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THE FINANCIAL TIMES GUIDE TO BUSINESS COACHING

points, but it’s inside their head. I’m not offering a magic wand to change the world outside; but what *is* on offer is sharpening up the only tool they really have to make that change, i.e. themselves.

The goal is utterly key. It does all the heavy lifting of the session – so if you don’t have a good clear goal, you don’t have a coaching session. I once watched a colleague do a coaching demonstration, in a large hall in a hard-edged industrial town, in front of a cynical audience of 200 people. He had only 30 minutes for the demonstration. The minutes ticked by. Ten minutes, fifteen, and he’s still working patiently to get the goal. Twenty minutes, and his colleagues in the audience are beginning to sweat. Finally at minute 25, he got it – and in the remaining 5 minutes, the rest of the session fell into place like dominoes: reality, options, will, click click click, and a great result. With a great goal, the rest of the session falls into place.

Why is it so powerful? It’s like light. When the light waves are all over the place, as normal, it’s light. When with great effort, all the waves are brought into focus, it’s a laser and can cut through steel. That’s what we are doing with ‘G’: it’s as if we’re picking up the entire content of the client’s brain, and turning it to focus laser-like with the same searing power on a single topic.

Because this demanding precision of goalsetting is unfamiliar, there is a big difference between clients who are ‘trained’ and ‘untrained’. A client who has never experienced coaching before will have no idea what they’re meant to do, and the coach needs to guide them through. By contrast, coaching someone who has been coached many times before, and/or where this is their third or fourth session with you, is much easier. They know the rules: they tell you briefly what the key things are they want to work on (‘topic’) and know they then need to focus this or part of it into a crisp ‘goal’. Often they come with a pre-prepared G. If so you have ‘transferred the technology’ and they have a tool for life.

But sometimes even the most ‘trained’ client comes in absolutely steaming: something big or bad, or good, has happened, and they have to get it off their chest. You need to let them vent. Sometimes the chance to vent, with the coach not interrupting, is itself the value of that session, and the whole session can be eaten up by it. Practice helps here: experienced coaches have the confidence to judge when it’s time to move the client onto the task for today, and very experienced coaches can do it deftly and surprisingly fast, even where the subject of the venting would seem overwhelming.

Note there is a difference between the *overall goal(s)* your client brings to coaching, and the *individual goal for each session* (different writers use different terms for each). So for example, Client A comes for six months' coaching, with the brief to prepare them for, say, their first board-level position. That's the overall (sometimes 'programme') goal. Within that, individual goals are set for each session. Over time, the series of achievements session by session (including the work that is done by the client between sessions) adds up to delivering the overall goal. In the GROW Model, we are referring to the individual goal for *this session*. (And in the first one or maybe even two sessions of a six-month programme, the G goal for that individual session might be to define, refine and crisp up to SMART standards, the overall programme goals for the six months. If you see what I mean.)

How do you know if you have a sharp enough goal? If you haven't, the session feels out of control – to both people. The discussion goes round and round. It is often low-energy, uninspiring, flat. The reward of hanging out for a really defined goal, is a turbo-charged remainder of the session: it's shorter, because everything is tightly focused, energising, even fun – maybe exhausting, but still exhilarating.

Getting the goal: some tips

- Have courage: bring the client back to goalsetting until it's sharp.
- Require specifics: 'be clearer about what I need to do' is not a G (unless measured – see below); 'three actionable bullet points written in my notebook/phone' is.
- Honour individual difference (see Chapter 7) – some people need tangible take-aways – a plan, bullet points; for others, it's feeling different (e.g. less anxious).
- If the latter, drive for measurable results using 1–10, i.e. for subjective goals (e.g. higher clarity; self-confidence; lower anxiety), benchmark using the scale of 1–10: 'On a scale of 1–10, where are you now and where do you want to be by the end of the session?' Then set it aside and get to work, only revisiting it at the end.
- Don't assume you're both clear on the G, but test it out, e.g. 'So, given what you've said, could you state for me what your goal is for this session?'
- Write the goal down once established, so you can track if it morphs during the session (and check and, if necessary, recontract for a new G).

