Asking the right questions, phrasing your comments judiciously . . . this is a prime coaching skill. When done well, it looks effortlessly easy. When not done well, it gets in the way. If you can learn how to do it well, you will have cracked one of the most challenging barriers to effectiveness as a coach. In this chapter I look at some of the common traps for coaches and describe how to circumvent them.

As with so many other domains in coaching, this skill falls into the category of *simple but not easy*. One of my trainee coaches spoke for many others when she said:

Intellectually I can accept the case for keeping it short and sweet and working from the client's agenda exclusively, but advice-giving is so entrenched in my mental concept of helping, that it's taken me a long time to see how loaded my questions are. And when I'm there with a real client, I panic and then I fall into my old default mode!

Successful coaching involves an intense awareness of the language you use and this does not come naturally to everyone. When coaching well, your language will have a purity and probably also a brevity that your everyday conversation does not normally have or need. Each word will count.

Knowing the traps

At the risk of appearing to emphasize the negative, I'm going to describe some of the most common traps, all of which I have been guilty of myself and seen many times in other coaches.

Here is an example, taken from a recording of a real-life piece of coaching:

Client: I need to work shorter hours. My life balance is all wrong.
Beginner coach: Have you tried asking your PA for feedback on where your time is going?

In this example, the client has named the issue on which he wants to work. The coach's mind immediately springs to a possible powerful solution: raising the client's awareness of how he currently spends his time by suggesting he asks his PA for feedback. This could be a good idea because PAs tend to see managerial behaviour in the raw.

This is how the conversation continued:

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| Client: | I need to work shorter hours. My life balance is all wrong. |
| Beginner coach: | Have you tried asking your PA for feedback on where your time is going? Her perspective would probably be very useful. |
| Client: | No, I haven't. |
| Beginner coach: | That would be really useful – often I find that my clients don't really know where their time is going and the PA is a day-to-day observer. As a starter for change it's really useful. |
| Client: | Well . . . |
| Beginner coach: | It's something you could do between now and the next session . . . |
| Client: | Well, I don't know . . . |
| Beginner coach: | OK, just a thought . . . |

As a coaching conversation, this one is going nowhere. If we speculate about what each side was thinking but not saying in this very typical piece of dialogue, it would probably go like this:

Thinks but doesn't say		Actual dialogue
This is such a huge issue for me. I've been round and round it so many times. I wonder if she can really help me?	Client	I need to work shorter hours. My life balance is all wrong.
Oh help . . . ! This is a biggie. Where on earth should I start? I know! That exercise where you ask the PA for their feedback. That will help him.	Beginner coach	Have you tried asking your PA for feedback on where your time is going? Her perspective would probably be very useful.
This sounds like a time-management course. I didn't come here for that.	Client	No, I haven't.
He's resisting, so perhaps I'd better push it.	Beginner coach	That would be really useful – often I find that my clients don't really know where their time is going and the PA is a day-to-day observer. As a starter for change it's really useful.
There's no way I'm going to do this. Just because her other clients find it useful doesn't mean that I will.	Client	Well . . .

Perhaps I'm not being persuasive enough?	Beginner coach	It's something you could do between now and the next session . . .
Absolutely not!	Client	Well, I don't know . . .
What on earth do I do now?	Beginner coach	OK, just a thought . . .

While the speculations about the client's thoughts are just that – speculation – the coach's thoughts are entirely authentic, because she described them to me in technicolor when, as her supervisor, we listened to the recording together.

Trap 1: advice-in-disguise questions

This coach, like so many others, has fallen into the trap of asking advice-in-disguise questions. These questions come from the coach's wish to be helpful through offering his or her own solutions, dressed up as questions. The give-away is the first word:

Have . . . ?	Was . . . ?	Is . . . ?
Haven't . . . ?	Wasn't . . . ?	Isn't . . . ?
Would . . . ?	Has . . . ?	Should . . . ?
Wouldn't . . . ?	Hasn't . . . ?	Shouldn't . . . ?
Do . . . ?	Did . . . ?	Were . . . ?
Don't . . . ?	Didn't . . . ?	Weren't . . . ?
Does . . . ?	Are . . . ?	Can . . . ?
Doesn't . . . ?	Aren't . . . ?	Can't . . . ?

For instance:

Have you thought of . . . ?

Would it be a good idea if . . . ?

Should you check that out with someone else?

There are about 30 of these constructions in English, all beginning with a verb. These questions invariably come from the coach's agenda, not the client's. A sure sign that you are falling into this trap is to notice that your question can be answered yes or no. The questions suggest that there is a right answer and of course that is the one in the coach's mind.

Question: Have you done x or y?

Answer: Yes.

Apart from all the other disadvantages created by offering advice described in Chapter 3, there are two other, equally compelling ones for avoiding these questions. First, as in the example above, they can be readily deflected by a client who has two easy options: mindlessly agreeing immediately or abruptly declining to enter further into the debate. The client's energy is going into the evasion instead of into thoughtfulness and learning.

The leading question

An even more lethal version of advice-in-disguise is the leading question, as legendarily used by the lawyer who is cross-questioning a hostile witness in court:

So would you agree that you have been lying, and you did commit this crime?

You can hear this sort of question asked every day on current affairs radio and television programmes by journalists whose basic position is that politicians are fibbing until proved otherwise. Since these programmes are a kind of theatre where each side knows its roles, it does not much matter. The politician says what he or she plans to have said anyway, and the journalist plays the role of ruthless inquisitor. The tradition is reinforced by the practice of parliamentary debate where differences are artificially emphasized. It is seen at its most exaggerated in Prime Minister's Question Time, the weekly ritual where the Prime Minister is subjected either to exaggeratedly sycophantic questions from his or her own party:

Would the Prime Minister agree that this has been his wisest act yet?

or to overt attempts at sabotage from the other side:

Would the Prime Minister not agree that it is time his government resigned?

