

The Enemies of Coaching by Aboodi Shabi

Introduction

As coaches we may encounter a number of pitfalls that get in the way of our coaching relationships and this article explores some of them. It is not meant to provide answers or solutions, nor even to be a way to measure our coaching abilities, but is more an exercise in exploration and reflection. I encourage you to approach it from a mood of lightness and curiosity, rather than from the perspective of looking for a definitive statement or a need to get something 'right'.

Context

I want to begin by creating some context to explore what I see as being one of the most important, if not always explicit, functions of coaching.

Before the investigations of Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler, the commonly-held view was that the Sun revolved around the Earth. As we all know now, in fact it is the Earth which moves around the Sun.

Thus the separation between the rational intellect and the experiencing body began.

What happened was that once scientific thinking took hold, it made it harder for us to accept our direct experiences as valid. We might **know** that the earth revolves around the sun. But our **experience**, supported by our language, is **not** that the earth moves. We still talk about the **sun** rising and setting.

As rational thinking has become the dominant way of exploring and understanding life, so we have learned to invalidate more and more of our direct experiences. For example, if a child cries because it has lost something small (like a sweet), we might reassure it by saying that it's of no consequence, it's only a small thing, it doesn't matter. This is **not** the **child's** experience.

We now have books and manuals on the 'right' way to bring up children, have relationships, even how to make love properly, as if such activities which we have been engaging in for millennia can now only be done in rationally developed ways.

What does this have to do with coaching?

There are 'how to' books offering information and advice, and it seems that almost everyone has a suggestion for any difficulty or challenge we might face. But often instead of advice or solutions what's needed is simple listening. In fact, I'd say that's something that's so vital and so rare. Sometimes we miss the obviousness of simply giving someone the gift of listening.

Simply put, I think the soul **longs**, perhaps more than anything else to express itself and be heard or seen. It doesn't need to be fixed, or told what to do next, or given a solution. It simply longs to be witnessed.

In our increasingly rational culture, we have learned to invalidate that which can't be measured or analysed. We don't value that which makes no sense, or has no apparent purpose. We learn to communicate strategically, effectively, and intelligently, but at the expense of truly expressing ourselves. And, when we cannot express ourselves fully, our magic cannot show up. We might well be performing well against measurable targets, but we are like empty shells, living lives that are automatic and soulless. Something is needed to re-awaken the dormant spark within us.

I think that is why coaching has emerged now - as a way for us to support this spark that has for too-long lain dormant.

Potential Enemies of Coaching

So that we can create the kinds of conversations which allow this essence, this spark, to be articulated, we need to be aware of the enemies of coaching - those things which interfere with our abilities to create the space needed for these conversations to happen. They are not enemies to be defeated, but simply pitfalls that can trap us all from time to time. Being aware of these potential dangers, these interferences, increases our capacity to truly serve our clients.

1) Being over-focussed on solutions

An important function we provide for our clients, and frequently a consciously articulated reason why they seek a coach, is to help them explore solutions to their dilemmas. However, by focussing on reaching a solution too quickly, we miss out on the possibilities that might occur through our explorations.

There is great pressure on all of us to find answers to every dilemma we face, as if being in the question is somehow a sign of weakness. For many people, merely having the opportunity to stay in the question, to explore without knowing where we might end up, is a real gift - an easing of the pressure under which most of us live most of the time.

Coaching misses something if we can't create and savour this reflective place. In this place we offer a different *way of being* to the client, which has real value in itself - we're not just giving them more of the same - more of what they already have and which doesn't always serve them.

2) Needing to know

Our need to know is closely linked to our need for solutions. When we are faced with uncertainty, we have a tendency to cling to what we know. A coaching conversation is a place to explore *not knowing*.

It's not always comfortable, and yet it's essential if we are to create the space to allow the client to just explore. Rumi said: 'Sell your cleverness, and buy bewilderment', and the more comfortable we are with bewilderment, the more room we give our clients. The more we need to know, the more we limit the space, the more we inhibit the blank canvas.