Reality

Now you have the goal, the task in reality is to get the facts out on the table. Again, this piece on its own can make a dramatic difference: in this busy world, we very rarely stop and give the important parts of our lives a good hard think.

If we try it on our own, we might not spot that our thinking has got stuck in a rut – or we do sense that, but can't find a way out. But working with a coach, who methodically encourages us to consider *all* the key domains – finance, people, technology, operations, etc. – there are often 'Ah-hah!' moments: 'I hadn't thought of this before, but actually . . .' The coach is on the lookout for habitual patterns of thinking, that might unknowingly blinker the client. 'People people', for example, are often on full alert to the ramifications for others, but might not have considered properly the operational or financial constraints. Technocrats, on the other hand, might have a brilliant plan that fails to take sufficient account of human risks or needs.

There are three traps to avoid here. First, this is not, as some people think, about being 'realistic'. The coach may privately think an aspect of the goal is unattainable, but who are they to know – they may be blithely unaware that the client's cousin is a Russian oligarch. Unless there is a clear breach of the law, moral or ethical codes, or the coaching contract, this is not the place for the coach to impose their own limiting beliefs on the client; evaluation of options comes in the next stage (and even then, it's done largely by the client – if you want to be paid for your opinions, become a mentor!).

(If you do have serious concerns about an option – or indeed a goal – being feasible, there are two possible things you can do. Ideally, jot it down in your notes in a corner where you put 'things to come back to later'. When you check that towards the end of the session, you'll often find the concern has already been dealt with. Or, if you are really worried, say it, but own it as yours: 'Myrtle, this may just be me, but what concerns me about X is Y.' They can then either explain more background, which satisfies your concern, or agree you have a point. The trick is to state your view neutrally, so it remains a proper challenge to their thinking, rather than telling them what to think.)

Second, some beginners think this fact-gathering is for the coach. But in purist GROW coaching, the coach needs to know very little of the background and present situation – all this digging is for the sake of the *client*. As the main facts are pulled out, the client often gains insight. That insight, the higher quality perspective, is the objective, not feeding an analysis process of the coach. (The latter is consulting.)

And third, note that in *reality*, good questions begin 'what', 'who', 'when', etc. – but *not* 'why'. If you ask 'why', people will leap happily into self-justification, digging themselves deeper into the hole they're currently in. (This is one of the differences between coaching and therapy; the subject of some schools of therapy is often or even exclusively 'why'.) 'What' type questions are more likely to keep the client objective, and able to look dispassionately at the facts. (OK, I accept there are occasions when 'why' can be valid, if asked neutrally simply as part of the fact-gathering. But it is a healthy discipline for novices to avoid it – and thereby to notice how habituated we are to ask it!)

Options

Having clarified their goal and considered the facts, only now does the client consider their options. The coach has two tasks here: first, to broaden the options, and second, to narrow them down.

Broadening options can add great value to the client's thinking. Often people will say (metaphorically, or even literally with their head in their hands), 'There's nothing I can do.' But as Viktor Frankl has so soberingly pointed out,[3] in even the grimmest situations, there is always *something* one can do; in the concentration camps, he noted some people, when able to control nothing else, could still choose their inner reaction to events. Or they will say, 'there's only one option' that the coach must challenge – what other alternatives are there? Or clients often say, 'I've really only got two choices' – you get the picture.

The 'O' is where coaches who love technique can have a field day. There are dozens of great questions to help clients break out of their mental constraints. The 'miracle question' often works. I was coaching a client once and both of us were stuck, going round and round on a seemingly intractable problem. Then I asked, for no particular reason, 'If you had a completely free hand, what would you do?' and the client almost spat straight back, 'I'd *fire* the bitch!' She clapped her hand to her mouth, giggled shamefacedly, and said she had no idea until that moment she felt so strongly about this particular individual. The topic had suddenly became a lot clearer! There are dozens of variants on the 'miracle question': 'if you had unlimited time/unlimited budget what would you do; if you could wave a magic wand; if you woke up in the morning and the problem was solved . . .' – each has unblocked many a log-jammed client.