This type of question has never been better mocked than by 'Mrs Merton', the 1990s TV chat-show 'host'. 'Mrs Merton' was a convincingly dowdy 50-year-old Northerner with a horrible perm, very unlike her alter ego, the much younger comedienne Caroline Ahearn. Mrs Merton's sly and apparently guileless questions frequently disarmed her guests, especially at the beginning of the series when the guests were often not in on the joke. One of her best was addressed to the glamorous and much younger wife of the magician and performer Paul Daniels:

So, Debbie McGee, what was it that first drew you to millionaire Paul Daniels?

Trap 2: the why question

When you ask the question 'why . . . ?' it seems at first like a benign, open question. In practice it is another trap. The question 'why . . . ?' invites defensiveness which takes the form of analysing and intellectualizing.

In this example, the client has raised the question of a highly unsatisfactory team meeting. This client already knows she has difficulties in chairing meetings and wants to improve.

Coach: Why did you decide to hold that team meeting when you did?

Client: Well, our policy on meetings is that we never let more than ten days go past without a team meeting and it was already nine days since the last one so I thought it was time . . . (*ramble, ramble, ramble*)

The coach's real question was about what was in the client's mind before calling the meeting and what she wanted to get out of the meeting. The coach has not had his real question answered here because by starting with the word 'why . . . ?' he has triggered a defensive response (see Chapter 2) which gets nowhere near the real issues for this client.

The 'why . . . ?' question is also unhelpful because it often focuses on the client's motivation. Nine times out of ten when you ask this question you will get the response 'I don't know', or 'It's just how I am'. If the client already knew what her motivation was, she might not be asking for coaching on the issue.

Coach: Why did you lose your temper with X?

Client: I don't know. I just seem to have a short fuse.

Similarly, 'why . . . ?' can seem like an interrogation or an accusation. For many people it reminds us of the kinds of questions that we were asked as children by our irritated parents:

Why did you get your trousers so muddy?

Why do you fight with your brother?

Why have you lost your bus pass for the third time this term?

When asked like this, it can easily be interpreted by the client as having the underlying meaning, 'Why were you so stupid?' The reply you get is then

likely to be either the blank shrug that goes with 'I don't know' or a long-winded and defensive justification. In brain chemistry terms the word 'why?' alerts the amygdala (see page 31), the brain's alarm signal, the client feels attacked, is unlikely to be totally honest with you and cannot think clearly.

Trap 3: researching the data

This is a more subtle trap but it is a trap nonetheless. Let's suppose that you have a new client from an organization you don't know at all. The client begins his account of a problem concerning a poorly performing member of his team. The temptations might be to ask the client for an organization chart or to explain any unfamiliar acronyms he is using; establish how big the team is and how their roles relate to that of the problem member; ask how old the team member is and how long they have been in the job.

All of this is unnecessary. The client already has this data so it is pointless to ask him or her to give it to you. It will be far more important for you to take the client into areas that they have never considered and that means asking a different type of question. The most likely explanation for your behaviour is your own anxiety:

'Do I really understand this client's organization?' (Probably not, but you don't need to)

'How is this team like other teams I know in different organizations?' (Irrelevant – it may be or may not be)

The pertinent data – pertinent to the client, that is – will emerge when you ask the right questions. Anything else is simply postponing the moment when you get to the heart of the client's issues. When you find yourself searching for data, notice it as a sign that you are at Level 1 listening (see page 66), more concerned about whether you are asking the right questions than with truly listening to the client. Extra facts are usually a distraction and will take you away from the real issues rather than towards them.

On one of our coach training courses, my colleague Jan Campbell Young was working with Annie, a promising coach who had spent her career up until that point as a distinguished university teacher. Noticing how often Annie spent in a relentless search for facts in her practice coaching, Jan memorably burst out, 'Annie, you are not doing a PhD thesis on the client's problem!' I remind myself of this with an inner smile of recognition when I am tempted to start the equivalent type of questioning with a client.

Trap 4: asking about people who are not present

A client presents you with a puzzle. Let's say it is about how to harness the flagging motivation of their PA. The trap here is to ask about the PA's motivation or concerns.

Coach: What does she feel about it?

Client: Who can say?

None of us can ever know for sure what another person's motivation is. Clumsy probing about other people's motivation or feelings may confirm the client's belief that the other person is the problem, rather than looking at their own contribution to the problem. You may encounter another variation of this temptation. Let's say the client is thinking about a radical change of career. You know something of the client's personal circumstances through other questions you have asked. You now ask, 'What would your mother/wife/husband/partner/boss think about this?' Again, it is a distraction from the client's own responsibility to speculate about what the not-present other person might think. Interestingly, I notice that when we are tempted to ask this kind of question, the third party is often an authority figure. Asking about that person's views might therefore seem to be implying that the absent person has the final power to decide, and may have to be placated or manipulated in order for the client to have their own way. In this way, old myths and excuses could be unwittingly perpetuated.

Trap 5: long and double questions

As a coach, when you ask long questions you are at the risk of turning the spotlight of the coaching onto yourself. Long questions normally come out of uncertainty. Inside, the coach is thinking: 'What shall I ask next? If I go on talking I'll get to something eventually and it will cover up any pauses which might otherwise embarrass me . . .' As a coach, you cannot afford the luxury of doing all your thinking out loud. It will only confuse your client if your questions have long preambles followed by many dependent clauses, garlanded with phrases intended to give yourself time to think: *sort of, you know* and *I mean*. This coach found himself falling into this trap:

So when you have this **sort of** problem, **you know**, with punctuality, and I know you've described it as baffling, and how it really, **sort of**, annoys your boss when you're late for her meetings, I wonder, **you know**, what the circumstances are – **I mean** whether it's when you're really hassled about everything else that's going on in your life? **Know what I mean?**

Not surprisingly, the client's response was: 'Yes – I mean no . . . I don't know. Could you repeat the question?' The question the coach was really asking was: 'What are the typical triggers for unpunctuality for you?' If he had asked the question this way, the client would have found it much easier to answer, though possibly also more challenging.

