

Introduction

In this chapter we look at the skilful behaviours of a good coach. Skills can be learned, although not everyone can learn them. People learn best and most easily those skills that are consistent with their beliefs, values and motives.

A long time ago, I worked with ‘underachieving’ teenagers in an inner city school. My job was to teach them the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. There is no doubt they could have learned them. They had learned easily how to mend motorbikes, and drive, both things I was struggling with at the time. They were sophisticated in their arguments and knowledgeable about many things. But they were slow at learning the things I was teaching them, and never learned them very well. You can readily appreciate how little connection there was between what mattered to them and the skills I was trying to teach them.

I had an experience that reminded me of this a couple of years ago. The MD of an estate agency asked me to coach him in listening skills. Suffice it to say, 360-feedback suggested he learned little from me! But he was a man who believed passionately in a particular kind of selling; his success was founded on his ability to put himself about, to make an impression, to carry people away with the force of his own certainty and enthusiasm. Also, he believed that to be successful you have to move fast. How could listening skills be his forte?

(I wouldn’t like you to think I gave up. He solved the problem by getting his second-in-command, a much more measured and less ebullient personality, to do his listening for him and to communicate other people’s key messages to the MD in a very forceful, concise way.)

So the skills of coaching are not independent of values, beliefs and motives. I don’t think you can be a good listener if you’re not interested in what someone is saying. Nonetheless we need to be clear about the skills a good coach needs. Positive intent is necessary, but not sufficient.

Active listening

In my view, this is the single most important skill for a coach. It is what enables the coach to understand the coachee and her world. Every other intervention the coach makes has to be based on that understanding, and the more complete that understanding is, the more effectively the coach will intervene.

This kind of listening is called 'active' for a number of reasons, and these reasons give us important insight into what it is about.

- First, it is active because the listener is doing things. We shall talk in more depth about what she is doing.
- Second, it is active because while it is going on, changes are happening. The person being listened to is seeing things in new ways and starting to feel differently about things. A different kind of relationship is being formed between listener and speaker. Active listening causes things to happen. It is a positive act, not a passive time preceding the 'real action'. Sometimes active listening achieves the goal of coaching all by itself.
- Third, it is 'active' because it takes effort and application to do well. People who learn how to do it often say it is more tiring than anything else they do. Passive listening often feels like taking a rest. Active listening never does. It is work, and hard work at that.

Probably the greatest active listener of all time was Carl Rogers, the psychotherapist. He believed that many of us suffer unhappiness and loss of purpose because we experienced insufficient 'unconditional positive regard' when we were growing up. That is, the sense that we are loved and respected for who we are; and that the love and respect we receive are not contingent on our behaving in order to please others.

Rogers believed that giving adults some hefty doses of 'unconditional positive regard' could help to put this right, increasing their sense of self-worth and their ability to take positive action to achieve their goals. (You can see the connection with the purposes of coaching.) Rogers demonstrated unconditional positive regard through active listening.

What did he do? He focused his attention completely on the person he was listening to. You can see when someone is deeply attentive in that way. They lean forward when the speaker is speaking intensely; they lean back when the speaker is more reflective.

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They nod and make nonverbal utterances – ‘uh huh’, ‘yeah’, ‘mmm’, ‘I see’, for example – in response to the speaker’s points. They notice not only what the speaker is saying but how he is saying it. They notice changes in his voice, his body posture, his skin colour, his eyes.

They notice changes in themselves that happen in response to changes in the speaker. They find themselves feeling a sense of anticipation as the speaker builds his story to a climax, sorrow as the speaker tells of disappointment; they laugh with the speaker, and often their own behaviour will unintentionally ‘mirror’ that of the speaker. Their entire attention, both conscious and unconscious, is focused on the speaker.

This has two profound effects. First, the speaker has a sense of being attended to in a way that he will rarely experience. He will attend more closely to his own words as a consequence. He will learn things about his own story. He will ‘realise what he is saying’ and what it means to him.

Second, the listener will receive a vast amount of data about the speaker. Her understanding of him will be far deeper and more comprehensive than if she had just listened to his words, and had simultaneously been thinking about what she planned to say next.

The reason why active listening is such hard work is that we are not used to focusing our attention so entirely. Typically we will be attending to a whole range of things simultaneously: the words we are hearing, our own thought about those words, what our next words will be, and some random things like what we are planning to have for dinner or some anger at someone that is still unresolved. That is normal listening, and most of the time it does fine. But a coach has to practise active listening.

