

UNPACKING THE EXPERIENCE

A PRIMER ON COACHING

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Effective coaching skills can improve every relationship, whether at work, at home, among friends, or in the community. Coaching is about being able to truly hear another's experience – in a way that the other knows he or she is being heard and understood. It's about being able to help others expand their self-awareness and their self-understanding, and about helping others see their own lives from different, and optimally more helpful, perspectives. Good coaching expands one's sense of possibilities, sometimes triggering those "ah ha" experiences that forever alter *Weltschauen* (world views) and often make vivid those choices that were heretofore unseen and unimagined. It can change one's sense of personal efficacy – an efficacy in dealing with the world that was always there, but never known or owned by the coaching client. Good coaching helps clarify and illuminate the world our clients live in – and by doing so expands that world to include new opportunities, new directions, new strategies, and new tactics.

Effective coaching enriches life for both clients and coaches, as it involves a dynamic learning experience for both parties. It is perhaps one of the purest examples of a relationship that can be – indeed, must be – a win-win arrangement. And the skills for effective coaching, while not always intuitive, are within the grasp of any motivated professional who can muster a genuine curiosity in the lives of others.

COACHING AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

No single professional service more completely captures the elements of emotional intelligence (EQ) than does effective coaching. Coaching is both a means for enhancing EQ awareness and behaviors, as well as an expression of emotional intelligence in practice. Hence, one of the key sets of skills to develop and hone as part of a program for enhancing emotional intelligence is the set of skills that comprise the effective coach.

In this discussion we will use the independent professional coaching relationship as the frame of reference for addressing effective coaching skills. This relationship removes the political and job-performance concerns that may attend a coaching relationship between two employees working for the same organization – especially when one of the parties, usually the coach, is in a supervisory and evaluative role relative to the other. So, for this discussion, see yourself as an independent professional

coach offering executive or life-coaching services to a client, and, when seeing the discussion from the client's perspective, see yourself as a paying client who is purchasing professional coaching consultation from an independent executive coach. This is the frame for our coaching simulation in our program to enhance emotional intelligence awareness and behaviors.

THE MUTUAL COMMITMENT TO EACH OTHER

For professional coaching relationships to deliver maximum value to clients, both parties in the relationships must be committed to each other's success – success for the clients in terms of the purpose for pursuing coaching, and success for the coaches in terms of delivering positive results in their coaching roles. This means that both parties in coaching relationships must be committed to seeing and supporting each other – to getting behind and helping each other move ahead in their respective worlds. Both parties in coaching put themselves out there – are as transparent as they can be for each other – thereby helping each other do their jobs most effectively.

Truly, in the game of coaching, either both parties win, or both parties lose. Saying that I am committed to the success of my client, in my role as a coach, is the same as saying I am committed to my own success as a coach. And the reverse is equally true. If my personal coach isn't successful in her relationship with me, her client, then I am also unsuccessful in achieving whatever result I had hoped for in pursuing the services of a professional coach. In coaching, it's either win-win, or lose-lose.

Whether the focus of coaching is on enhancing emotional intelligence, resolving conflict, giving feedback, or some other issue related to one's immediate working world or evolving career, the basic requisites for an effective coaching relationship include the following:

1. A trusting and open relationship
2. Empathic listening skills
3. Genuine curiosity
4. Genuine interest and caring
5. Ability to understand and convey that understanding
6. Commitment to staying focused and moving forward
7. Ability to hear the unsaid
8. Ability to probe and dig deep

Even without expert training in the refinements of coaching, peer coaching can be a powerful and productive exercise, for both coaches and clients. And, coincidentally, the same skills that comprise an excellent coaching repertoire also comprise an effective repertoire for working through conflicts and for other manifestations of emotional intelligence.

THE ART OF LISTENING EMPATHICALLY

It almost sounds like a cliché, but the starting place for honing strong coaching skills begins with effective listening. And, some would add, it proceeds with effective listening and ends with effective listening. That's simple enough – now if only effective listening skills were as easy to master as it seems they should be!