Buried inside the long question there are often two or even three sub-questions. An example would be:

So tell me how you first came to feel concerned about this. Was it when you first joined the company or did it start later? And has that concern always been as strong as it is now?

This kind of question comes across as a barrage, however gently it is asked. It confuses because, as the client, you don't know which bit of the barrage to concentrate on. I notice that when coaches ask this kind of question, the client's most frequent response is typically 'Err . . . um . . .', or 'You've lost me there'. If you know this style of questioning is a particular trap for you, take a breath, give yourself a pause, gather your thoughts and only then ask your questions – one at a time.

Tactics that work

All these traps, and the types of question that go with them, have one thing in common. They narrow the search for answers, rather than broadening it out. They confuse and distract. They focus attention on one place rather than persuading the client to extend out to many places, including, often, the places they might at first rather not look. One way and another, they all lead to dead ends.

The coach's freedom

As a coach, you are in a remarkably free situation. You have the luxury of remaining detached from whatever outcome the client achieves. It really doesn't matter. You want the client to get an outcome which will make a positive difference in their life, whether it is greater clarity or a workable solution, but you are not attached to any one path.

You don't need to know the whole story, only the bits of it that matter to the client now.

The past is less important than the present and the future.

You don't need to be right.

You don't need to understand the context in order to be able to coach effectively. I often coach clients whose technical worlds are literally

incomprehensible to me. A recent example includes a nuclear engineer who considerably asked me at one point early in our coaching whether it would help me if she briefly outlined the laws of thermodynamics. I reassured her that it would be a waste of our time. I might understand the individual words, but it would be unlikely that the whole sentence would mean very much.

Another client managed a complex overseas operation in a country whose political system is as different from the standard western democracy as it is possible to be, with internecine manoeuvrings, widespread corruption and a great deal of physical danger. This client was relieved to discover that he did not need to give me potted histories of the various factions involved. Whether or not I knew about them was irrelevant to our success. Similarly, I have coached theologians, lawyers, doctors, actors, IT specialists, interior designers, architects, retailers, academics, pharmacologists, sportspeople, finance directors, theatre directors, actuaries, civil servants, ambassadors, hospital managers, chefs and many others without knowing anything about their professional worlds except perhaps as a consumer.

In fact it is even more liberating than this. It is a positive help to know nothing about the context or the content. The more you know about the content, the more likely you are to be seduced into the role of expert. This case has been supremely well made by Timothy Gallwey in his *Inner Game* books, for instance *The Inner Game of Work* (2000). Gallwey worked for a time as a tennis coach and came to realize that the real opponent for a tennis player was not the person on the other side of the net. Rather it was the mental programming of the player. The real opponent was in the player's own head. A player without bodily self-awareness and further handicapped by lack of self-belief was almost bound to fail. Gallwey began his Inner Tennis courses with the explicit aim of coaching participants in the techniques of mental and physical self-awareness rather than in some preordained set of tennis techniques.

The contrast with traditional coaching is instructive. The traditional coach relies on his or her own ideas of what makes, for instance, a good serve: 'Watch me and do it like this,' or 'Keep your eye on the ball at this or that point.' This would be followed by feedback from the coach to the player: 'At the crucial minute, you let your arm drop and took your eye off the ball.' In this example, the coach is doing most of the work and the player is robbed of responsibility. The coaching turns into a performance to please the coach rather than the player taking responsibility for their own game.

In the Inner Game approach, the roles are reversed. The coach asks open questions aimed at raising the player's consciousness of their physical and mental states with the aim of the player taking the responsibility and doing the feedback on him- or herself:

What worked then?

What didn't work?

What was in your mind at the start?

What do you need to do now?

Where was the ball when you connected with it?

The results were startlingly successful, so successful that an Inner Ski school was started too, with coaches trained in the same technique. In his book *Coaching for Performance* (1996: 37), Gallwey's then collaborator, John Whitmore, tells a wonderful tale of how the ski coaches were able to coach people in tennis, in spite of knowing literally nothing about the sport:

Several of our Inner Tennis courses were so overbooked that we ran out of trained Inner Tennis coaches. We brought in two Inner Ski coaches, dressed them in tennis coach's uniform, put a racket under their arms and let them loose with the promise they would not attempt to use the racket under any circumstances.

Not entirely to our surprise, the coaching job they did was largely indistinguishable from that of their tennis-playing colleagues. However, on a couple of notable occasions, they actually did better. On reflection the reason became clear. The tennis coaches were seeing the participants in terms of their technical faults: the ski coaches, who could not recognize such faults, saw the participants in terms of the efficiency with which they used their bodies. Body inefficiency stems from self-doubt and inadequate body-awareness. The ski coaches, having to rely on the participants' own self-diagnosis, were therefore tackling problems at cause, whereas the tennis coaches were only tackling the symptom, the technical fault. This obliged us to do more training with the tennis coaches to enable them to detach themselves more effectively from their expertise.

Effective questions in coaching

The most effective questions in coaching have a number of characteristics in common.

- They raise the client's self-awareness by provoking thinking and challenge.

- They demand truthful answers by cutting through obfuscation and waffle.
- They are short.
- They go beyond asking for information by asking for discovery.
- They encourage the client to take responsibility for themselves.
- They stick closely to the client's agenda.
- They lead to learning for the client.
- They are more than likely to begin with the words 'what' or 'how'.

