

How to Coach for Deep Problem-Solving and Learning

One of the major goals of a consultant is to help their clients learn to be more effective at solving problems and learning. One of the most powerful services that you can provide to your client is coaching your client to a) closely examine their own perceptions, assumptions and conclusions about their current problem or goal; b) take relevant and realistic actions; and c) learn by continuing to reflect on those actions and experiences.

You can use coaching at almost any time during your project when your client seems to be struggling to address an issue or achieve a goal. Coaching can be useful, for example, during the initial meeting when your client is reporting the current issue or goal for the project, or during regular meetings with your client when they are describing current challenges in implementing plans.

What Is Coaching? How Is It Useful in Consulting?

There are a variety of views on coaching. In addition to the obvious example of coaching in sports, many supervisors consider coaching to be what others might consider to be delegating. Delegating is usually considered to be working with direct reports (employees who report directly to the supervisor) to establish goals or tasks, and then providing ongoing feedback, guidance and support to help the employee achieve the goals.

Another perspective on coaching is that of personal and professional coaching, which has fast become a major consulting service. Coaching provides conditions that are ideal for adult problem solving and learning. In the midst of continual change and development, people rarely struggle because they lack some key piece of information or some precise procedure from a course or a book. Rather, they often get stuck in how they think and feel about themselves or their situations in life and work. In addition, for people to learn, they often need ongoing support and guidance to take realistic risks and then learn from reflecting on their experiences. Coaching guides and supports that kind of problem solving and learning; thus, it is often quite powerful when used during a consulting project.

While there are also a variety of views about the nature, goals and techniques of personal and professional coaching, most coaches would probably agree that their approach to coaching is to work in a collaborative approach. This provides structure, guidance and support for their clients to:

1. **Take a complete look at their current situation,**
including their assumptions and perceptions about their work, themselves and others.
2. **Set relevant and realistic goals for themselves,**
based on their own nature and needs.
3. **Take relevant and realistic actions toward reaching their goals,**
ensuring that the actions are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely.
4. **Learn by continuing to reframe (or take apart) how they see their current situation,**
and by reflecting on their actions along the way.

Note that coaching is not the same as therapeutic counseling. The focus of your coaching is not on the analysis of an individual’s personal history and character in order for them to overcome current, entrenched emotional or spiritual challenges in their lives. Instead, the focus of your coaching is to guide and support members of the organization to achieve the goals and actions necessary to accomplish change in their organization. While there is some general overlap between these two

areas of focus, a consultant for organizational change should not attempt giving therapy unless they are trained therapists and unless that type of service is in the consulting contract.

Consultants know that one of the major challenges in achieving success is implementation and follow-through of action plans by members of the organization. Small businesses often have very limited resources and attending to implementation in an ongoing focused fashion can be extremely difficult. Another challenge for those organizations, and the people in them, is that they tend to be highly diverse. Consequently, methods to help them must be adaptable to diverse views and approaches. Coaching is highly adaptable to the nature of the client being coached because it works from people, rather than at them. It helps them to closely examine their own style, or the framework, of their thinking and problem solving. In systems theory language, it helps them to examine their mental models.



See “How to Analyze Mental Models – How People Think” on page 410 for more tools to solve problems by reframing them.

Guidelines for Designing a Coaching Session

The nature of a coaching conversation can be distinctly different from a typical workplace conversation. A typical conversation is usually a spontaneous exchange of information that almost seems to “ping pong” casually back and forth among the participants. The focus of the conversation can move with whatever comments are offered by participants. In contrast, coaching is usually a much more focused conversation in which the nature of exchange is based, in large part, on asking powerful questions of your client, while using effective listening and feedback skills, as you support your client in thoughtfully answering the questions.

Coaching is useful when it seems that an individual is struggling with a particular problem or is interested in how to achieve some goal, and wants help from another person. In those situations, you need to intentionally prepare yourself and your client for a coaching session. Consider the following.

1. **Briefly describe the nature of coaching and its benefits to your client.**
Mention that one of the most powerful ways to help someone solve a problem or clarify plans to achieve a goal is through use of a coaching session. Explain how coaching helps the person reframe the problem, carefully think about action plans, and learn at the same time. Explain the role of questions during coaching.
2. **Ask the client if they would like you to coach them.**
You should always get your client’s permission to be coached. Otherwise, your client may feel uncomfortable, manipulated and distrusting during questioning.
3. **Consider any culturally specific conventions.**
Depending on the conventions in the particular culture of your client’s organization and on the personality of your client, your client might not appreciate getting questioned by you. In some cultures, questions might be perceived as disrespectful.