To be an empathic listener, one must strive to see the world through the eyes of others – to get into their skin, walk in their shoes, feel their insecurities, experience their excitement, suffer their anxieties, appreciate their perceived limitations, truly understand their circumstances and experiences. None of this is possible, of course. Yet the quality of coaching will be in direct proportion to the extent to which the coach achieves this unreachable empathy. And good coaches do it amazingly well.

So – what's all the fuss about listening empathically? Wouldn't it suffice to instruct our coaching clients to simply listen to their own self-talk more attentively, to pay more attention to their own inner voices and from what they hear derive logical and appropriate inferences? After all, most of us engage in incessant self-talk. Why bore our coaches with audible versions of those scripts that we already know so well? Why do we, as coaches, have to be able to hear our clients so effectively – so empathically – that we can actually experience and feel what is behind the client's words?

WHEN TEACHING IS THE BEST PATH TO LEARNING

To answer these questions, I want to relate a personal story. Many years ago I was hired by Seattle University to teach accounting and business statistics. I was a CPA and had taught accounting for four years, so the first part was not hard. But – teaching statistics? The problem with that assignment was that I had never understood statistics when I took it as a student -- I basically muddled through the course relying upon my student colleagues to do even worse than me on the tests. But now I had to learn it because I had to teach it (or turn down the job and remain in Ohio for the rest of my life). I remember my whole perspective changed. I now not only had to learn statistics, but I had to figure out how to convey those concepts to business students – something that I had never seen done effectively.

From the very first day of preparation, I was thinking about how I would teach these concepts that I had never understood myself. I wasn't just going to learn about descriptive and inferential statistics; I was going to teach it. I wasn't just going to learn about probability theory; I was going to teach it. I wasn't just going to learn about regression analysis; I was going to teach it.

I remembered someone once saying that you really learn something when you have to teach it. Nothing could have been truer. I became a quite good statistics professor, perhaps because I had been such a bad statistics student and appreciated so well how not to teach the subject. And the more I taught, and the more I heard myself explaining statistical concepts, the more I truly understood what it was all about. And the same thing happened with accounting. The more I heard myself talking about

accounting, the more I came to appreciate and understand the enduring elegance of our accounting model as an historical application of Arabic algebra – something I never understood as either a student or as a practitioner of accounting.

What does this all have to do with coaching? In a very real sense, an empathic coach makes his clients teach about who they are, what problems they are facing, how they see and feel about those problems, and, ultimately, what options are out there to make constructive changes. The coach “unpacks” client experiences, asking questions, much as a classroom student would, to coax the client to elucidate those experiences until they can be fully understood and described by the coach – and by doing so, they become better understood by the client.

A COACHING SIMULATION

In the following eavesdrop of a coaching session, try to see how the coach turns his client into a teacher, and how he questions from the perspective of a student who doesn't quite understand what the teacher is trying to say:

Client: I'm not sure that I'm taken seriously at work.
Coach: Tell me more.
Client: Well, I don't know. I just don't always feel that my boss respects me.
Coach: Like when?
Client: Yesterday I turned in a report, along with my recommendations, and she sort of chuckled and said something like “you are always the customer's most loyal lobbyist” – or something like that. I just felt that my main recommendation had been devalued because it was coming from me -- a “lobbyist” for the customer -- instead of from a respected professional.
Coach: Do you think that your boss was discrediting your recommendation because you always side with customers?
Client: Well – it sounded like it. I think so. I felt kind of insulted and belittled.
Coach: Tell me – do you think your boss values the contributions you make at work?
Client: Yes. I guess so. I mean – she keeps me around. And I get good performance reviews.
Coach: Do you respect your boss?
Client: Yes. I don't think I've ever worked for a more competent person.
Coach: Do you respect her opinions?
Client: Yes.
Coach: Do you like her as a boss?
Client: Yes. Like I said, she's the most competent boss I've ever had.
Coach: So – you are reporting to a boss whom you like and respect, who doesn't respect you.
Client: (Pausing) I guess so. Like I said, I feel like I'm labeled by her and that my opinions and recommendations are discounted as a result. Sort of like what I say is a joke – since it's coming from me and that makes it somehow less than objective and constructive.

