

The Importance of Relationship in Coaching Accomplishment

Synopsis

Coaching focuses on action and accomplishment, and coaches partner with clients to maximize their potential. The premise of this paper is that relationship is the foundation for that; here we seek to clarify the relational elements and behaviors of a successful coaching relationship.

At the core of all work done by groups of people, there is relationship. Relationship can be helpful or hindering, and it can be intentionally built or allowed to blossom naturally. But it is undeniable that it will exist and have an impact on the results of a coaching partnership. Peril awaits the coach that does not confirm that the level of relationship with her client supports the magnitude of change desired from the coaching!

The primary elements of relationships correlate well to the practice areas of coaching, and the creation of a healthy coach/client relationship serves to improve the experience and effectiveness of coaching. Coaches positively impact their clients when they practice these specific skills:

- Bringing self-respect by preparing adequately and using a proven coaching model.
- Promoting mutual respect by valuing what the client brings to the relationship.
- Nurturing mutual affection by practicing regard.
- Advocating cooperation through transparent processes and an emphasis on synergy.



- Giving and living up to the gift of authentic trust.
- Using structures to gain and keep commitment to the relationship.
- Communicating effectively, with an emphasis on listening.

Key Words: *coaching relationship*

Introduction

Coaching focuses on action and accomplishment, as spoken by The International Coaching Federation (ICF, 2010): “Coaches help people improve their performances and enhance the quality of their lives.”¹ Coaches do this by *partnering* with clients to maximize their potential. The premise of this paper is that relationship is the foundation for that; here we seek to clarify the relational elements and behaviors of a successful coaching relationship.

Background

At the core of all work done by groups of people, there is relationship. Rick Strycker (2005), JMJ Associates’ Global Director of Development, said it this way: “We generate authentic relationship as the foundation of accomplishment. Relationship is fundamental and is built on integrity, open and honest communication and trust. We value relationship for its own sake and as the source of accomplishment.” Relationship can be helpful or hindering, it can be intentionally built or allowed to blossom naturally, and it can be with people or things. But it is undeniable that it will exist and have an impact on the results of a coaching partnership.

Yet a search of readily available publications reveals little on the subject. An Internet search reveals precious little about the subject – there are over a million Google hits for “relationship” and “coaching” but all of the top ones are coaching offers for individuals who are interested in



improving their life relationships. It is ironic that so many coaches focus on the importance of relationships in life yet relatively few have apparently taken the time to explicitly address the importance of it in their own dealings with clients. The implication is that coaches often take the quality of their relationships with clients for granted. Peril awaits the coach that does not confirm that the level of relationship with her client supports the magnitude of change desired from the coaching!

Executive development coach Jerome Shore (2004) calls it rapport. He says, “Rapport is one of the active ingredients of coaching that makes it work. More rapport between the coach and client ... will typically make the coaching go more quickly. Less rapport will make it less effective. What this means is that more time spent by the coach and client up front will lead to less effort later to produce results.” He asserts “in extreme circumstances the rapport building might need to be 99% of the coaching relationship”!

Elements of Relationship

Karin Syren (2006) of So-lu’shunz Management Services identifies and summarizes seven “Commonsense Core Elements” of relationships. While recognizing that others can build more impressive and complex lists of such elements, she asserts these seven are fundamental to building an effective relationship:

1. *Self-Respect* – Treating oneself as worthy of attention, esteem, regard and consideration
2. *Mutual Respect* – The result, flowing freely from within yourself to the other individual and back again
3. *Mutual Affection* – A degree of fondness that goes beyond self-interest
4. *Cooperation* – Operating in a common effort, in agreed unity of purpose
5. *Mutual Trust* – Reliance on the truthfulness, character and integrity of the other individual



6. *Commitment to the Relationship* – An agreement, a pledge; a decision by the participants

7. *Communication* – Open, honest, and focused on learning

A comparison of these elements to the skills of a successful coach yields a high degree of correlation. As affirmed by Duncan Brodie (2010) – Managing Director at the leadership development firm *Goals and Achievements* - these skills include listening, questioning, constructively challenging, holding to account, seeing different perspectives, encouraging and supporting, trusting and using intuition and keeping focus on the client. A simple map follows showing the correlation of the elements and skills:

Relationship Element	Coaching Skill
Self-Respect	Trusting and Using Intuition
Mutual Respect Mutual Affection	Encouraging and Supporting
Cooperation Mutual Trust Commitment	Seeing Different Perspectives, Constructively Challenging, Holding to Account
Commitment	Focus on the Client
Communication	Listening Questioning



While it is tempting to simply note the consistencies and conclude that relationship building is “automatic” for good coaches, a deeper look at each relationship element reveals specific actions the coach can take to create a great foundation for accomplishment.

