

# COACHING I

## 3. COACH – CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

### 3.1. What Underpins the Best Coaching Relationships?

The single factor most vital to successful outcomes in executive coaching is the quality of the relationship between coach and client. In her article in this series last month, Ina Smith stressed that executive coaching is quite different from ‘training coaching’ that focuses on the development of skills or knowledge. What, then, can the executive coach offer? What can a client reasonably expect of his coach, and what skills or knowledge should the coach have in order to secure the best possible outcome for his client? Ina has already identified many of these. However, even the coach with the best “kitbag” of skills, knowledge and business experience will not procure the best outcome for his client unless he is able to establish and build a good relationship. Consultancy coaching has many features in common with counselling and psychotherapy. It is the intentional use of a relationship that aims to develop the *person of the client in relation to his professional life*. The personal and professional areas of a person’s life cannot be kept separate. The client brings his or her personal self to the professional role and it is this area of overlap that is usually the focus of a coaching intervention. Because of the features coaching shares with counselling and psychotherapy, consultancy coaches can learn important lessons from some of the research into successful psychotherapy outcomes. This research has identified the ‘common factors’ that contribute to positive change, and studied their relative importance.

Summarizing key research, Assay and Lambert in 1999 identified the following relative importance of key factors affecting client outcome.

- **Client Factors – 40%:** for example openness, optimism, motivation, a strong friendship and family network or membership in a religious community.
- **Expectancy/Placebo factors – 15%:** the instillation of hope brought about by the engagement
- **Model and Technique factors – 15%:** gains arising from the use of particular theories, models or techniques
- **Relationship Factors – 30%:** the client perceives the practitioner to be offering

empathy, respect and genuineness, and there is a shared understanding of the nature of the work.

If we transpose these findings to the consultancy coaching context, the message is clear: the establishment of a meaningful relationship between practitioner and client is vitally important and far more important than the application or teaching of theories and models. The implication for coaches is that they may need to resist the urge to impart knowledge or theories in favor of developing a good relationship. Frequently the coaching client, eager to advance, will be very keen to learn new models or formula, but this should not be the initial priority for the consultancy coach.

### **3.2. The Coaching Contract**

What, then, will ensure the creation of a good relationship? Studies state that positive outcomes rely upon relationships that involve mutuality of *goals, tasks and bonds*. In the coaching context, coach and client must have:

- a clear shared agreement about the *goal* of their work – the direction and the desired outcome.
- a clear understanding about how the coaching work will happen and what will be the role or *tasks* of each party
- *bonds* of mutual respect and empathy. A relationship in which the client experiences him or herself to be understood and warmly accepted even after he has shown his vulnerabilities.

All of these three elements are held within the *coaching contract*, which provides a container for the work and represents both its scope and also its boundaries. Let us look at the first two factors.

#### **Goals and Tasks**

It is important to recognize that there are significant differences between the contract in counselling/therapy and the contract in coaching. Normally, the goal of coaching is defined in terms of the client's professional life rather than his personal life. As a result, the coaching contract might well include levels of complexity that are not present in the therapeutic engagement.

Sometimes a coach will have the luxury of a private agreement between him or herself and the client, but more frequently the consultancy coach is subject to multiple levels of contact and commitment to other parts of the organization. Usually his fee is paid by the organization, which may have its own agenda for the client, or the coaching may be part of a wider consulting initiative, which may create possible confusion or conflict of interest. Conflicts abound arising from confidentiality issues, financial loyalty (who is paying?) and ‘best interests’ allegiances. These areas need careful and explicit contracts involving clarification of goals and tasks if an atmosphere of trust is to be created.

### **The Empathic Relationship**

The third of Bordin’s elements – the empathic relationship – cannot be established by contracts alone. It is built by the quality of the contact between coach and client, and I believe it to be the heart and foundation stone of all the work that takes place. Indeed, without it the client cannot feel safe enough to take the risks of self-disclosure either to the coach or to himself. Human beings are programmed from birth to seek attachment and relationship. We become who we are by being shaped by our relationships with the world and the people around us. Neuroscientific research has found that in infancy, the empathic loving bond between a responsive parent and the baby is actually essential in developing the neural networks that regulate the young child’s sense of himself, his feelings, and his capacity to think and make decisions. In 2000, Schore presented exciting evidence to suggest that even in adulthood, an empathic accepting ‘right brain – right brain’ connection with someone we trust, can provide the possibility for the development of new neural pathways, of new ways of feeling and being. All this would tend to confirm what many people have always believed. If we are in a relationship in which our thoughts and feelings are heard and accepted in an empathic way by another person, we learn to hear and accept ourselves. This is essential if the client is to use coaching to raise awareness of himself and his working patterns rather than put energy into either denial or paralyzing self-criticism. He needs to be willing to know what he knows and acknowledge what he doesn’t. He needs to be available to hear feedback, examine his working patterns and experiment with new ideas. Empathy means allowing someone to feel met, truly understood and seen. *Within a solid working alliance* empathy can include, when the time is right, the difficult confrontation or demanding challenge. However, it is characterized at heart by a real relationship of acceptance and resonance that invites the client to step into the area of ‘bounded instability’ from which real creativity and change can emerge. In summary, the client needs to feel safe enough and valued enough to be able to use

the other core ‘common factors’ of the successful therapeutic relationship, all of which are highly relevant to the coaching relationship.