Carl Rogers did more, as a consequence of being entirely focused on hearing another person’s story. Sometimes he would simply repeat what the speaker had said. Speaker: ‘I was really disappointed.’ Rogers: ‘You were really disappointed.’

These repetitions happened because Rogers recognised that these were key parts of the speaker’s story, that they had special emphasis and poignancy. He was moved to repeat them.

Sometimes he would paraphrase: ‘I’m hearing you say you were at a loss at this point – is that right?’ He did this because he wanted to be sure he had understood something that he sensed was important. The speaker might say ‘Yes, that’s it’. Or he might say ‘No not quite’ and put the listener right. Either way, Rogers would understand the speaker better.

Rogers would also do things to help the speaker keep going. He would convey that he wasn’t judging the speaker negatively with

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comments such as 'I've seen that happen many times' or 'that's understandable' or 'I've done the same myself'. When people are talking about something personal, they can stall through a fear that the listener is thinking badly of them. Rogers was not, and he showed it.

Active listeners can help the speaker when he loses his thread. 'Where was I?' 'You were just explaining how the promotion system works here.' 'Oh yes...'

So these are the signs of active listening. You can develop your skill somewhat by practising the behaviours. But you will develop your skill more by learning how to become deeply interested in another person. The most effective way to do this, unsurprisingly, is by finding a link between a deep interest in the person and a belief or value of your own.

For example, suppose you value diversity. Then you can make the link that it is only by stepping fully into another person's shoes and experiencing the world as they do that you will really show respect for diversity. The link is made; the interest will follow; and so will the active listening behaviours.

Suppose, like the colleague of mine I mentioned in the chapter on 'Motives', you want to 'get people back to work'. You won't be able to do that unless you fully understand the barriers. You will only get that understanding from the individual herself. And so your interest in her story is kindled.

When you find your attention wandering, as it will, you should remind yourself of why this information contained in your coachee's story and in the way he tells it is so important to you. Also, if you look for an opportunity to do one of the more active things (reflecting back, paraphrasing or sharing a common experience) that will help you re-focus your attention. Sometimes taking a note or two helps too, but be careful not to let that break the connection between you and your coachee. You will probably need to explain why you take notes, either at the outset, or when you realise you need to do it.

Questioning

Questioning is the second most important skill, and together with active listening probably achieves 80 per cent of the positive outcome of coaching. In Part Four we provide some specific questioning

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sequences that can be helpful at different times in coaching. Here we shall look more broadly at what it means to say a coach has ‘good questioning skills’.

First, such a coach will ask questions that get the coachee thinking in new ways. They will often be questions the coachee has never been asked, or asked himself, before. Typically, such questions elicit the response ‘That’s a good question!’ and a reflective pause.

Where do such questions come from? (You can’t list them, provide a resource pack of ‘good questions for coaches’, because what makes a question good is specific to the issue and the person.) Good questions come, just like active listening, from a deep interest on the part of the coach in the coachee’s experience of the world. But the coach is more detached from that experience of the world than the coachee. So when her detachment combines with her curiosity it leads her to ask new questions that may get at the heart of what’s going on.

Here is an example from a recent coaching session with a senior accountant. He was struggling with the huge workload his new management role entailed and with the fact that his secretary, who had worked for him for many years and with whom he had a good relationship, had not been able to respond to the new demands on her of her boss’s new role. Unintentionally, she was contributing to his problems. He was under pressure to fire her (from well-meaning colleagues) but was caught up in feelings of guilt and also anger: why were his colleagues pushing him towards a course of action so at odds with his own values, and about a matter that was his business only?

His coach asked him: ‘How is your secretary feeling about her new responsibilities?’ The accountant stopped short. ‘You know, I never asked her. I don’t know.’ That was a good question. The coachee saw he only had part of the information he needed to decide what to do. The question unblocked him.

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It wasn’t a subtle or sophisticated question. But the coach was intently interested in understanding the problem, and yet not caught up in the feelings that the coachee had; she just saw there was some important information she hadn’t heard yet. The coachee’s feelings of guilt and anger led him to focus on his own shortcomings and responsibilities; the

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coach's question reminded him that another person's views and responsibilities were also important.