The Practice Areas of Relationship Building

Self-Respect

Self-respect is important to a coach’s self-confidence. Clients will quickly pick up on any insecurity that their coach demonstrates, thereby undermining the clients’ confidence in that coach. Conversely, when a coach shows up as a highly confident and positive-speaking individual he/she will improve the odds that clients will want to follow in his footsteps. Football coach Vince Lombardi said it best: “Confidence is contagious. So is lack of confidence.” (Lombardi, Jr. 2002)

The most important thing a coach can do to improve self-confidence is to adequately prepare. The International Coach Federation has identified 11 core competencies to be demonstrated by coaches meeting their standards for certification. There are over 40 coach training programs that use these competencies as their basis for skill building (ICF, 2010). Coaches who complete these programs typically demonstrate a high level of coaching skill and confidence. Consistent with this, an ICF-commissioned survey conducted by Price Waterhouse Coopers in 2007 found that 52% of coaches report that their coaching clients expect the coach they hire to be credentialed (Poehnert & Schindler, 2009). This illustrates how consumers are becoming more educated and savvy in their coach selection process, and how they notice that more prepared coaches bring better results.



A proven coaching process, also underpins confidence, and therefore self-respect. The International Coach Academy module on coaching models confirms, “having a coaching model to back you up in your coaching practice can give you additional confidence and credibility” (ICA, 2009). A coaching model that is refined over time gives the coach ready access to questions and processes that will move the client forward, allows the coach to stay “in the moment” and reduces the amount of background conversation going on in the coach’s mind. This results in more coaching clarity and better results.

Mutual Respect

Mutual respect is the result of both parties in the coaching relationship practicing a high degree of self-respect. It flows freely throughout the relationship, from within the coach to the client and back again. Continued unabated, it nourishes the relationship in its lifeblood.

David Edgerly (1998) notes that respect for one’s partner is built on the recognition that they are fully functional and remarkably capable people. He goes on to say that to ask for and accept help one has to allow for the fact that often your partner is better at some things than you are. This means the coach has to acknowledge that the client is an expert in the matters of her own life and is the best source of information for finding solutions to current challenges. For the client it means acknowledging that the coach brings expertise in the form of a process that will unlock solutions the client can’t access on her own. When both individuals practice mutual respect they increase the likelihood that a breakthrough will result.

Mutual Affection

In describing Mutual Affection, Syren (2006) says, “a degree of fondness is necessary in any relationship that must endure beyond the current crisis.” She says that relationships based on self-interest, without any



affection, can exist briefly but only for a specific purpose. However, for those that endure the rule is “the deeper the fondness, the more powerful the relationship.”

Mutual affection is the element perhaps most akin to Jerome Shore’s concept of rapport. When there is a high level of it, the participants find the conversation flowing and look forward to the next instance. Mutual respect grows to a very high level and both coach and client genuinely enjoy the time they spend together.

A coach can contribute to the creation of this mutual affection by bringing a genuine and open respect for the client. Acknowledging areas of commonality, appreciating differences, and actively practicing empathy all contribute to the client’s feeling that he/she is truly appreciated. This is taken a step further by Strycker (1995) in what he describes as *regard*. Distinct from acknowledgment or even appreciation, regard goes a step farther by acknowledging to the client the gifts they are bringing to the relationship and to the coach, personally.

Cooperation

Cooperation refers to the extent to which the coach and client have an agreed unity of purpose. In cooperation, emphasis is given both to the individuals and the work they are accomplishing.

There are several moves a coach can make to establish a high level of cooperation. First, the coach creates alignment by assuring the client they are present only to support the client’s desires or needs. This establishes a direction and intentionality for the conversation from the start. Then, the coach uses an established process - which may or may not be explicitly revealed to the client at the beginning but is at least exposed as they go through the steps. This creates a predictability that the client can follow. Finally, the coach uses specific tools for coming alongside the client and impartially examining problems - such as



brainstorming, role-playing, prospective examination, and gaming. These position the coach and client on the same side of the “table” and promote a high degree of teamwork.

