

Coaching demystified: what is the role and intention of a performance coach for leaders and teams they support?

In the last Helpsheet I talked about leadership and how the conductor of a musical ensemble is accountable for the sound that gets produced, the impact of the performance, the expression of the music, bringing it all together even though the conductor themselves makes no sound. And how, as conductor Benjamin Zander says, the role of the conductor is “to make other people powerful”, i.e. the players. And I related this perspective on the role of a corporate leader enabling others to step up and be their best, essentially what an effective conductor manages to do, to leadership in the corporate world.

Related to the idea of a conductor making no sound, yet having a huge impact on the orchestra’s performance, is the role of performance coaching and how the coach works with a client to enable the client to reach new heights and take on things they previously thought themselves incapable of. What is the role of the coach? I pose this question because, in common with the conductor, the coach does less of the talking during a coaching session than the client. It is often assumed that the coach does a lot of talking, as if their role is to advise, to determine the way forward and set this out for the client.

Coaching, consulting, mentoring?

There is no one-size-fits-all coaching format of course. Some coaches may say a lot and be extremely effective, but when it comes to providing advice and expertise to clients, this is more the role of a consultant or mentor than of a coach. By contrast, the coach focuses on building a strong rapport quickly with the client, in which listening curiously and without judgement is a critical skill for building a safe space and nurturing trust so the client feels supported and completely ok the way they are.

By building that sense of space in which anything can be covered, within the scope of the goals and personal development aspirations which the coach and client have contracted around, the client experiences a completely different quality of listening from their coach, who is independent and without conflict of interest. And paradoxically, when someone experiences being heard, accepted and ok the way they are, they are liberated from having to be that way and can feel energised to explore new ways to be.

Free from limits

Whereas talking to a close friend, however valuable - and I am not making an either/or comparison here - will be likely to have limits. Friends know each other from their shared experiences. That ‘knowing’ defines and necessarily limits the extent that either friend can grow and develop because of the familiarity and patterns that have – albeit unwittingly – influenced their relationship.

Subconsciously or consciously, we may not think about our friendship having limits at all or whether we've come to like our friendship the way it is and wanting it to stay that way, until suddenly when our friend appears one day and tells us about all the new insights and awareness they've gained through a personal development programme or leadership course they've been on. Such an experience can leave us feeling excluded or on the outside and insecure about where the friendship goes from here.

Having a trusted manager to report to can be a great support to our development, but again the relationship has limits in what we may be comfortable talking about because of the professional context, especially if we are both at different levels within the hierarchy. We may not want to admit to what we consider weaknesses in our work or capabilities too freely, in case these do not land well with the manager and end up counting against us, however close our relationship is on a personal Level.

An independent coach, supporting leaders and their teams, is free from the constraints of existing relationships. We have the privilege of drawing on our expertise in human performance, emotional and cognitive awareness, neuroscience, conflict management etc, by asking appropriate our clients many kinds of questions which each serve a specific purpose:

Create a supportive and safe space: Connect and listen to whatever the coachee is bringing into the session today, how they are, the coach reflecting back what they've understood so the coachee experiences being heard and accepted.

Raise energy levels: by inviting someone to reflect on their current energy level at the start of a session, they get to focus on something that's often unfamiliar to them. Once they think about their energy level, they can shift gear and have more energy, just in the space of a few seconds.

Enable taboos to be mentioned and explored: The safe space enables the coachee to raise things they find important which they are not comfortable discussing in other environments. This may not be something they have planned to talk about or have on their mind at the moment, but just knowing they can provide welcome freedom for the coachee in having a specific forum to explore such things if they need to.

Engage the coachee in their own learning: The coach urges the coachee to reflect on what they have said, to engage the coachee's own thinking and emotional awareness, rather than the coach immediately providing a steer, explanation or answer. It is the ability of the coach to remain silent and hold the space with integrity, continue to have the coachee look at why that issue is important for them, re-examine their current sense of how much they can influence or act to deal effectively with the issue. With appropriate questions from the coach, the coachees can explore and uncover valuable insights about why they are resistant to

dealing with something, understand what lies behind that unwillingness, see new ways forward for action they would never have discovered.

An important goal of the coach is to enable **a shift in perspective** for the client, so they can refocus and see something different. What was a persistent problem now becomes something manageable and within their grasp to influence. What was “the only way” becomes “one possible way” and releases the coachee to see other options and possibilities.

Helping a coachee **to gain clarity** is important. For example, helping them to distinguish between a need and their strategy for meeting that need. A simple example in an organisational strategy context would be: “We need to grow and become double the size”, without first identifying what value that growth would have, for whom, why, what are the risks as well as the rewards in such an approach, etc? What need is being met if we grow, becomes the consideration.

What can I influence? Working with the coachee to be clear on what they can influence directly and **what lies outside their sphere of control**, being responsible for their part while learning to set limits so they can act fully within their role.

The questions from the coach can also direct the coachee towards what it is they are really listening to within themselves, so they become aware of self-imposed limits they were not aware of. **Think about when you hear yourself tell someone else your account of the day you’ve had – speaking this reveals more than when you simply think about it in your own head.** Similarly in coaching the coachee speaking illuminates how they see themselves – the coach can make this visible to the client by having the client explore and notice what their focus is and has been, what conclusions they’ve drawn about themselves. From noticing their focus and its limitations, clients can refocus freely as they wish on something different, empowering and important for their professional goals and personal growth.

Story-telling

A coach does not only ask questions of course. Sharing observations and personal stories from similar situations the coach has experienced can be extremely powerful for the client, validating the coach as someone who has undergone big challenges and grown themselves. An effective coach will build a deep connection and can challenge the client to look at blind spots and uncomfortable areas because of the profound respect and sense of trust that they have built with the client. Respectfully getting permission from the client to go deep and explore something which appears to be holding them back.

Being prepared and free to change plans

No two coaching sessions are ever the same, so the coach needs to have all their attention on the client and what they are saying, or showing in their non-verbal communication. It is that presence and attention which releases the coach from having to be ready with the right question at the right time - gazing at a prepared plan for the session is not a recipe for supporting a client.

That is not to say the coach does not have a plan - they certainly do - but paradoxically it is the coach's experience and preparation in getting profoundly related with people that frees them from having to remember what to ask or say. Importantly, the coach will use that ability to change plans and shift the focus for a session in the moment when it is clear that the coachee is needing something different today. The effective and experienced coach is spontaneous and focuses on **listening first and intervening second**, knowing that the appropriate coaching tools and questions will present themselves at the moment they are needed.

I provide one to one and team coaching for leaders and their organisations. If something resonates in what I've outlined here and you would like to check out what support options could be helpful for you and your team, please get in touch.