If the coach is interested in getting the whole picture, she will ask good questions, questions that help the coachee get a fuller picture.

The coach will also ask 'good' questions when she taps into her own different view of the world to extend and enhance the coachee's view of the world. Probably the best-known example of such a question is this one: 'How do you feel about that?' In the coach's view of the world, feelings are important and a legitimate topic of discussion. They dictate what people will do, far more often than logic, and they are certainly key to a coachee's ability to achieve difficult goals.

In the world of many coachees, feelings are ignored; they are embarrassing to talk about, even seen as inappropriate to talk about. By asking a question about feelings, the coach is making available to the coachee a whole extra source of information he might never spontaneously access for himself.

Other good questions of this kind include questions about what coachees hope for, about what they are most proud of, and about their

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imaginings and fantasies. Of course, a coach has to understand and respect her coachee's world. But she will be more helpful to him if she also stays in her own world

and draws on its different sets of principles and norms to cast another light on his.

Another sign of skilful questioning is that the questions flow naturally from the dialogue. This is the difference between a series of skilful questions and an interrogation. In this way, the coachee leads the conversation as much as does the coach. Although there may be times when the coach decides to use a particular sequence of questions to achieve a particular purpose (see Part Four), for the most part the coach is taking her cue from something the coachee has chosen to say.

The variety of different question types also marks out the skilful coach. These range from very open questions, which give the coachee almost total freedom to say what is on his mind (such as, 'what's been happening?' at the start of a session) to probing questions, which have the precision of a scalpel, helping the coach and coachee understand something important in all its complexity ('what did you do?' 'how did

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they respond?’ ‘what happened next?’ ‘where exactly were you standing just then?’). The coach may ask questions that have a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer to help the coachee get clarity or commit to a view or a decision; she may ask wandering, obscure questions to encourage the coachee to talk about things he is still not clear about.

We develop our questioning skill best by developing our capacity for curiosity. Encourage yourself to wonder, about all kinds of people and all kinds of situations. Ask yourself lots of questions, and you will become better at asking them of other people.

Reframing

As we have seen with skilful questions, one of the ways a coach is helpful is by offering new ways of thinking about old problems. Skill at reframing enables him to do just this.

Reframing is changing the meaning of something by putting it in a different context.

Here is an example. A teenage boy argues with everything his mother says. She puts his arguing into the context of his respect for her. ‘He doesn’t have any respect for me,’ she thinks, and feels angry. Then she talks to a friend about the problem. The friend says ‘maybe he’s trying to find some independence’. She puts the teenager’s behaviour in the context of the difficulties of adolescence. This reframe works for his mother, who now feels compassionate towards her son.

Who knows what it is right for that mother to feel? And who cares? It’s better if what she feels has better consequences for her. When she feels angry, the consequences are rows and tensions at home. When she feels compassionate, the consequence is a calmer atmosphere. Now that she has two possible frames to put round her son’s behaviour, she has choice about what she feels and what consequences ensue.

Often when we are stuck, a reframe will help us move forward.

A coachee of mine wanted to leave her job but couldn’t. She saw it as a secure job, and although she was unhappy in it she was too frightened to leave. She had good benefits and a guaranteed final salary pension. She had worked there for 15 years. Her job meant safety to her. Then one day she couldn’t go to work; she had an acute stress reaction and couldn’t stop crying. She came to understand the links between her feelings about work and her stress reaction. She began to see her job as

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threatening her health. It began to mean danger. (Nothing else had changed.) She handed in her notice soon afterwards.

Coaches who are skilful at seeing things from lots of different angles, and at suggesting different ways of seeing things that strike a chord with their coachees can use that skill to unblock their clients. But this is not about prescribing a different way of seeing things. It is not about saying 'You should see this as an opportunity, not a threat' or 'You should see he's just trying to be helpful.' Coachees will choose how they want to see things. What it is about is putting forward possibilities for seeing things differently, one of which may capture the coachee's attention.

I remember working with a group of people who were learning the skill of reframing. They took it in turns to describe an intractable problem that was causing them stress. We had to brainstorm lots of ways of looking at the problem that could reduce the amount of stress it caused the person who had the problem and see if he latched on to one. One of the men said he couldn't stand his brother's wife. He found her unattractive, graceless, and obnoxious. He wished so much his brother had never married her. He felt regretful and frustrated.