Mutual Trust

About trust, Syren (2006) says it is reliance placed on the truthfulness, character, integrity, and the proven ability of the other individual, as experienced over time. Robert Solomon and Fernando Flores (2001), in their book *Building Trust in Business, Politics, Relationships, and Life*, describe three kinds of trust. The first is *simple* trust, the kind extended to another person early in a relationship. It is unconsidered, unconscious trust similar to what a child gives. However this is the sort of trust that, once betrayed, cannot recover. At that point a person can do one of two things: distrust or extend the next level. That second level is *blind* trust, which is also a willful act of the extender. It fully ignores any reason not to trust, even when these reasons have already showed up in the past. It is only following a period of simple trust or broken trust that the kind of trust Syren describes is possible, according to Solomon and Flores. Their third level is termed *authentic* trust and it involves conscious evaluation and builds into the thinking the possibility (and in some cases the actual occurrence) of betrayal. *Authentic* trust is when one takes into account the capabilities and history of the person being trusted, recognizes a risk, and makes the conscious choice to trust anyway.

It is this last point that is of most interest to the coach. A coach does not always know whether a client is trustworthy. When the coach authentically puts the client’s needs ahead of any need of her or his own – including the need to be respected - it becomes possible to extend trust while simultaneously recognizing the possibility it will be broken. And it is *often* broken, for instance in the form of missed appointments, incomplete truths, risk avoidance, and even the occasional falsehood!



At the same time, the client is also extending trust. It is imperative that the coach doesn't break this trust. Clients often come to the coaching relationship in a frail state and they can be easily bruised. A competent coach quickly establishes the ground rules for the relationship, makes the coaching process transparent so that there are no surprises for the client, and acts in accordance with all assurances and promises given.

Commitment to the Relationship

Syren (2006) describes commitment as an agreement - a pledge - that must be fully engaged to count. It is an all-or-nothing undertaking. A coach gives most of the structure for this commitment in the form of a coaching contract.

The Executive Coaching Forum (2004) outlines basic elements of a good coaching contract. It clearly lays out at least three types of boundaries for the coaching engagement:

Goals and Objectives include the purpose of the coaching engagement, timelines, milestones, success measures, and any assessments that will be included.

Rules of Engagement include elements such as confidentiality agreements, fees and the payment schedules, how sessions are conducted, and venue.

Accountability covers expectations regarding participation, honesty, timely payment, the delivery of any promised tools and resources, and any expected feedback or documentation.

When such elements are clearly outlined for both coach and client, the expectations for their relationship are transparent and each individual can make the choice of commitment to the relationship. If any element gives pause to one of the individuals, the contract likewise presents the opportunity to iron out these differences in advance.



Communication

At the heart of coaching is communication. Most coaching sessions are discussions and both coach and client are using their *expressive* skills and their *listening* skills. The client is doing most of the talking during a session and so is most frequently using expressive skills. The competent coach therefore must be simultaneously skilled in reading nonverbal (e.g., body language) signals in a face-to-face setting and purely verbal signals in a telephone setting.

The 2009 ICF Global Coaching Client Study notes that the delivery channel for coaching worldwide is now about evenly split: 50% for face to face and 47% for telephone. Patrick Courtois, Director at the Asian organizational consultancy Ming Bai, has made a switch in preference from face-to-face to telephone coaching. In his article “Benefits of Telephone Coaching” (2010) he concludes that telephone coaching enables a total concentration by both coach and client on what is essential: coaching and nothing else. Visual distractions are removed from the interaction, enhancing the effectiveness of communicating the message and information. Taking the place of nonverbal signal decoding is a new skill - that of listening for voice inflections, pauses, speed of speech, emotion, etc.

Alongside this passive listening is the need for active listening through the use of strategic questions. Much has been written on the various distinctions regarding question types - open vs. closed ended, higher level and lower level, and expansion vs. contraction. Relationship-building questions are the ones that seek to understand, expand on what has been previously said, and allow the client to say what “wants” or needs to be said.



Conclusion

This critical analysis reveals that the main elements of relationships correlate well to the practice areas of coaching, and that the active creation of a healthy coach/client relationship serves to improve the experience and effectiveness of coaching. Coaches positively impact their clients when they practice these specific skills:

- Bringing *self-respect* by preparing adequately and using a proven coaching model.
- Promoting *mutual respect* by valuing what the client brings to the relationship.
- Nurturing *mutual affection* by practicing regard.
- Advocating *cooperation* through transparent processes and an emphasis on synergy.
- Giving and living up to the gift of authentic *trust*.
- Using structures to gain and keep *commitment* to the relationship.
- *Communicating* effectively, with an emphasis on listening.

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