Coach: When she “discounted” your report yesterday, how did you feel?
 Client: Pissed. I felt insulted. And offended. Really pissed.
 Coach: (Pausing) I’m trying to put myself in your shoes to see how that would affect me. Let’s see, my boss, whom I respect and like, makes a joke of my reports and recommendations – because I’m just “being myself” instead of the respected professional that I want to be. Is that accurate?
 Client: That’s about it.
 Coach: That would hurt me. Does it hurt you?
 Client: (Pausing) I guess so.
 Coach: You guess so what?
 Client: I guess it does.
 Coach: You guess? Tell me what you feel when your boss does that.
 Client: I guess I feel hurt when that happens.
 Coach: Guess? Or do you know that you feel hurt?
 Client: It hurts.
 Coach: (Pausing to let that soak in) Tell me how you feel when you think your boss is insulting you.
 Client: I feel hurt when she insults me. And
 Coach: And?
 Client: I don’t even know if she means to insult me. But ... it hurts anyway.
 Coach: So – I’m guessing you’ve engaged in a lot of self-talk over this issue. Would you share some of that with me?
 Client: I’m not taken seriously. I’m seen as not being objective. I’m not seen as professional. I’m not understood. I’m a joke.

To be continued ...

WHAT’S GOING ON HERE?

So let’s dissect this coaching engagement. The client begins with a pretty vague statement – “I’m not sure that I’m taken seriously at work.” Often these opening expressions are merely clues to what’s really on the client’s mind. So the first step the coach takes is to get behind this clue and elicit more disclosure from the client. What is really bothering the client?

We see in the next response by the client that his relationship with his boss is problematic – “I just don’t always feel that my boss respects me.” That’s funneling down a lot from just not being “taken seriously at work.” There seems to be an issue with the boss. But what is it and how does that relate to not being taken seriously?

At this point the coach is just keeping the ball up in the air, inviting more and more explanation from the client. Invitations like “Tell me more” and “Like when?” openly invite the client to just talk more about what’s really on his mind. We learn a lot more from the client’s next utterance -- “I just felt that my main recommendation had been devalued because it was coming from me – a ‘lobbyist’ for the customer -- instead of from a respected professional.”

So now we're getting a clearer picture of what's really bothering the client. He feels both labeled and devalued because of that label – and, of course, that's only the beginning. At this point the coach is becoming more and more curious about the relationship his client has with the boss. Is it antagonistic? Is it friendly? Is it respectful? Does the client like his boss? Despise his boss? What's going on? So what follows are a series of questions that help illuminate that relationship:

“Tell me -- do you think your boss values the contributions you make at work?”
“Do you respect your boss?”
“Do you respect her opinions?”
“Do you like her as a boss?”

From responses to these questions the coach learns that his client both likes and respects his boss – indeed, he holds her in very high regard (“she's the most competent boss I've ever had”). That helps to put in perspective the client's reaction to his boss's perceived labeling and devaluing of his recommendations. At this point the coach makes a conscious shift in questioning to see how the client would describe his reaction to the boss's words:

“So – you are reporting to a boss whom you like and respect -- who doesn't respect you.”
“When she 'discounted' your report yesterday, how did you feel?”

When his client responds with “Pissed. I felt insulted. And offended. Really pissed” the coach tries to get behind that answer and see if it really fits. It may seem incongruent with what the client has said about respecting and liking his boss. Is it possible that the coach is hearing something that the client cannot say – and by further “unpacking” can help his client say it – and, perhaps for the first time, understand it. Here's where the coach employs “paraphrasing plus” to open up the box a little further:

“I'm trying to put myself in your shoes to see how that would affect me. Let's see, my boss, whom I respect and like, makes a joke of my reports and recommendations – because I'm just 'being myself' instead of the respected professional that I want to be. Is that accurate?”

When the client confirms this characterization of what's happening, the coach adds the “plus” part to the paraphrase: “That would hurt me. Does it hurt you?” In response to this pointed question, the client begins slowly to say what he cannot say – that he is hurt when a boss he admires and likes insults and belittles him. But it takes a few more follow-ups for the client to really utter this truth. And the coach, sensing his client really needs to hear himself say it, moves slowly and meticulously through this phase of questioning. It's easier for the client to say “I guess so” and other vague expressions of agreement, than it is to say out loud that he is being hurt by something his boss is doing – and presumably doing regularly. Here's where the “you really learn something when you have to teach it” aphorism becomes an important knowing in the coach's tool kit. The coach has put his client into a challenging teaching role, insisting

that he explain very clearly what he feels, so that both he and his coach will more fully understand.