Some super-useful ('magic') questions

The easiest way to understand the difference between effective and less effective questions in coaching is to look at some actual examples. When I was relatively new to coaching, I was fortunate to get sent by my then boss to a course on organizational consulting run by Columbia University. There I encountered a set of questions which were so obviously special in their impact on people that I immediately adapted them to my coaching work. There is an equivalent in therapy – so-called 'magic questions' – from which these questions had probably sprung. Whatever their origin, I attached a crib sheet to my notebook and shamelessly kept it open during coaching sessions. I would explain that I needed the prompt, that the client would be the beneficiary and was welcome to see the list at any time (no one ever asked).

This list, much adapted, has proved its worth time and time again as an outline script, not just to me but to the many hundreds of other coaches I have now trained. It will work in almost any situation, regardless of the setting or the issue. There are several points to note about it:

- The questions are content-free.
- They are short.
- They do not include the word 'I'.
- They work elegantly as a natural progression, starting with asking the client to state the problem, going on to restating the problem as a goal, then to naming options and finally to first steps to action.

Here are the questions:

1 *What's the issue?*

This asks the client to state the problem. It can often usefully cut through a client's lengthy account by asking them to summarize what the problem actually is.

2 What makes it an issue now?

Issues that clients bring to coaching have typically been around in the client's life for a long time. But often there is some immediate provocation or development, even if this is in the form of anger or worry. This emotion will provide energy for change and resolution. That is why it is worth naming and surfacing it.

3 Who owns this issue/problem?

If the client does not own it, there is no point in discussing it. You can only coach the problem owner. Some clients come to coaching in order to find out how to change someone else, whereas the basic assumption of coaching is that you can only change yourself. This question puts the onus back onto clients to own whichever bit of the issue is theirs.

4 How important is it on a 1–10 scale?

If the problem is not important then why are you and the client wasting time discussing it? Importance captures the idea of issues with potential for major impact on a client's life. Anything the client scores at lower than 5 should be set aside.

5 How much energy do you have for a solution on a 1–10 scale?

This question often draws an interesting response. The client may have told you the problem has an importance of 9, but then tells you that their energy for a solution is only 3 or 4. If so, you will want to ask a follow-up question such as 'What would need to happen to increase the energy to 8 or 9?'

6 Implications: what are the implications of doing nothing (or of letting things carry on as they are)?

This question builds the pain created by contemplating staying stuck. When we are in the client role many of us like to imagine that the default scenario can continue for ever, whereas inside we know perfectly well that it cannot and that we are ignoring the discomfort the problem is creating. Naming out loud the likely consequences of inactivity paradoxically builds energy for change. You might want to follow this question with a further probe: . . . and what would be the implications if that happened?

7 What have you already tried?

This question stops you offering pointless advice which the client has already tried or considered and it also lets you in early on the client's thinking. Most coaching problems have already been the focus of a great deal of energy and thought on the client's part. You need to know what this energy and thought has produced. If the client has not tried anything yet, that will also provoke an interesting discussion.

8 Imagine this problem's been solved. What would you see, hear and feel?

Up until now, the client has been deep in the problem. You will typically see this reflected in the way the client has been sitting and

talking – often slumped or despairing. By asking this question you tap into their resourcefulness. Clients will sit up straighter, stop frowning and will look generally lighter. Note that the answer to this question reveals the real goal (see also Chapter 6). Asking the question at this stage prevents you coaching on the symptoms rather than on the underlying causes.

9 *What's standing in the way of that ideal outcome?*

This question broadens out the client's thinking. Expect new insights to occur from this point on.

10 *What's your own responsibility for what's been happening?*

An essential question. The client is always part of the problem as well as part of the solution. This question makes that assumption explicit and encourages clients to see how they have, maybe at an unconscious level, been sustaining the problem through their own behaviour.

11 *What early signs are there that things might be getting better/going all right?*

However dreadful the situation, there is always something that is working. Identifying and building on it is part of the process of change and improvement.

12 *Imagine you're at your most resourceful. What do you say to yourself about this issue?*

This question assumes that underneath all our typical confusion, at some level we do know what we should do. Another version of this question: 'If I could give you a pill which contained all the courage and insight you needed, what would you do?' I have yet to find a client who could not find an instant reply to this one.

13 *What are the options for action here?*

Now that the question has been looked at from several angles, the client can begin to consider the options for change.

14 *What criteria will you use to judge the options?*

Options are even more useful when you have criteria against which to judge them. Typical criteria might be: practicality, cost, fit with the client's values, time – and so on.

15 *Which option seems the best one against those criteria?*

At this point you are narrowing down again towards action – including, of course, just pondering.

16 *So what's the next/first step?*

The answer may be to do some more research, to have a conversation or to make a big life decision.

17 *When will you take it?*

Asking for a commitment to *when* makes it more likely that the client will actually do something different as a result of the coaching.

I have seen this format, adapted of course to individual vocabulary and preferences, work time and time again. Not only does the format work; it also works at speed because there are few diversions.

Brevity

The most powerful coaching questions are often extremely short because they cut to the heart of the issue. The ideal question is between 7 and 12 words long. I believe the most powerful question of all is this one: 'What do you want?' Although another strong candidate is: 'What needs to happen to . . . ?'

CASE STUDY

Ros

Ros is a new chief executive who has inherited a less than ideal team. She expresses lack of confidence about her own ability to cope and also a rising level of concern about her finance director, Isobel. The coach encourages her to let off steam for a few moments.

