

What kinds of topics do people typically explore through coaching?

This brief exploration of things which clients typically bring to coaching may be of help to you if you're a leader considering whether coaching could provide a useful way to develop members of your team, support for your own challenges or as a way of getting your team energised with new ideas and approaches.

While much depends on the context, e.g. the type of organisation, its stage of development and the kinds of people it needs to be successful in the key roles, it is often a career development need that leads someone to coaching. As organisations grow and navigate change, they need their people to develop agility in their roles as these evolve. For example, a leader might be looking at how one of their managers can develop and improve their key stakeholder relationships, to bring new energy and inspire more commitment and trust so the organisation can take critical new opportunities that seem out of reach at the moment.

In such a scenario, this may open up a career development opportunity for the manager, say for them to progress to a COO role in the coming year if they can successfully demonstrate new skills and greater impact with those key stakeholders.

If I'm having a chemistry conversation with a potential coachee in such a case, I will be looking at what they want to achieve and why it's important for them, and explore if there's a fit between us for me to support them as their coach. After that, I'll be having a scoping conversation with them together with their sponsor (e.g. their team leader or CEO who wants them to consider coaching) and possibly other key stakeholders in the relationship at the same time, to build alignment and agreement on how we'll work together.

It's important to build alignment between the coachee and other key people they work with on what the coaching is for, what outcomes the coachee wants to accomplish and why these are important for them and the organisation. How will we know if we've got there is another important question to consider, so what does success look like? And, how can the sponsoring stakeholders support the coachee, so the learnings from coaching can be welcomed and put into practice successfully day to day? Seen like this, appreciating and supporting an individual manager's growth can inspire change and spur the growth of the whole team.

In such a scoping conversation, it will become clear fairly quickly if the manager (coachee) has some skin in the game, in other words if they really want to grow and develop, or if they've been driven to consider coaching primarily because their team leader or CEO wants them to. I have been fortunate to support people who are clearly motivated by their own hunger for development and whose managers support them in that journey.

So it's often an exciting and critical point in someone's development journey when they come to coaching. It's important for the coach to reflect this and acknowledge that someone is taking time out to invest in developing themselves and is prioritising themselves. That message helps the coachee to see that the coach takes them seriously and is committed to building a trusted safe space for them to explore their challenges deeply, see what is holding them back, how can they overcome current barriers, take a step out of their comfort zone into unfamiliar territory etc. All towards accomplishing that big goal they want to reach.

Putting it simply, we start from:

1. Identifying the goal/challenge and how the coachee sees it now, including how they see themselves based on their past experience in tackling their challenges;
2. The result they want to accomplish, how this makes them feel, how they see themselves managing it, including what's in the way, imagining the view from the mountain top after reaching the summit.
3. The GAP between the two.

The coaching will help to clarify the gap and focus the coachee on how to close it. We start from where the coachee is now and how they see themselves. It's important to be aware of the difference between assuming our past limits how we see the world, compared to informing how we see the world. Limiting beliefs – and transforming them - are an important area we look at in coaching.

Identifying where we have come to a fixed view of ourselves and our capability based on a past experience is helpful in opening up new ways to deal with that situation differently going forward. We have often set limits on our capability without realising this or noticing the impact it is having. Reframing is a concept in coaching which helps people to look at the same situation and express it in different ways, noticing the impact this has on their mood, sense of impact they can have, realising that the first way they expressed it (often their habitual view) isn't the only one.

Interestingly, thinking about what topics people typically bring to coaching, while it may be about career development, clients often notice in our sessions that what they're seeing about themselves is not just something they experience at work in their leadership role and context, but is also present in their close relationships and in private.

Sometimes, it's as if we leave important parts of ourselves behind when we come to work, really powerful things like our intuition and laser-like ability to sense what's needed, because we decide that "this situation isn't really to do with me and I'd be poking my nose in". What if we could put those concerns aside and make our goal one of contribution, so we speak up and offer our perspective rather than invalidate

ourselves out of fear of overstepping the mark. At the same time, if we are aware that we typically tend to speak up every time and get involved in too many things that are not our priorities, we can try out setting limits in this area and seeing what impact that has on reducing our workload and increasing productivity.

These are classic comfort-zone challenges. With a client I've been working with this year, part of our work has been about integrating her personal strengths with her professional skills, realising that she is one whole being and can bring her whole self to work. The artificial division of ourselves into a personal and a professional self is a construction we like to make out of convenience, justifying why we prefer to stay out rather than step up in certain demanding situations. It isn't a real division and we don't need to let it reduce our power or hamper our authentic self-expression. We can choose differently.

"What got you here won't get you to there" is a familiar reminder that if we want to progress to a higher role, something else will be needed from us and we need to know our gaps and how to address them. Faced with the challenge of responding to stakeholder feedback e.g. that as a manager we need to learn to engage in discussion about how to advance a difficult situation rather than taking it personally as a criticism that it is the way it is currently, coachees often express they don't know how to do this and want coaching to support them.

The coach can, by asking the coachee to reflect on what they see from the stakeholder feedback, help the coachee to see that what stakeholders are asking for may not be that far off, something easier to imagine than they initially could see. From that new view of the challenge, different ideas and options start to emerge for the coachee, new beliefs about themselves and what they are capable of, bringing that all important goal within reach.

I provide one to one and team coaching for leaders and their organisations. If something particular 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.