

THE COACH AS CONSULTANT

By Dennis Heath



Conventional wisdom says that a Coach never offers advice to a client. “That’s the job of a Consultant”, I find myself saying to potential corporate clients.

When training as a Coach the message is constantly reinforced that we must not offer clients our opinions or advice but purely concentrate on our intuitive listening and questioning skills to draw the solution from our coachee. Neither must we lead our client in a direction that reflects our own thoughts or model on the issue being discussed. Depending on which coaching school you gain your certification from there are many models for coaching conversations. However, the basic framework is the same. The principles are to discover the coachee’s goal and underlying values, assess the current situation, discover options that will lead towards the goal and finally establish actions the client is willing to commit to in order to achieve the goal.

In life, career or relationship coaching it is unlikely that the Coach’s own life or marital experience will be aligned with that of the client. Telling the coachee how successful or unsuccessful your own marriage is, or was, is of little benefit or interest to the client. Likewise a career Coach explaining how successful their previous career as a lawyer was, to a graphic artist looking to advance in their own field, probably adds little or no value to the client. After all the coaching process is all about the client, not the Coach, isn’t it?

But what happens when a corporate client hires an Executive Coach to upgrade the leadership behaviour of a member of their executive team? Some corporate clients when selecting a Coach may well look for coaching experience and possibly ICF accreditation, as well as trying to find one who they believe

will fit the personality type of the coachee. However, many HR and Training Managers will place emphasis on the Coach’s business and corporate experience as a deciding factor. Why? Because what they are buying is the Coach’s ability to pass on the benefit of their business experience and wisdom to the coachee. After all, what is the point of hiring a mature, ex-corporate manager with thirty years of experience, at the requisite fee, if a younger, aspiring coachee cannot tap into that experience?

So what does a Coach do when the coachee asks, “Well what did you do when faced with this situation?” or, “I’ve tried everything to try and fix this problem with my team, but to no avail. What would you do?” Does the Coach say, “I’m sorry I can’t discuss that with you, my coaching principles forbid it.” Or worse, “This is not about me, it’s about you and what you will do.” These sorts of answers can at best frustrate the coachee, appear evasive, or at worst destroy his confidence in the Coach’s willingness to share business experience and wisdom.

However, there are ways around this dilemma, without deviating from the sacred principles of coaching. One way is to share an experience similar to that which the coachee has raised and talk about the outcome. The coaching question then follows, “How does that compare with your current situation?” The follow-up questions are, “How would that fit with the characters in your scenario?” “How could you handle it differently to be effective with your team members?” Now, a train of thought has been established where the Coach can revert to standard practice, teasing the solution out of the coachee having used the Coach’s own experience as the seed for deeper thought.

There are also occasions where the coachee may expect direct help from the Coach on the basis of his functional

expertise. For instance if the Coach has an extensive background in sales management the client’s question might arise, “I need to put in place a sales forecasting system and I’m really not sure how to go about it. Can you help me?” Once again, in this situation the Coach is being directly asked for advice. Should he or she give it, or simply continue questioning?

There is nothing wrong in starting with, “In my experience forecasting systems usually contain the following basic information.” The Coach then goes on to draw a sketch of what a forecasting spreadsheet might look like, along with the information it typically contains. The likely follow-on questions then become, “What else do you think your management might want to gather from the forecast reports?” “Who needs this information?” “What will they do with it?” “What does that tell you about the required content of the system?” The Coach has shared his experience but has let the coachee craft the final answer, tailoring the solution to the needs of his or her organisation.

In management, a manager uses established principles and processes to run the business but also needs to use creativity and intuition to guide his or her actions. Likewise, the Executive Coach needs to apply coaching best practice but at the same time use their initiative. They must make a judgement as to when it is appropriate to step outside the coaching framework. Ultimately, what matters is a successful outcome for the client. If that means the occasional diversion from standard coaching conventions, then the end surely justifies the means.

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