Ros: . . . and then Isobel made it much worse by once again correcting me in a meeting and telling me that as I'm not a finance specialist, I had no idea what I was talking about and she couldn't really understand what on earth I was going to do about interpreting the accounts – on and on and on. I was so annoyed. And her manner with her team is awful – she's rude and she consistently loses her best people. We really can't have senior people behaving like she does.

Coach: What do you want?

Ros: I want her to go!

Coach: So what needs to happen to make that happen?

Ros: I've got to talk to my chair and get him on side and then find a civilized way for her to leave as soon as possible.

At last – clarity. Once these words 'I want her to go' have been spoken, the question then becomes how it can happen, not whether or not it is a good idea.

Sometimes the most effective question is a single word: 'So . . . ?'; 'And . . . ?'; 'Because . . . ?' Or even a questioning silence.

You could even say that any coaching conversation reduces itself essentially to three ultra-short questions: 'What?' (identifying the issue); 'So what?' (implications); and 'What next?' (action).

Summarizing

Summarizing is important. First, it shows that you are listening because you cannot summarize accurately unless you have been listening. Second, it reassures clients that you are keeping track of things. This is particularly important where there has been a period of intense and discursive conversation. Equally important, it keeps you in the frame and emphasizes your role. Also, it gives you a check that you really are understanding what the client is saying.

Summarizing provides punctuation in the coaching conversation. The coach's summary makes it a two-way and not a one-way conversation. When you feel you are getting confused by the twists and turns of a client's story, that is probably a reliable sign that you need to summarize. I now actually say to clients, 'I'm getting a bit lost here – can I try a summary?' Summarizing also helps us to get beyond the panic of Level 1 listening. If you know you can always summarize, you know you will always have something to say which is respectful to the client and helps you get back on track.

Genuine summarizing has these features:

- It does not contain any judgement of your own.
- It does not interpret.
- It uses the client's language.
- It ends with a question – 'Have I got that right?', or 'Is that a fair summary of where we seem to have got to?'
- It is authentically a summary and therefore brief rather than a polly-parrot rendering at the same length as the client's own account.

Some useful summarizing phrases are:

I think it would be useful to summarize where we've got to here . . . There seem to be three or four main views that you have been putting forward . . .

Can I check that I've really understood the points you're making here? What you feel is that . . .

So, to summarize so far . . .

Or even the very brief, 'So you feel angry/sad/happy/confused about this?'

You should note that ending on a question (e.g. '... is that a fair summary?') often prompts further significant disclosure from the client. This is because it demonstrates authentic listening and therefore encourages the client to tell you more.

Getting to the crux

This describes the skill of asking a client to name what is ultimately at stake in whatever the issue is. The relief of being able to talk to another person who listens non-judgementally is such that clients will often begin to ramble. Signs of this are:

- the client tells you the same thing in several different ways;
- you begin to feel bored because you've already heard what the issue is;
- an instinct that the long story is a way of avoiding the main issues;
- the client starts way back in the distant past history of whatever they are describing;
- the client gets lost in all the detail: 'Where was I – I'm losing my thread here!'

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

Interrupting

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

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

Interrupting needs to be done with discretion. There are always caveats to consider:

Potential for interrupting

A client is going on and on, giving an enormous amount of detail which seems irrelevant.

The client is talking continuously about the past. Coaching is not psychotherapy where the purpose may be to reinterpret the past. It is about the future.

The client gives the full script of every conversation. The give-away is lots of 'So he said . . . and then I said . . .'

But . . .

The client may need to do this in order to get the story straight in their own mind.

The client may need the catharsis of talking about the past.

This may be one of the client's ways of storytelling. The client may need feedback on how to be more succinct. If clients do this with you they are probably doing it with everyone and potentially getting the reputation of being a bore.

Why interrupt?

Clients often go on too long as a way of avoiding getting to the real point. Talking at length may be a conscious or unconscious tactic – a way of keeping the coach at bay. These clients may tempt you with distractions they know you will find alluring. This is nearly always because you are on the track of some nodal point for change. One British politician owned up to this tactic with his personal trainer:

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

Sometimes, the same clients who play on your politeness may be the first to say later that the coaching was just a lot of pointless talking. Other clients may not know how long is *too long* for talking about an issue and will need your help in establishing this. Some people talk a lot when they are nervous.

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

How to interrupt

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

Assuming a positive outcome

The best coaches, like the best therapists, are naturally skilled at using language which assumes a positive outcome. In effect it is a hidden order. They consciously slip in the constructions which convey that success will be inevitable. This is the linguistic equivalent of the placebo effect in medicine. When the doctor conveys that he or she believes the placebo will work, the patient may get better, in spite of the fact there are nothing but inert ingredients in the pills. Hypnotherapists do the same: *when I count to 10, your arm will feel heavy.*

The unskilled coach conveys doubt and may say:

If you try to learn how to control your nerves when you give a presentation I think you'll probably find that your problems with volume may fade away.

I have italicized the words which convey misgivings. As the client I will pick up this doubt – the coach is not certain that I can succeed, therefore I may not.

The skilled coach will use a different construction:

When you've learnt to control your nerves, you'll find that your problems with volume will disappear.

I heard this exchange on a beginner coach's tape recently:

Client: (sounding very anxious) I don't know how to stop myself getting angry with Sharon. Every time I try to talk to her I get so annoyed because she witters on and on and I've given her hints that I don't like it but I'm afraid I may just have an explosion then she'll probably carry out her threat to lay a grievance against me for bullying . . .

Coach: Well, if you try to have the conversation in the slightly different way we've discussed before, you might find that it turns out a bit differently.

Client: (dubious) Mmm, I suppose so . . .

Coach: Yes, you ought to try it – you never know, it might work.