Ideas for reframes came thick and fast. 'She's an opportunity to learn tolerance'; 'you can be glad when she leaves'; 'you can use her as a warning to yourself when you're at risk of getting married'. But the reframe that worked for him was 'You will never be jealous of your brother again.' The trainer who came up with this one had noticed the competitiveness that had come across when this man was talking about his brother. He found a reframe that struck a chord.

Reframes that don't speak to people's underlying values, beliefs and motives won't work.

A coachee of mine is very hurt and angry because, contrary to what she feels she was promised, she is not going to make it on to the board of her organisation. Although she is extremely well thought of, and also has by now earned enough never to need to work again, she feels she has failed.

You might imagine I have tried lots of reframes about being liberated from the journey up the greasy pole, being free to run the rest of her career on her own terms, having the opportunity to adjust her perspective on success and failure before she retires, and so on. None of these works for her. She believes status is the most important measure of achievement. We are now trying to change the meaning that status has for her. It won't be easy.

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Confronting

Sometimes it is the coach's job to turn up the heat, to generate some emotion that may provide the impetus for change. That's where confronting comes in.

Confronting is bringing to someone's attention, in a way they cannot ignore, some information that they cannot reconcile with their current view of reality. Here is an example.

A coachee says he wants to improve his time management. He is late for every coaching session. The coach says. 'I am wondering about something. You say time management is important to you, that you see it as part of what makes a manager successful. But you are late for every session with me. How can you explain this?'

Here is another example. 'You have told me that everything would be fine if you were working for a different boss. Yet most of the things you describe as frustrations or difficulties are in fact to do with your relationships with your colleagues. I'm puzzled.'

And another. 'How does your wish to be promoted stack up with your lack of respect for authority?'

The coach is not trying to catch the coachee out, or provoke an argument. Nor is she making a sarcastic point (tone of voice is even and factual). She is rather identifying discrepancies, because they may hold the key to why things are as they are. When the discrepancy is resolved, coach and coachee's understanding will move forward and something important may change.

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The coachee who was late for his sessions realised time management is in fact very low on his list of priorities. He was only focusing on it because he'd been told to. He and the coach started work on an issue of much more importance to him.

The coachee who was complaining about his boss was rather upset by the coach's observation. He went quiet for a while, and the session finished early. But at the start of the next session he said he'd been doing some thinking. He'd come to realise that many of his problems were to do with his own competitiveness and jealousy. The coaching began to make more progress.

The coachee who didn't respect authority replied that he wanted to be promoted in order to be a different kind of boss. This resulted in a whole new line of exploration.

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Confronting requires courage as well as skill. It is not easy to turn the heat up. Many coaches, and they are not the most effective, avoid confronting. They prefer to stay supportive and affirming throughout. Other coaches confront too readily, often out of impatience. The skill is to identify a mismatch between two things your coachee says, or between what she says and what she does, which seems to you to be at the heart of things.

Then the skill is to point out the mismatch clearly and calmly, and to be puzzled, not judgemental or triumphant. Hold on to your curiosity. Where an intelligent and well-intentioned human being (your coachee) is believing two contradictory things, it probably means there is something important he hasn't understood fully yet. Getting to the bottom of such misunderstandings can be a door to change and growth.

There is another kind of confronting. If your coachee tells you two things that don't stack up, and you point it out, he may come to understand external reality differently and more fully.

I had a coachee who told me she had nothing but positive feedback from her internal clients. They valued her work, and kept her busy. But she also told me that her boss, who was in regular contact with her clients, never had time to see her, and was avoiding formalising her role. She had understandably been dealing with this difficult situation by focusing on doing good work for her clients, and had pushed the boss's behaviour to the back of her mind.

I helped her focus on understanding what these two conflicting messages meant. She came to the view that while people thought she

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did good work, they weren't prepared to pay for it (she was on her boss's budget, and essentially provided 'free' to the internal clients). I believe that when she was made

redundant she was more prepared for it as a consequence.

Confronting needs to be done with care and sensitivity, and with an overriding concern for the growth and confidence of the coachee. When people don't see things that perhaps look obvious to us, we need to remember that they will have their own good reasons for not seeing. We can confront, but we should not force or bully. We should leave an escape route whereby people can continue not to see something if they need to.

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Skilful confronting points out a puzzle. It does not provide the solution to the puzzle. That is for the person who is in the puzzle, and who has both more information and more investment, to do.

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