See “How to Work in Multicultural Environments” on page 59 for guidelines to understand if questioning is acceptable in another’s culture.

4. **Focus on organizational issues, not just on the individual’s issues.**

Your role as a consultant is to facilitate organization-wide change, not only to facilitate change in one individual. Thus, you should maintain focus on the desired results of the project for organizational change in addition to the current challenges of the person whom you are coaching.

5. **Use the guidelines for effective listening.**

For example, be sure that you can hear your client, listen more than talk, and acknowledge your client’s responses.



See “How to Really Listen to Your Clients” on page 66 for guidelines to really listen to your clients when coaching them.

6. **Respectfully and supportively offer probing questions.**

Questions are the heart of the coaching session. The rest of this subsection provides numerous guidelines about traits of useful and not so useful questions, along with examples of powerful questions.

7. **Limit advice during the questioning.**

Sometimes, you might feel an urge to answer a question that your client seems to be struggling to answer. Your client might be struggling because they are searching for the best answer. That search can yield a great deal of learning for your client.

8. **Limit general discussion during the questioning.**

A general discussion can diffuse the focus on the questioning. Instead, keep focused on asking questions of your client. Each question might be based on answers to the previous question. There can be other times in the project for general discussion.

9. **Avoid lecturing your client.**

This guideline is relevant to probably any supportive and respectful communication with your client. Lecturing can be detected by regular use of phrases, such as “you should” or “you have to.” Lecturing leaves your client feeling judged and angry.

10. **Use questions to help your client develop action plans.**

Often, it is useful to help your clients come to conclusions about their issues by helping them decide whether they even want to take action on those issues and what those actions should be. Often, actions “shake loose” solutions and generate learning.

11. **Use questions to help your client learn from the coaching session.**

Your client can generate valuable insights from thinking about and responding to useful questions from you. It is important for you to help your client to identify and take ownership for that learning.

12. **Close the coaching session.**

Always use some means for specifically ending the coaching session. For example, thank your client, ask your client what they have learned, mention the value of the coaching session to you, or physically move to a different location. Ask the client to summarize their learnings and ask them about next steps.

Why Questions Are So Important in Coaching

The core “engine,” or tool in personal and professional coaching, is you respectfully and supportively posing powerful questions to your client. There are several advantages to questioning.

1. **Helps your client to recognize their own perceptions and assumptions.**
Usually, a coaching session starts with your client describing some issue or goal that is important to them. For example, if your current client is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the CEO might explain to you that he or she believes that there is a significant management problem. The CEO might add that he or she has tried hard to address the problem, but does not seem to be getting anywhere. The CEO might suggest that he or she needs to take a time management course.
2. **Helps your client to clarify their own assumptions.**
As the CEO continues to think about the questions posed by you, he or she usually provides more information about the reasoning that led to those current conclusions about the issue. For example, the CEO might mention that other leaders seem to get more done, and feel much less frustrated.
3. **Helps your client to verify their own assumptions.**
As you pose more questions, your client may begin to question how they see their issue and any conclusions about it. For example, the CEO might question himself or herself about whether others really get more done, whether the CEO is being realistic about the amount of tasks to get done in a day, and ultimately, whether the time management problem might be a symptom of another larger problem.
4. **Helps your client to modify their views on the issues.**
Many times, finding the right problem is at least as important as finding the right answer. As the coaching session progresses, the CEO might seem to be talking about another problem or goal. For example, the CEO might mention that he or she wishes for more guidance from the Board of Directors about setting priorities and providing more resources for the CEO, but he or she is reluctant to ask for help for fear of appearing incompetent.
5. **Helps your client to arrive at realistic conclusions about what to do.**
Many times, leaders in organizations are faced with so many challenges and options for meeting those challenges that they do not know what to do. Other times, leaders are so inspired and driven that they struggle to be realistic. Coaching helps people to move on to action-oriented conclusions that are relevant and realistic.
6. **Helps you and your client to develop powerful skills in inquiry and reflection.**
In our example, over several coaching sessions, the CEO often begins to develop his or her own skills in asking useful questions to others and themselves. Conversations become more focused, especially on useful actions and learning. The CEO is learning to solve his or her own problems and identify learning, too.
7. **Helps you to help your client without knowing extensive background on issues.**
One of the major advantages of using questions during coaching is that often you can help your client without ever having to know a great deal of history about the particular issue or goal faced by your client. Actually, the more that you know about how your client got stuck on a particular issue, the more that you can sometimes get as stuck as your client during coaching. Many times, clients struggle because of strong misperceptions. The more that