### 3.3. Core Elements of the Effective Coaching Relationship

The effective coaching relationship needs to:

- **Provide the opportunity for understanding** - It is important that whatever theories are used to understand a situation, they should make good sense to the client. In fact they are more effective if they are generated by the client. Therefore, the coach needs to be flexible and responsive in the first instance to the client’s assessment of the problem rather than her own. It may also be relevant to share with the client, as mentioned above, that 40% of successful outcome is due to client factors. It is often important to enquire into the client’s support network, where he gets professional and personal support, what else he has in his life that supports him (for example family, hobby, or religion). If this area of the client’s life is impoverished, he should be encouraged to develop it.
- **Build on existing strengths** - Unlike counselling, coaching does not set out to heal psychological or emotional difficulties, nor bring about major characterological change. Naturally, these may happen as a by-product of the coaching engagement, but they are not the goal and do not form part of the contract. What coaching will do is help the client to know himself better; identify his existing strengths and his potential ones. Building on what he can already do will both maximize Lambert’s ‘15% hope’ factor and also help to open the door to the development of new skills.
- **Develop skills and encourage experimentation** - Another of the ‘common factors’ is the opportunity to identify relevant skills - to polish up existing skills or practice new ones while having the chance to get accurate feedback. The relationship should foster an atmosphere of experimentation and discovery rather than ‘finding the right answer’. Then the client can review and reflect upon the results of his experiments and use them to challenge beliefs he may have about himself, others or the organization.
- **Facilitate the sense of achievement** - Clients need a sense of agency or achievement and self-responsibility. It is important that the client be able to articulate what he has done or is doing differently in order to increase the feeling of mastery and self-efficacy. Coaching is less effective if the client perceives himself to be dependent on the coach’s expertise.
- **Prevent ‘relapse’** - Where the identified goal of coaching is a change in the client’s behavior, it is extremely unlikely that the client will not at some time lapse into old ways of behaving. It is important that he not see such lapses as setbacks

but believe that they provide the opportunity to check and see whether there was something useful in the old behavior. To prevent serious lapses, it is always useful to invite the client to predict them, discuss what triggers the old behavior and develop strategies for responding differently.

### **3.4. Building the Client & Coach Relationship**

Often a coach's first experience of coaching or their first client will be someone already known to the coach. Many other coaching relationships will result from recommendations or referrals by clients' or from past clients. Integrity and trust are significant factors in successful coaching relationships, so it is logical that personal referrals and introductions are at the start of many coach-client relationships. It is a fact that most coaches are recommended by existing or past clients. Aside from this, coaches can and do market their services like any other professional provider, using a variety of appropriate methods, including internet websites, directories, brochures and leaflets. Many coaches offer free trial sessions. Publicity from various media also helps to spread the word, and promote the reputations and availability of many coaches. Coaching is very a popular subject and so practicing personal coaches and life coaches can receive a lot of press and media interest. Coaches are seen by the public as having special skills that not everyone has - so it's not unusual to see coaches being interviewed on local radio or asked for their advice in newspaper articles, etc. The following outline of Coaching Relationship components is suggested by the International association of Coaching, Code of Ethics section.

#### **Coaching Relationship**

##### ***3.01 Structuring the Relationship.***

- (a) Coaches will explain their fee structure prior to the first paid coaching session with a client.
- (b) Coaches agree to bring up and discuss important topics as early as possible in the coaching relationship. An example of such a topic is confidentiality.
- (c) Coaches agree to refer clients to other professionals when relevant. Coaches also will refer a client to a counselor, therapist, or psychiatrist as soon as possible if they see or hear a problem that may necessitate mental health treatment.
- (d) Coaches make an effort to answer clients' questions and address their concerns about coaching as promptly as possible. When available, a coach will provide written information to address specific concerns about coaching.

### ***3.02 Safety and Well-Being.***

(a) Each Coach must make an appropriate referral to a Mental Health Professional or Emergency Service Professional at an early point of recognizing situations in which clients may put their own safety or well-being at risk, or the safety or well-being of others at risk, and in severe situations the Coach must contact a Mental Health Crisis Service or Emergency Service on behalf of the client.

(b) Coaches must not attempt to diagnose or assess any mental health issue or specific problem where clients may put themselves or others at risk, but must act solely out of their personal experience, as coaches are not trained or licensed to make such diagnoses or assessments.

(c) Coaches must notify the appropriate authorities when a client discloses that they are harming or endangering another individual or group. The coach must also attempt to notify the person or group who is being harmed or endangered. The Coach does not need to discern if a mental health problem is present or in fact if the current or imminent harm is in fact illegal.

### ***3.03 Providing Coaching Services to Those Served by Mental Health Professionals.***

Each coach must decide whether or not to enter into a coaching relationship with a client who is currently undergoing psychotherapy or other mental health treatment. Most important in making this decision is the client's welfare.

### ***3.04 Sexual Intimacies With Clients.***

Coaches agree not to be sexually involved with current clients.

### ***3.05 Interruption of Services.***

Coaches will make reasonable efforts to make other arrangements for any interruption of coaching services. For longer-term interruptions (longer than 1 month), the coach is encouraged to refer clients to other coaches until they are able to resume coaching.

### ***3.06 Terminating the Coaching Relationship.***

Coaches agree to terminate a coaching relationship when it becomes clear that the client is no longer gaining benefit (or is being harmed) from the coaching relationship. In terminating the relationship, coaches will suggest alternatives or provide referrals to coaches or other professional services when appropriate.