

# FIRST STEPS *in* COACHING

# 2

## WHAT IS COACHING?

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we shall consider a number of definitions of coaching, including my own definition that is the basis of my practice. We go on to describe a widely used framework for structuring coaching conversations, the GROW model. We end by considering an equation that sits at the heart of the kind of coaching we'll be exploring in this book:

$$\text{Awareness} + \text{Responsibility} = \text{Performance}$$

### DEFINITIONS OF COACHING

If you were to ask the ordinary person in the street what comes to mind when they think of a coach, many people will reply with some notion of a sports coach. I myself have been having some golf lessons recently. As we worked on the driving range, the professional adjusted my grip by asking me to move my right thumb. When I sliced some shots to the right, he corrected the way I held my shoulders. And he encouraged me to lengthen my swing. As he suggested these changes, he briefly and helpfully explained why they would enable me to strike the ball better. He was also encouraging, always saying *Good shot* whenever I hit a half decent one.

I'd sum this up by saying that the golf professional understood perfect technique and was working with the intention of helping me get closer to an ideal way of gripping and swinging the golf club. He was telling me what to do. And I found this helpful. My golf did improve. And I was more aware of what I was trying to do, even if I couldn't always execute what I had in mind.

The approach of the golf professional is one method of coaching, and it can be very effective. One way of describing this kind of coaching is that it is directive. However, it's not what I mean by coaching. In the chapters which follow we shall largely be exploring a primarily non-directive approach to coaching.

Jenny Rogers proposes this definition of coaching, which she says is 'a simple one that conceals complexity':

The coach works with clients to achieve speedy, increased and sustainable effectiveness in their lives and careers through focused learning. The coach's sole aim is to work with the client to achieve all of the client's potential – as defined by the client. (Rogers, 2008)

Julie Starr offers this view:

Put simply, coaching is a conversation, or series of conversations, that one person has with another. The person who is the coach intends to produce a conversation that will benefit the other person (the coachee) in a way that relates to the coachee's learning and progress. (Starr, 2011)

There isn't an agreed definition of coaching. Here is my own definition that is the basis of my practice and which we'll refer to throughout the book:

Coaching is a relationship of rapport and trust in which the coach uses their ability to listen, to ask questions and to play back what the client has communicated in order to help the client to clarify what matters to them and to work out what to do to achieve their aspirations.

There are a number of points I'd like to highlight in this definition.

First and foremost, coaching is a relationship between two people. The definition offers a couple of pointers to the nature of an effective coaching relationship – one based on rapport and trust. The fact that the coach is operating non-directively will create a different relationship than if the coach were directive.

Second, the definition states that the role of the coach is to help the client to articulate their goals and how they will set about achieving them. Non-directive coaching is about facilitating, not instructing, advising or guiding. It is working with someone, not doing something to them.

In the following chapter we shall look in more detail at directive and non-directive approaches.

Third, the definition introduces three basic skills that will be explored a little later in the book – listening, questioning and playing back. However, while these skills are important, the more fundamental ability that the coach needs is to establish rapport and trust in the relationship. Coaching is an art not a science. The coach is continually drawing on their experience and their intuition to shape what they do next.

### EXERCISE 2.1 WHAT IS YOUR DEFINITION OF COACHING?

You might be content to work with one of the definitions offered above. However, you may wish to browse through some books or search the internet for definitions used by other writers.

Here is another definition of coaching that is somewhat different from mine. Peter Hawkins and Nick Smith offer this definition as their 'working hypothesis':

Coaching is the focused application of skills that deliver performance improvement to the individual's work in their organization, through robust support and challenge. The coaching process should yield learning and personal development for the executive, and help them contribute more of their potential. This collaborative relationship will be short-term and practically focused, and will be marked by clear, strong feedback. (Hawkins and Smith, 2006)

In this definition Hawkins and Smith have in mind executive coaching, but their definition could be modified to include, for instance, coaching someone who isn't currently working.

You might like to summarise what you see as the different emphases in my definition and Hawkins and Smith's definition, and consider which feels most appropriate to you at this point in your development as a coach.

As an exercise, try to crystallise your thoughts by writing your own definition of coaching that you will use in your own practice.

It will be interesting to see if your definition evolves as you work through this book or in the light of your experience of practising coaching.

## THE GROW MODEL

Coaching generally takes place through conversation. Here is a simple framework that you can use to structure a coaching conversation. The GROW model is a very practical framework to enable another person to think through their situation and come up with a plan of action. The four aspects which give the model its name are:

<b>G</b> oal	What are you trying to achieve?
<b>R</b> eality	What is currently going on?
<b>O</b> ptions	What might you do?
<b>W</b> ill	What will you do?