If you review that dialogue, you will note that the client is having great difficulty admitting to hurt – there is a lot of hedging (“I guess so,” “I guess it does,” “I guess I feel hurt,” etc.) and the coach is keeping that ball in the air until the client stops “guessing” and starts telling the truth. And *hears* himself tell the truth. The coach keeps the client “teaching” his experience to the coach until he teaches it clearly, so that both the coach, and the client, can hear it and understand it.

GETTING AND STAYING CURIOUS

The first job of a good coach is to get curious about his or her client. This needs to be an imperative. No matter how boring and dull the client appears to be – and may indeed prove to be – the task of the coach is to drill into the client’s experiences, thoughts, feelings, and wants as though they were the most interesting revelations in the world. That burning curiosity to know more, and to know it all, will act as a brake against rushing to judgment and rushing to solution, metaphorically called “spiking the ball” in this discussion. Being curious will “keep the ball in the air” and thereby elicit the critical information that too often gets short-circuited when a coach is impatient to offer solutions. A good coach sees herself as a curious student mesmerized by the material being delivered by her professor (her client) – and is absolutely determined to get every one of her important questions answered.

Note in the unfinished coaching session above that the goal up to our “to be continued” juncture was to unpack and understand what the real issue or issues were. We stopped well short of remedies. Had we tried to move toward even a discussion of possible action steps, without fully understanding our client’s circumstances and perceptions, we would have not only “spiked the ball,” but spiked it randomly and recklessly. It took some serious digging to discover that our client a) really likes his boss, b) thinks that his boss probably likes and respects him in return, and c) suspects that his boss is oblivious to how her dismissive words are landing on him. All of these discoveries augur for a very different path toward talking about action steps. Indeed, the coach had to follow his own well-developed nose to sniff out how the boss’s words were affecting his client. Stopping with “Pissed. I felt insulted. And offended. Really pissed” as a characterization of how the client was really responding would have taken the discussion in an entirely different direction. As it turned out, “pissed, insulted, offended, and *really pissed*” were merely words that the client felt comfortable expressing – but they were a complete distortion of his real feelings. In truth, our client was lying to himself as a defense against admitting to the truth. In reality, the client continued to like and respect his boss, even when the boss’s words seemed dismissive, and was hurt by those dismissive words. Being able to hear what a client cannot say is one of the most valuable gifts that a coach can possess. And hearing “hurt,” as was the case in this simulation, is often the most difficult feeling to hear through the haze of a client’s self-limiting range of expression.

The truth about the client’s generally positive relationship with his boss, and the impact his boss’s dismissive words were having on him, were revealed because of the

coach's burning curiosity. It would have been easy to quit with "I felt insulted" and move forward in an entirely different – and entirely wrong – direction. Curiosity kept the ball in the air so that both the coach and the client could finally hear the truth.

HELPFUL METAPHORS

In the previous discussion we used several metaphors that are helpful in thinking about the coaching process. From the vernacular of volleyball, the expressions "spiking the ball" and "keeping the ball in the air" are helpful to a coach who is "unpacking" a client's experience. "Spiking the ball" refers in this coaching metaphor to moving too quickly to solution – to hastily offering the client avenues of action before fully understanding the client's thoughts, feelings, and wants – before really understanding what's going on. "Keeping the ball in the air" suggests quite the opposite posture, where the coach remains curious and resists talking about solutions, and keeps the conversation in an information gathering mode until all the facts and nuances are aired and understood. By "keeping the ball in the air" the client is expected to teach the coach about all facets of the problem. It turns the client into a teacher – and, with an effective coaching dialogue, a teacher to a coach who is either a slow learner, or who wants to understand even the minutia of the situation. When done well, the client learns a lot about himself, and his predicament, by having to teach it carefully and thoroughly to his "student" coach.