Here's another favourite of mine. The client says, and they mean it: 'I don't know.' You flip back quickly with, 'If you did know, what it would be?' – but you have to keep a perfectly straight face. Astonishingly, 50 per cent of the time they will come straight back with the answer – because the question has got in under their radar, and triggered a hitherto buried thought. The other 50 per cent of the time, when they spot the question is absurd, they gaze at you in astonishment, or laugh, and it doesn't work. But a 50 per cent strike rate is not to be sneezed at – try it! But keep a straight face.

Once the client has been freed up to consider a full range of options, the task is then to narrow down the field, by evaluating the pros and cons of each. Again, the criteria against which the various options are judged are for the client to determine – these may also need to be coached out of them. For some clients/topics/contexts, safety first is absolutely paramount. For others, the best option is the most innovative. Each to their own.

Will

As noted above, this has two parts: what *will* you do, and what is your *will* or motivation on this.

First, the action plan part of 'W'. This again is where coaching is different from a normal conversation. The coach wants to know, having talked the matter through properly, what action the client is now going to take, and by when, etc. This may not need to be as tough as you were on 'G' because if everything has gone well the client is by now energised, clear and determined. But you do need to push harder than you would in normal conversation for the client to articulate the action to which they are now committed.

Then, we need to check the level of that commitment – the will, or motivation part of 'W'. Sir John Whitmore's scale of motivation[4] really does work here. You ask the client on a scale of 1–10 how likely they are to do it. If the number is 8/10 or above, they probably will; if it's 7 or below, they probably won't. I have asked this question hundreds, perhaps into the thousands, of times, and Sir John was absolutely right. If it's 7 or below, I tell them his wise words, they look sheepish, and it emerges that back in G, or R, we missed something, and we need to cycle through again. (And high-achiever coaches or clients, even if it's 8 or above, usually then ask, 'So what do we need to do to make it a 10?'!)

3. Listening and hearing

In the 1960s, Carl Rogers pointed out that just being deeply listened to is enough for many people to resolve their problems – *without* any other intervention.

This is so utterly crucial . . .

. . . let me pause for you to take it in. Just being deeply listened to is enough to bring about change.

And 50 years on it's even more true, and more rare. Everyone and everything – our phones, emails, texts, Twitter, blogs, podcasts, YouTube, TED etc., etc. – is on transmit mode, and each of us inhabits our own personal cacophony.

By contrast, when I was first deeply listened to as an adult, by an expert trained to listen acutely, the experience felt such a privilege, and was so productive, I was moved almost to tears. I suspect neuroscientists will soon find cells in the brain that fire under conditions of real listening, explaining why it is so liberating and creative. For whatever reason, it works: problems that were stuck work loose, unexpected new ideas pop up, you think more deeply and see further.

So it is an absolutely central coaching tool.

The coach's ability to listen and, beyond that, to *hear* – that is, to listen such that they really understand the client, can imagine being in their world – creates trust and authenticity. Listening is key to non-directive coaching, which we consider below: real listening switches the focus so the session is guided by what the client says and what the coach hears, rather than by any prior agenda of the coach.

How do you listen better?

Step one: stop talking!

Step two: just listen. There is the term 'active listening', but the phrase annoys me: it's a contradiction in terms. True listening isn't a 'doing' state, it's a 'being' state where everything else is shut down, and you are just utterly absorbed in what the other person is saying. One hears about things like paraphrasing, or straight parroting back what the person has just said to show you have heard.* If you're *really* listening, the clients don't need that signalled, they already know.

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* Nothing wrong with these techniques per se: used discriminatingly, they can be very effective, for example to check we have heard correctly. But done mindlessly and repetitively, 'because that's what I should do in active listening', they drive clients crazy.