When you look at the dialogue you can see clearly that in trying to be encouraging and not too directive, through her convoluted and tentative language, the coach is actually conveying a belief that the suggested tactics will *not* work. When asked about this in supervision, the coach was amazed – 'But I did believe they would work!'

To counter this tendency, use phrases which assume success, such as:

As you continue to improve . . .

When you've learnt this . . .

Once mastered, this will feel . . .

You will feel better when . . .

When you've practised this skill five or six times you will find that . . .

Similarly, beware of telling clients that something will be *difficult* or *tricky*. Essentially your role is to expect success because this way you will convey it to the client. This increases the chances that this is what will happen. When you label something *difficult*, you create the expectation of failure. One of my former dance teachers seemed to me to make life twice as hard for himself and his learners by announcing that we were going to find some particular sequence *a stumbling block*. Sure enough, we stumbled. Another teacher with a class of identical ability said nothing at all about whether it was easy or

difficult but just took that same section a little more slowly, assuming that we would master it – which we did.

Naturally you need to temper all of this with pragmatism. It is not appropriate when you have serious doubts or when it would be unrealistic to raise expectations too high. But on the whole I find that grounded optimism gets much better results than doleful prediction of obstacles.

Encouraging clients to be specific

When a client is bewildered, angry or concerned about an issue, he or she may begin by explaining it through extravagant generalizations, assertions or comparisons. This is a sign that feeling has taken over from logic and also a signal to you that the issue is important to the client. Encouraging the client to be specific is often the swiftest way to begin unpacking what is really at stake.

Here are some examples of how to use the technique:

The client makes a comparison:	This is the worst boss I've ever had.
The coach surfaces the comparison:	Worst in what way? Or, Worse than what specifically?
The client makes a generalization:	She's always late.
The coach challenges the generalization:	Always? No exceptions?
The client makes a bald assertion:	I don't like the way this organization is going.
The coach asks for a specific example:	What specifically don't you like about the way the organization is going?
Alternatively, the coach asks for the opposite:	So if everything were going well in the organization, what specifically would be happening for you?
The client states implied rules which indicate firmly held beliefs:	We should know exactly how this recruitment programme is going to be organized.
The coach surfaces the implied rule and asks what the result would be of changing the belief:	What would happen if you didn't know exactly how the recruitment programme was going to be organized?

Look out here for *must* and *should*. For instance, if a client says 'I must have advance warning of changes in plans', the coach might reply, 'What does having advance warning of changes do for you?'

Can'ts may represent particularly strongly held self-limiting beliefs:

The client says:

I can't hope to change the way I work.

The coach replies:

What's stopping you?

Looking out for nominalizations

The study of linguistics has given us the ugly neologism *nominalizations*. Don't let the clumsy label put you off. A nominalization is a noun, adjective or verb which has been turned into an abstract concept. These words are used by politicians, preachers and advertisers all the time, precisely because they are vague. So a politician promises us *modernization* of the NHS, *excellence* in schools or *efficiency* in the Civil Service. A motivational speaker may talk about *values*, *happiness* or *truth*. To make sense of these words, we have to fill in the blanks ourselves. There is no behaviour specified. In fact, many politicians deliver speeches, whole parts of which are also entirely without verbs. Each listener will create their own meaning, lulled into a false sense of shared understanding. So clients may say they are locked into *misery*, or seeking *enlightenment*, or *paralysed by indecision*. If in doubt about whether you are hearing a nominalization or not, ask yourself if you could buy it, carry it away as a physical entity or see it in actual behaviour. If not, then you are hearing a nominalization.

When you hear nominalizations always ask the client to clarify. Here is an example:

Client: I feel a bit depressed about the state of my organization.

Coach: Depressed: that's an interesting word. What is depressing exactly?

Client: It's the way we as a senior team seem to be detached from what is really going on. We hide in our nice offices as if we're afraid to venture out – and I think we are! We know our people believe we've lost touch with them and I really don't know what to do about it.

Running the conversation like this will stop you assuming that when the client used the initial word *depressed*, he meant sadness, anxiety or clinical depression. What he really meant was something a great deal more particular.

The client's language

The effective coach notices and picks up on the client's language. When clients are talking about issues that really touch them their language changes: it becomes more vivid, sometimes more direct, often more metaphorical. It gives you clues to what really matters to the client and this is virtually always worth exploring.

CASE STUDY

Sean

Sean, one of my BBC clients, constantly used military metaphors. His *troops* were going to *go over the top* in their *battle* with the *enemy*. This *battle* might be an enjoyable *joust* or it might *go nuclear*. When I pointed out this pattern to him, he was amazed and thoughtful. 'Well, yes,' he said, 'I see my department as being engaged in a life or death struggle for survival. We're fighting the independent production companies and our BBC bosses for commissions and if we don't win it will be the sack for all my producers.'

Metaphor and its importance

It is impossible to explore any abstract concept without using metaphor. In fact, metaphor saturates our conversation, even though we may be quite unaware of it. Possibly as many as 1 in 25 of our words are metaphors. Never underestimate how powerfully the language we use can affect how we think. This has been repeatedly demonstrated experimentally, most vividly in a series of experiments designed by two researchers at Stanford University, Paul Thibodeau and Lera Boroditsky (for a full account go to www.plosone.org). Subjects read accounts of crime in a fictional city, including statistics. One set of these reports contained the word *beast*, describing crime as *preying on* the city. The other used the metaphor of a *virus* which was *infecting* the city. These words were used only once. Subjects were then asked to recommend action to solve the problem. The group which had been exposed to the beast metaphor recommended vigorous police action (*hunting down, catching, imprisoning*) while the group exposed to the virus metaphor preferred *diagnosis, looking for root causes, cure and social action*. These results were only marginally affected by political affiliations. Intriguingly, few of the subjects attributed their reasoning to the metaphor. Most believed that they had been influenced by the statistics. This clearly has serious implications for any kind of political and social discourse – for instance, newspapers whose headlines use phrases like *immigrants flooding in* or *swamping* or which describe well-paid bosses as *fat cats* most probably have a profound impact on our attitudes. But there are also huge implications here for coaches. Just asking your client to describe the same story using a different metaphor may entirely change how they think and feel about the issue.