you closely examine the background and thinking about those misperceptions, the more that you might adopt those misperceptions yourself. You can avoid that trap by resorting to asking questions during coaching sessions.

Traits of Destructive Questions

Before suggesting guidelines to conduct supportive questioning, it is important for you to know what types of questions to avoid. Consider these guidelines.

1. **Avoid asking questions that can be answered simply with “yes” or “no.”**
You and your client gain little understanding or direction from such pointed questions that have such short answers. Instead, consider questions that start with “What,” “How,” “When,” and “Where.”
2. **Avoid leading questions.**
Leading questions are questions that are asked to lead your client to a certain pre-determined conclusion or insight. Those questions can be perceived by your client as being manipulative and dishonest. Leading questions often can be answered with “yes” or “no,” for example, “You did what I suggested, right?”
3. **Avoid frequently asking questions that begin with “Why.”**
Those types of questions can leave your client feeling defensive, as if they are to be accountable to you to justify their actions. That feeling of defensiveness can damage feelings of trust and openness between you and your client.

Traits of Useful Questions

Consider these guidelines.

1. **Where possible, use open-ended questions.**
Open-ended questions are those that are not answered with “yes” or “no.” They generate thinking and reflection on the part of your client. They also ensure that your client keeps focused in the questioning session.
2. **Focus questions on the here-and-now.**
The goal of coaching is to help your client go forward by reframing their problem, identifying realistic actions to take, and learning from those actions.
3. **Ask questions to clarify what your client is saying.**
Clarifying questions help you and your client understand the key point or “bottom line” of what he is saying. This can enable them to move on to the right question.
4. **Ask questions about the client’s perspectives, assumptions, actions, etc.**
Adults can learn a great deal by closely examining their own thinking. Often, they struggle because of inaccurate perceptions or assumptions. Therefore, ask questions about their thinking, assumptions and beliefs about current priorities. Do not ask lots of questions about other people – you cannot coach people who are not with you.

5. **Ask your client for help.**

It can be powerful when you show enough trust and confidence in the relationship with your client that you can ask them for help with helping them. For example, you might ask your client, “What question should I ask you?” or “What additional questions should I be asking now?”

Examples of Powerful Questions for Coaching

It is common that a coaching session with clients goes through a certain life cycle. Initially, your client will report some major problem, goal, challenge or priority. Your questions can be useful at that time to help your client report their problem, and then closely examine and clarify that problem. Next, you can help your client identify useful actions to take to effectively resolve their problem. Lastly, you can help your client learn from the coaching session itself. Consider the following questions when coaching your client and notice the grouping of the questions into the various life cycles of a useful coaching session.

Table I:5 – Useful Questions to Ask When Coaching Others

1. To Help Clients Report Their Issue:	3. To Help Clients Move to Action:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ What do you want to work on today?▪ What is wrong? What is missing?▪ What would be exciting to achieve?▪ What would you like from me today?▪ How would you like to get it?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Have you experienced anything like this before? What did you do? How did it work out?▪ What do you hope for?▪ What is preventing you from...?▪ What would you be willing to give up for that?
2. To Help Clients Clarify Their Issue:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ If you could change one thing, what would it be?▪ Imagine a point in the future where your issue is resolved. How did you get there?▪ What can you do before the next meeting?▪ Who will do that action? By when? What will it look like when done? How will you know it is done?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ What is important?▪ How is this issue important?▪ What do you think the real problem is?▪ What is your role in this issue?▪ Where do you feel stuck?▪ Is what you are doing getting what you want?▪ What is the intent of what you are saying?▪ Where are those strong feelings coming from?▪ What would you like me to ask?	4. To Help Clients Deepen Their Learning:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Have you said everything that you want to say?▪ How did this coaching session go for you?▪ What is the learning in this for you?