In the last paragraph I also used the expression "unpacking the client's experience" as a metaphor for taking the wrapped-up package the client first presents – packages like "I'm not sure that I'm taken seriously at work" – and really taking off the wrapping and getting inside the package to see what's hiding in there. In the coaching dialogue above, we eventually found some hurt hidden way down in the package – but it wasn't easy to find and we had to carefully unwrap and inspect all the contents of the package to find it. The package as first presented was a ruse, and we could scarcely have guessed what its contents would eventually reveal.

So – as a brief recap of several suggestions to keep in mind while coaching – here are a few apt metaphors:

1. Your goal at the outset of a coaching session is to *unpack the experience*.
2. To accomplish this, avoid *spiking the ball*.
3. Instead, work at *keeping the ball in the air*.

CONTINUING THE COACHING SESSION

Remember where we left off? The coach had just heard his client describe the real feeling emanating from his boss's dismissive words as "hurt," and now has asked the client to share his self-talk around this situation.

Coach: So – I'm guessing you've engaged in a lot of self-talk over this issue. Would you share some of that with me?

Client: I'm not taken seriously. I'm seen as not being objective. I'm not seen as professional. I'm not understood. I'm a joke.

Coach: And – would you say that this self-talk accurately expresses reality in terms of your relationship with your boss?

Client: I don't know -- maybe not completely.

Coach: Do you think your boss takes you seriously?

Client: I don't know.

Coach: What do you think? Be honest with me.

Client: I think she does.

Coach: Does what?

Client: Does take me seriously.

Coach: I think it's important for you to hear yourself say this --- out loud. Because you've already told me that your self-talk says the opposite. Tell me, do you think your boss sees you as unprofessional?

Client: No. I don't think so.

Coach: Not understood?

Client: No.

Coach: Not objective?

Client: No.

Coach: But your boss thinks you're a joke, right?

Client: (Laughingly, we hope!) No. OK. I see where this is going.

Coach: I hope you hear what you're teaching me right now about the relationship you have with your boss, because it seems to contradict everything that you say you are telling yourself about that situation. So let me just paraphrase what I think I just heard. You have a good working relationship with your boss. She respects and values your work. She gives you positive performance evaluations and consistently expresses pleasure with the work you are doing. Is this all accurate?

Client: I would say so.

Coach: And, from the other perspective, you respect and value your boss. Is that accurate?

Client: Definitely.

Coach: But one of the first things out of your mouth today was "I just don't always feel that my boss respects me." Do you remember saying that?

Client: Yes – something like that.

Coach: So – not everything is perfect. Let me see if I can paraphrase what I think I heard from you around this issue – in my words. Despite believing that your boss values and respects your work – and does not think that you are a "joke" – she fairly regularly says things in a way that result in your feeling belittled. Is that reasonably accurate?

Client: Yes.

Coach: OK. Now I want you to think about this question before responding. Unbeknownst to you, your boss has been watching and listening to this coaching session from behind that fake mirror over there. How do you think she is feeling? Think about this before answering.

Client: Surprised.

Coach: Surprised how? Happy surprised? Upset surprised? Stupefied surprised?

Client: I would imagine she would be a bit upset surprised – upset that her words were have this effect on me.

Coach: Upset at you? Upset at the world? Upset that people are so damn sensitive?

Client: I think she would be upset that she was having a negative impact on me. I don't think she would want to do that.

Coach: Really? You mean you don't think she's deliberately trying to hurt and demoralize you?

Client: (Again – we can hope the client is at least smiling) Definitely not.

Coach: Do you think that maybe you have something important to share with your boss? Some feedback that might be valuable to her?

Client: I think maybe you're right.

Coach: Me? Right? I didn't even say anything. Do you think you have some important feedback to share with your boss? And, if so, why?

Client: I do, and mainly because she is likely having an impact with her words that she doesn't want to have. And perhaps not just with me. She may not realize how what she says lands on people.

Coach: Is there a good way that you can offer this feedback to your boss?

Client: I'm sure there is. It's not something that is in the middle of my comfort zone – giving negative feedback to anyone, let alone my boss. What would you suggest?

