

The
Coaching
Relationship
in Practice

lobby, which is very common practice in pro bono coaching. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of using a lobby? It is likely to be a mutually convenient venue and not cost anything to meet there. There will be some privacy, but at the same time that privacy is limited and this is likely to affect the quality and possibilities of the conversation. It will be particularly difficult for the coachee to explore strong feelings, so the conversation is likely to have a somewhat constrained and muted tenor.

A second issue is whether it is coaching that the coachee wants, or does he really want some form of advice? The professional background and expertise of the coach may be important here. It may be that you are of interest to your coachee precisely because of your background, and that they hope you will offer an informal kind of mentoring or give advice. Remember, most people don't know what coaching is, and it is understandable that coachees will initially expect to get from you what they get from most people, i.e. advice, guidance and direction. Though you may be as clear as you can be, and hold to the coaching approach, you may still be working at cross purposes, perhaps leaving you both somewhat dissatisfied and confused. In this case, the dissatisfaction is not clearly articulated by Andrew, but perhaps expressed in the cancelled session, and experienced by John in his sense of unease and uncertainty about the next session.

The examples of Mary and John give you, I hope, a sense of the issues involved in setting up your first coaching sessions. The ideal is a safe, confidential space and a shared understanding of coaching that meets the needs of the coachee. Meeting these conditions takes work and may not always be possible, but the coaching relationship will be eroded to the extent that the set-up is not right. Your motivation and confidence as a coach will be a significant element here: will you use 'good authority' to get the frame right? It is worth making this a priority as it will profoundly affect your coaching.

STRUCTURING THE FIRST SESSION

Managing the first session with a coachee can be quite challenging as there are a number of things that need to happen to properly set up the coaching. These include:

1. Starting to build the relationship by getting to know each other.
2. Explaining about coaching so there are shared expectations.
3. Getting into the story.
4. Contracting.

There are various ways of covering these points. It may be that you tell the coachee early on what you want to cover, or you just simply structure the session to ensure it happens. You may find that you do it differently with different coachees, as some

may come in and launch straight into their story, whilst others may want to talk more about coaching and what's involved. However each particular session evolves, it's good to know the various strands to be addressed by the end of that first session.

1. Starting to build the relationship by getting to know each other

You will already have had some contact with the coachee when setting up the first meeting. However, it is important at the start of the first meeting to spend some time saying hello and talking together to find out a bit more about each other. It's up to you what to share about yourself, and you might want to give some thought beforehand about this. My attitude at the beginning is to 'get interested' in the coachee and see what flows from this in the conversation. Regarding how long you should take over this, again you'll find your own style, but there is a balance between getting to know each other and 'getting down to business', as the coachee will be wanting to get something from the session and it is important to create a sense of purpose and direction.

2. Explaining about coaching so there are shared expectations

As has been indicated in the examples above, it is quite likely that the coachee does not have a clear idea about coaching and will therefore seek from you what is normal elsewhere: advice, guidance and so on. Therefore there is a job to do in 'educating' the coachee as to what to expect and the kind of conversation you'll be having. This can be done in an informal way, perhaps by asking the coachee about what they know about coaching, and/or saying briefly that you don't have the answers but will help them find their own. What you say will set the scene and serve as a reference point, but may not initially carry a lot of weight; it is likely that the coachee will still anticipate that the conversation will follow the same old rules. What you say will only carry weight when you put it into practice, and then you'll find out how ready the coachee is to have a coaching conversation or whether they are really committed to something else. In the example above, Andrew was seeking to tap into John's experience in HR to provide guidance for his complaint, so a coaching approach was mostly frustrating. The first session sets the scene and gives you data as to whether coaching is what is wanted, and offers the opportunity as you conclude the conversation to talk openly about whether coaching is the right approach.

3. Getting into the story

This is where you will draw most clearly on the skills and the structuring (GROW) discussed in Chapter 1. The conversation will probably move on from the opening 'getting to know each other' to asking what the coachee wants

from coaching. They may be very clear and specific about this, or it may need more time to surface and be given shape to. It may be that by the end of the session there is still more to do to identify a specific agenda, and this will have to be picked up in the next session. There is also a sense that, in an informal way, you will be doing an ‘assessment’ of whether coaching is appropriate. Peter Bluckert (2006) has a section on the ‘coachability of the coachee’ which I’d recommend you read, as the coachee may, for a variety of reasons, be either more or less coachable than expected. In the example above, Mary left the session with a concern about whether it was coaching Jane needed or something else, perhaps counselling.

4. Contracting

The coachee’s story can be really engaging, and it is quite likely that the coachee will be very involved in telling it. It may feel hard, therefore, to draw that to a close so as to leave time to properly contract about the work. You will both have a shared sense of how the conversation went and whether coaching is likely to be fruitful, so you can explicitly ask whether this approach is what the coachee wants. You can agree on the agenda even if at this stage you recognise that settling on the agenda is still a work in progress. You will also address things like confidentiality, where and when sessions should take place, how long they should be and how many should be arranged, and whether and how you might have contact between sessions (e.g. email, text, phone calls). If there are course requirements that might involve the coachee (such as case studies or recording sessions) this would be a good time to talk about them and seek permission.

You can see that structuring the first session is complex; there is a lot to do. It will require you to exercise your authority as the coach and manage the session, allocating time for each aspect in a way that flows and respects the pace and rhythm of the session.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE PRESENCE OF EMOTION

When you create a situation that is safe and use the skills of awareness raising to help the coachee talk about something that matters to them, you’ll find they often start to tell you things that are very private, things they have never spoken to anyone else about and perhaps have never openly acknowledged to themselves either. You’ll start to hear the way they view the world and the kind of assumptions they make about themselves and others, their hopes, fears and ambitions. It is likely they’ll come to speak about this in a very ‘feelingful’ way, i.e. with a lot of emotion. In the examples above, with Jane there were feelings of anxiety about her job, and she was upset about her mother and had a background mood of