So in the example above, the essence of the dialogue went like this (shortened for the sake of brevity here).

- JR: So Sean, I notice how many military metaphors you're using: *war, fight, nuclear, joust . . .*
- Sean: (looking a bit startled) Yes, yes, I am, because that's how it seems.
- JR: What's the evidence that it is actually a *war* or a *fight*?
- Sean: (long pause) I suppose it's their behaviour. (he takes some time to describe the behaviour)
- JR: Well, we haven't got them in the room, just you. How do you think it's influencing your own behaviour to describe it like this?
- Sean: (another long pause) Probably a lot. (he describes it)

We then discussed how effective Sean thought these tactics were. Answer: not at all, in fact totally counterproductive.

- JR: Let's just play with some language here. How else might you describe it?
- Sean: Maybe a parley, a *negotiation, a conversation . . .*
- JR: And how does it seem when you frame it like that?
- Sean: (suddenly energized) Quite different. This is making me think! I need some new approaches here, otherwise I'm going to go down the same old path.

This conversation was a turning point: the beginning of devising a new strategy for the department. This was backed up by coaching in which Sean developed and practised the influencing and negotiating skills he had neglected for so long in his thirst for a fight.

Clean language

The concept of probing language, especially metaphor and simile, has been refined and made more elegant and accessible by neurolinguistic programming (NLP) enthusiasts, notably David Grove, an outstanding therapist who built on work by Milton Erikson, a famous twentieth-century hypnotherapist. The ideas are well explained in the book *Clean Language* by Wendy Sullivan and Judy Rees (2008).

Essential propositions

- The coach must notice the client's exact language including their similes and metaphors.
- Using the client's exact words creates rapport: the essential foundation of any coaching or mentoring. Clients will feel understood at a very deep level.
- The coach uses phrases that are, as far as possible, 'cleansed' of any of his or her own presuppositions, interpretations and assumptions.

- The coach draws attention to any of the non-verbal signals that accompany the client's words – e.g. a raised arm, a hand on heart, a jiggling foot – without making any of the popular interpretations of so-called 'body language' (that crossed arms means defensiveness and so on).
- The coach directs the client's attention to their own gestures, metaphors and language and asks them to interpret these by expanding on them.
- Doing this enables the client to understand their own 'perceptual world' – for instance, their own assumptions, blocks and barriers – and to see how these link with behaviour, including the behaviour they would like to change.

Unclean language: an example

Client: I feel trapped in my job.

Coach: So how could you find a way out?

In this example, the coach assumes that the client *wants* to find a way out. The hidden instruction is that this is desirable and that the client should find a way out.

Clean language alternative

Client: I feel trapped in my job.

Coach: And what kind of trapped is trapped?

Client: It's a deep hole and I can't climb out.

Coach: And what happens when you can't climb out of this deep hole?

Client: I turn in on myself, I shut down. (client wraps arms around body)

Coach: (copies client's wrapped arms briefly) And when this happens and you turn in on yourself and shut down, what happens next?

Client: I stop asking for help – which I should!

Coach: And if you did ask for help, what would happen?

Client: I would feel far far better.

Coach: And then?

Client: I'd have other people involved and wouldn't feel so helpless and stupid.

In this case, the coaching turns to how to find help from others – a completely different topic.

How to do it

- The coach slows down his or her speech.
- There is an implied sense of wonder and curiosity in the way the questions are asked.

- The client's idiosyncratic emphases, pronunciation etc. are matched.
- Only the client's language, metaphors and similes are used.

Useful phrases

And what kind of <> is that <>?

And where does that <> come from?

And that's like . . . what?

And what happens next?

And is there anything else about <>?

Tell me more about <>

What does <> mean for you?

If you had <> what would be happening?

Occasionally, applying the principles of clean language can produce transformative moments for the client, as the example below shows.

CASE STUDY

Fran

Fran was referred to me by her boss who reported puzzlement about Fran's performance. Recently appointed to a leadership role, her early promise had fizzled out. Fran had lost the confidence of her team, was frequently turning up late for work and had missed an important off-site meeting with what seemed like an implausible excuse. The boss's attempts to find out what was going on had gone nowhere. Coaching was openly described to Fran and to me as a last chance to 'get your leadership style in order' before disciplinary action was started.

Fran's first session with me was intended to be about work issues, but in reality we spent the whole time on her private life and, thanks to that reliable tool, the Life Scan Wheel (see page 144), she made an unprompted sudden decision to pour out a tragic story. Fran, of British-Somali background, had married a Nigerian man. Cultural and personal differences began to damage the marriage and with no warning her husband took their two children to Nigeria,

accusing Fran of a variety of gross moral failings. She discovered that he had not been paying their mortgage for some months and was heavily in debt. Their house was on the verge of being repossessed. Fran's psychometrics showed her to be an intensely introverted and deeply private person, avoiding disclosure and intimacy unless there was a high level of trust.

At this session we discussed the whole question of telling her boss what was going on in her private life and agreed that disclosure was essential. We also discussed how she could get legal advice about reclaiming her children and dealing with her financial problems. She left with a plan of action which encompassed all of these topics.

Some weeks passed. At her second session Fran reported that she had now told her boss and her team about her personal circumstances. Things had improved dramatically at work as a result. She was renting a small flat and was applying to the family court to get access to her children. I noted and fed back to her the striking change in her physical demeanour: more upright, more confident. I then asked her to reflect on how she would sum up her feelings about the whole experience.