Coach: I would suggest asking for a few minutes of her time. Then I would tell her exactly how you feel when she labels you as the customer's most loyal lobbyist, because you don't know if she is joking or being serious. Tell her that you've sometimes been hurt by that. Just be honest and stick to the facts. And remember that your feelings are facts. You don't know anything about her motives or her thoughts when she is doing this, so avoid that altogether. Keep it to “when you say X, I feel Y.” Tell her that you don't really know if you are being reprimanded and criticized, or just being joked with. And that has bothered you. Then let her talk. I think she will have a lot to say to you.

WHAT TRANSPIRED?

In the above continuation of our coaching simulation, the coach could have prematurely sized up the situation, skipped over all the “unpacking” dialogue, and gone straight to a recommendation – thereby “spiking the ball.” Let's see what that might have looked like:

Coach: Based on what you've told me, I believe you should set up a meeting with your boss – preferably tomorrow – and tell her how her dismissive words are affecting you. That will let her know how she's coming across and will clear the air.

Sound reasonable? Maybe – knowing what you know now from having read the “unpacking” dialogue. But without that dialogue, you know virtually nothing about the client’s boss. What if the client’s response to the “spike” goes something like this?

Client: Are you kidding? My boss would either die laughing if I’d tell her that, or she’d tell me to go easy on my meds! Don’t get me wrong, I think the world of my boss, but she is anything but touchy-feely. She can be bitingly sarcastic, often effectively so. And she is tough – not one to always worry about hurting people’s feelings!

Ouch! The problem is, without the revealing content of the unpacking dialogue, the coach knows little or nothing about the client’s boss, other than that he likes her, respects her, and regards her as the best boss he’s ever had. But that’s really information about the client. The coach has a pretty good sense for what the client thinks about his boss – but virtually nothing about her personality, her style of leadership, her orientation toward conflict, her motivation to behave the way she does, and so on. A perceptive coach will, however, assume that his client knows his boss pretty well, and, accordingly the client will be able to decide on what actions are most effective to take. The coach’s role is to help his client in this process – to help him funnel down to an action plan that seems to fit, and to help him commit to those actions.

That’s what we see happening in the continuation of the coaching dialogue above. The coach meticulously questions each part of his client’s self-talk – staying curious to the client’s reality -- and ultimately discovers that this self-talk is all lies. In truth, the client believes that he is taken seriously by his boss, believes he is seen as objective and professional, believes that he is well understood, and believes he is not being seen as “a joke.” This tells the coach something important about his client’s boss – but not enough. So the coach uses a rather novel approach to learning more about the boss, asking how she would react if she were to surreptitiously observe the first half of the coaching session. From that response – and remember that the coach asked his client to think carefully about this before answering – we learn that the client’s boss would probably be quite disturbed by what she heard and observed. From the client’s answer to this question we begin to see a glimpse of the boss’s personality and personal values structure. Quite unlike the boss in our immediate example above, where the coach “spiked the ball” and found the spike well blocked at the net, the real boss in our coaching scenario is sensitive to how her words and gestures are affecting the people around her. At least from the client’s vantage point, he fully expects that his boss does not realize that her dismissive words are having such a negative impact on him. That makes the proposed meeting, and the strategy for that meeting, much more appropriate.

By the time the client asks his coach for a suggestion as to how to proceed, the coach is quite well versed on both his client and his client’s boss, and appropriately suggests a meeting to air the client’s concerns. At this point the client is sufficiently satisfied with everything that has evolved from the coaching session that he will follow his coach’s suggestion with refinements, if they are deemed necessary and appropriate. You may by now be so gun-shy about “spiking the ball” that the coach’s rather explicit suggestion at the end may seem a bit bold and presumptuous. But it’s now coming at a good time. The rapport between coach and client is well developed. The coach has

probed quite thoroughly and feels safe in making a clear suggestion, knowing that it can and will be modified if the client sees useful refinements. The suggestion has come at the end of a thorough unpacking process, one that included probing and paraphrasing and looking carefully through the wrapping and into all four corners of the package. No recommendations are perfect, and none is based on complete information. But this one, coming when it did, seems both appropriate and productive at the close of a fairly open and revealing coaching session.