The GROW model was developed originally by Graham Alexander in the 1980s in his work with senior executives. It was brought to a wider audience by John Whitmore in his book *Coaching for Performance*, first published in 1992. Whitmore explains why he considers it more useful to explore the client's goals before looking at the current reality. He writes:

Goals formed by ascertaining the ideal long-term solution, and then determining realistic steps toward that ideal, are generally far more inspiring, creative and motivating. (Whitmore, 2002)

### EXERCISE 2.2 THE GROW MODEL

Here is an exercise to experience working through the stages of the GROW model. To do the exercise you need to have in mind a real issue that you'd like to spend 20 minutes thinking about. As in the coaching trios exercise described in the previous chapter, the issue needs to be a real one involving yourself and where you're not sure how to proceed.

Begin by writing down in a sentence the issue that you want to think about.

Here are a number of questions to structure your thinking about the issue. Simply write down your answer to each question as you work through them.

#### GOAL

- 1) What are you trying to achieve?
- 2) Imagine that you have successfully addressed your issue. What does success look like?
- 3) And what does success feel like?
- 4) In regard to this issue, what do you really, really want?

#### REALITY

- 5) What is happening that makes this an issue for you?
- 6) Who is involved?
- 7) What assumptions are you making?
- 8) What – if anything – have you already done to address the situation?
- 9) And what has been the effect of what you have done so far?

#### OPTIONS

- 10) What options do you have?
- 11) What else might you do?

- 12) If you had absolutely no constraints – of time or money or power or health – what would you do?  
 13) If you had a really wise friend, what would they do in your shoes?

### **WILL**

- 14) Your answers to the last four questions have generated a set of options. Which options will you actually pursue?  
 15) For each chosen option, what specifically will you do?  
 16) What help or support do you need?  
 17) What deadlines will you set for yourself?  
 18) What is the first step that you will take?

Here is a final question, which is about the process you've just been through rather than the content of what you've written.

What was the effect of these questions?

If you are working with colleagues in a coaching pair or trio, you'll find it useful to have the GROW framework in mind to help you manage the conversation. Note, however, that not all conversations lend themselves to the GROW framework. For example, if a client wants to think through whether to accept the offer of a new job or stay in their current role, a conversation structured to help them think through the pros and cons of the two options might be more helpful.

As you become more familiar and comfortable with the GROW framework you'll also find that you need to use it flexibly. Sometimes the client's goal will be very clear, and you don't need to spend a lot of time in this stage. On other occasions, you may have to take considerable time to help the client clarify their goal and then, once the goal is clear, the action steps are obvious. At other times you may discover that exploration of reality or options leads to the insight that the goal as originally formulated isn't achievable and so you need to track back to help the client to revise – or perhaps abandon – their goal. You might also feel that it's easier to start with R and the exploration of reality, so that the model becomes RGOW – which isn't as neat a mnemonic!

Over time too you'll develop your own set of questions. There is nothing magical about the precise questions set out in the GROW exercise. Indeed, as we will consider in the chapter on questioning, the most useful questions are those that emerge from listening to understand the client. Note, however, that all of the questions in the exercise are open rather than closed questions, often beginning with the word *What ...?*

In my own coaching practice I have the GROW model at the back of my mind as I converse with a client. I sometimes explicitly work through the stages of the model to structure a coaching

conversation, and on other occasions I use it more implicitly to mentally check where we're up to and if, for example, it seems time to move on to explore Options. I also find that in many coaching conversations it does seem more natural and useful to help the client explore their Reality before asking about their Goal.

## AWARENESS AND RESPONSIBILITY

The mnemonic GROW means that people who encounter it on coaching skills programmes generally remember it. However, GROW is simply one way of structuring a coaching conversation. A much more important and fundamental idea is the notion of awareness and responsibility.

One way of thinking about what you are trying to do as a coach is summed up in this equation:

$$\text{Awareness} + \text{Responsibility} = \text{Performance}$$

As a coach your questions are designed either to raise your client's awareness – of their hopes and fears, of how they feel about their current situation, of what they might do to change things and so on – or to encourage them to take responsibility – what are they going to do, and by when, for instance. The premise is that someone who is aware of what they need to do and how to do it, and who also takes responsibility for acting, will perform. What performance means depends on their situation – it might be hitting a golf ball well, managing a team, completing an essay or playing the flute.

You will see as you read through the book that we continually refer back to the importance of raising awareness and encouraging responsibility. John Whitmore (2002) writes that, 'Building AWARENESS and RESPONSIBILITY is the essence of good coaching.'