Client: I feel I've been in a tidal wave.

JR: What kind of a tidal wave is that?

Client: Huge, overwhelming, a tsunami. I've been standing on the shore helplessly watching, seeing the sea roll back, knowing it's coming, unable to do anything to protect myself. (silence, several seconds) Feeling powerless, knocked over.

JR: Knocked over . . . powerless . . . and then?

Client: (very loudly) Yes, oh God, yes, that's exactly how it's felt, how amazing, I see myself there.

JR: And then . . . ?

Client: And then the tide's rolled in and I'm standing knee deep in water.

JR: Is there anything else about that water?

Client: (very energized) Dirty, full of wreckage, it's the wreckage of my life. Actually I'm in a house and the water has surged through it, leaving me standing. I'm just watching. When it all happened I couldn't run for the hills where it's safe.

JR: The hills would be safe. (short silence) You say you're still standing and the hills would be safe. Which way are you facing now?

Client: (sounding amazed) Oh God, I'm sideways, I'm sideways . . .

JR: Sideways. Which way would you like to be facing?

- Client: Forward, forward, I'm going to be heading for the hills, yes I can see myself facing forward and away from that sea; even though that tsunami's not going to happen again, but the tide will still keep coming in and I need to get to safety.
- JR: If you had that, how would that feel?
- Client: (very slowly and quietly) A bit scary but a lot better, a lot, lot better.
- JR: So better for you is . . . ?
- Client: Feeling I'm in control for the first time for nearly a year.

I noticed Fran had a slight sheen of sweat on her forehead. She was sitting upright and forward in her chair and alternating smiling with a look of astonishment. She and I then discussed what had just happened. Her response was: 'Being able to say it all is brilliant, listening to my own metaphors and realizing how powerful they are; being able to tap into my feelings and say all this to someone who's not judging me. Feeling back in control!'

Two years later Fran was divorced, had recovered her children and had reached a reasonably amicable settlement with her former husband. She had moved within the same organization to a similar job in another city and considered that her life was back on track. In reviewing our work her comment was: 'Our tsunami conversation was a huge turning point for me – I'll never forget it. Everything improved for me from then on because I no longer felt at the mercy of stuff I couldn't control.'

Exploring feelings

This core coaching skill has the simplicity of the obvious, and, along with that, the risk of it being constantly ignored. Virtually all clients already know what the 'solutions' are to their problems. Examples might be:

Problem	Solution
I can't manage my time	Prioritize
I don't know what to do about my career	Take logical stock of your career and follow the rational path
My boss is difficult	Give your boss some feedback

The reason clients find it difficult to follow the apparently obvious path is that feelings are getting in the way. Many of us, but particularly people with a strong preference for logic and rationality, act as if we believe that logic will

solve the problem. Logical methods of problem-solving are even taught on management development courses, but as the evidence from neuroscience shows that feelings precede logic by a long way in our responses to an event (see Chapter 2).

The logical solution may be obvious, but remain unimplemented. For the problems above, for instance, why can't the client take their own advice?

I could prioritize

but I am driven by assumptions from my early life about hard work and my identity is bound up in work

I could follow the logic of career choice

but I am terrified of novelty and change

I could give my boss feedback

but he frightens me, as all male authority figures do

This is why, along with looking at issues rationally, it is important to enquire into the feelings behind them. No client issue worth the focus of a coaching session will ever be without a 'feelings aspect'. As coaches our role is often to help clients articulate feelings that are there but go unrecognized, or to help them say out loud what they have kept inside.

Warning

When you ask a client about feelings, you will often get a *thought*. The symptoms of thoughts are clients who say, 'I feel *that* . . . this is exciting/interesting/worrying': as soon as you hear the word *that*, you are getting a thought.

You are getting a *feeling* when a client says, for example 'I feel excited/worried': point this difference out to the client and press for the feeling.

There are two natural places to ask for feelings. The first is at the beginning of exploring the issue. The second is at the end when the decision has been made by the client about what to do.

There are only a few questions in this area that the coach needs to ask and they can be asked constantly:

How does that feel?

Tell me about that feeling . . .

What does that mean for you specifically?

How does that translate into your behaviour?

Say more . . . ?

Moving the discussion on

Closed questions have their place in coaching, for example:

Have we exhausted that topic?

This implies that the answer is yes and will allow you to move on quickly to the next part of the session.

Linking questions or statements are also useful here. Links combine a brief summary of the discussion that has just happened with a look forward to the next section. Here's an example:

So in this part of the discussion we've looked at how the pressures on the business are affecting it in a number of ways [you then briefly enumerate them] and our plan now is to look in more detail at each of these. Is that OK?

For daily examples of how to do this elegantly, examine any live discussion programme on television or radio. Broadcasters call these links *segues*, meaning a technique of sliding seamlessly from one topic to another by making a link between them.

The simplicity that counts

The kind of language I have described in this chapter goes beyond technique, though technique is important. A 'coaching-aware' client may also be perfectly aware of any 'techniques' that you are using. A client of mine with whom I have worked for two years – so we know each other well – asked me in the course of our coaching how he could develop coaching techniques himself as a way of enhancing the performance of his team, and I taught him some questioning techniques. In our session recently, where I was pressing him on some issue or other, he suddenly said in mock exasperation, 'Couldn't you just ask me a closed question for once?' In agreeing that my question was entirely appropriate, we were reminding each other that coaching means fresh thinking for the client – i.e. hard work.

Language in successful coaching is the disciplined simplicity that comes from trusting clients to tap into their own resources. It is about paring down to the essence – having the questions but understanding that you don't need to have the answers.

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