SUMMARY

The intent of this discussion is to convey a sense for *unpacking the experience* in a coaching engagement, and certainly not to present a comprehensive guide to coaching. It rather provides some examples, in a hypothetical coaching dialogue, for how a coach's acute curiosity may lead to an exchange that drills deeper and deeper into the package that his client first presents. In this example we chose a fairly innocuous conflict between a client and his boss, a scenario that was substantially cheery except for the utterance of occasional dismissive remarks that were hurtful to the client. Obviously, the focus of a coaching session, or even a series of sessions, may be on far more substantive, and troubling, issues. But little issues, like little weeds, can grow and spread if they are not tended to in a timely and effective manner. That being the case, a coach should always be resistant to *spiking the ball* too early on grounds that the issue is too minor to warrant further exploration.

Regardless of how trivial or how monumental are the issues of focus in a coaching relationship, the fundamental rules still apply. We could close with a book of rules, but an even dozen seems just about right.

1. Maintain an open and trusting relationship with your client.
2. Enter the relationship with a genuine curiosity about your client.
3. Let that curiosity be satisfied through empathic listening.
4. Show your client that you are interested, that you care, that you understand, and that you are always open to learning more.
5. Take your time to get a complete picture of your client's circumstances and concerns. This isn't a volleyball game.
6. Carefully and meticulously unpack your client's experience. Assume that the package is fragile and, thereby, all of the contents are individually wrapped for their protection. Don't miss anything that's in the box.
7. Listen for what your client cannot say. The unsaid is often the essence of what's going on.
8. Be a slow learner if you need to be. Ask the teacher – your client – to explain it until you really get it.
9. If you think you've got it, then explain it and have your client confirm that you've got it. Learn to paraphrase effectively.
10. When it's time, bring yourself into the conversation. Learn to “paraphrase plus” – to see and explain things from your perspective.

11. When it's time, toss some suggestions into the air to see how they play. Your client knows the rules and will know what to do and not do.
12. Get commitments from your client. And give commitments in return.

For some specific ideas around questions that may be proffered at various stages in a coaching engagement, see the appendix of “provocative questions for coaching” provided courtesy of Teams and Leaders. These questions will further open your eyes to possibilities in a coaching transaction.

It's always a bit scary to enter another's world and presume to be able to help that person. But if you enter with good intentions, with genuine curiosity, with compassion, and with some basic coaching acumen, the results will rarely be disappointing.

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APPENDIX

PROVOCATIVE QUESTIONIS FOR COACHING

(Courtesy *Teams and Leaders*, Seattle, WA: www.teamsandleaders.com)

Questions that probe and clarify and prompt a coach to reflect and learn are one of a coach's most powerful tools. Many coaching books will offer you suggestions. Following is a suggested list of questions that you can use. Pick and choose as seems appropriate and see these as a starting point for creating your own questions.

Beginning

- What tells you that you should be working on this particular issue?
- How would you prioritize the things you want to accomplish?
- How would you know you were successful?
- If you got this, what would be different?
- What are the chances of success?
- What do you think is likely to happen?

Exploring Current Reality

- Tell me a bit about what is going on.
- What's another possible reason for this?
- How objective do you think you are being in thinking about this?
- What have you tried [in a given area] so far?
- What seems to be the main obstacle[s]?
- Is the situation worse at some times and better at others? What makes the difference?
- How might you be contributing to the way things are?

Exploring Options

- What do you see as your options?
- What other options could we explore?
- What have you [or others] tried successfully in similar situations that might work here?
- Have you done anything that makes the situation better – even a little bit?
- If you could do anything you wanted in this situation, what would you do?
- What room do you have to maneuver in this situation?
- What can you influence but not control?
- What do you have to accept as a given?

Planning: What and When

- What is your plan for addressing this?
- What are the resources [internal/external] that will help you get where you want to go?
- What kinds of things ought to be in your plan?
- What do you need to do first? Next?
- What support do you have?
- What else do you need to make this work?
- How do you think this will turn out? Why?
- What needs to be done when?
- What will you do between now and the next time we meet?