3) Not paying attention to the coaching relationship

The relationship is fundamental to the coaching; it provides the context for coaching and is much more important than the content. A prime element is trust without which coaching cannot happen. We ignore it at our peril.

When the client trusts the coach, then a kind of sacred space is created, where the client is ready to step into the unknown, and sit with their uncertainty and doubt. The coach who becomes their guide on the journey they are embarking on.

4) Needing to please the client

A client may come to a coach for help in achieving particular goals which, although laudable, create a narrow definition of successful coaching. If the specific outcome is reached I can be said to have pleased the client, but have I really served them? Have I enabled them to explore beyond the paradigm in which they think and live? If all I do for a client is help them get more of the same, then is that really coaching, or is it merely consulting and goal-setting?

When I am willing to risk *not* pleasing the client in order to serve them by helping them to explore at a much deeper level, then there is the space for masterful coaching to happen. This is not at all to suggest that the coach knows best, but that my attachment to pleasing a client can get in the way of truly serving them.

5) Focussing on techniques

As coaches we use different techniques and approaches, each of which has its place and is of value in our work. But by focusing my attention is focussed on the technique, then it's no longer on the client and I am no longer present to them. It's a bit like dancing with someone with my attention being on the dance-steps - the dance stops happening. As Carl Jung said, *'Learn your theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul.'* Keep techniques and tools in the *background*, trusting that they will appear like guide-points when they are needed along the way.

6) Discomfort with emotion

People's lives and work offer little or no place for emotion. Many argue that emotions have no place in coaching. But we are *emotional* beings. As Daniel Goleman argues, everything we do is based on our emotions (emotion means a pre-disposition to take action). We need to create a space for our clients where they can bring all of who they are.

If we are uncomfortable with emotions in ourselves or others, then we cannot be fully present. If a client is sad, for instance, our discomfort will, consciously or unconsciously, impact on the coaching conversation and tend to move away from the sadness. That deprives the client of the value of experiencing what they really feel and legitimising it as part of who they are.

7) Needing to be positive.

A need to be positive creates a pull away from negativity, which can inhibit a coaching conversation where a client is expressing negative emotions or thoughts. For example, a client who has just been promoted may feel excitement at the possibilities the new role will offer, but also doubt and fear about their capacity to perform at that new level, and they may have nowhere else to explore those doubts.

Or a client may report feeling 'stuck'. By providing a space where the client can explore their 'stuckness' they may allow themselves to see it from a different perspective and to see what develops.

If we are caught up in our need to focus on the positive, our capacity to honour our clients for where they are is seriously limited.

8) Heaviness

One of the most important moods of coaching is that of gentle lightness.

A client often feels very stuck and very serious about the situation he is facing. If we are caught by that mood of seriousness, it's as if we become two people running around inside the problem trying to find a solution, and then, of course, we can no longer serve the client.

By keeping our lightness, we are more able to serve the client and help them explore from a wider perspective. And we should never forget the importance of humour in coaching. We all have a tendency to take ourselves too seriously, and being able to laugh at ourselves is a real opportunity to move forwards.

However, being light is not the same as being trivial, and it is not about positive thinking either. We need to respect the client, to create a space that absolutely legitimises them and their experiences, while at the same time not being caught up in the 'story'. It's not always an easy balance to find, but it comes with practice, and more practice.

9) Wanting to be 'a good coach'

Someone who is attached to being a 'good coach' is not present to their client. They will be inhibited, reluctant to take risks, and will play safe. We will never really be great coaches if we're not willing to run the risk of making mistakes - being preoccupied with being a good coach kills off any risk, it's true, but it also kills off the possibility of great coaching where we really touch our clients.

10) Being 'coach-like'

As coaches we can take ourselves too seriously. We talk about the need to be coach-like, to walk the talk. The danger here is that we can forget that we are, like our clients, flawed human beings, who sometimes make mistakes or do things that show ourselves as less than great.

In many ways, this is one of the biggest enemies of coaching. If we are not comfortable with our humanity, with our own fallibility, then how can we fully be present to our clients in their humanity? How can we legitimise our clients in their messiness, if we can't accept our own?

As Master Coach Julio Olalla has said, we don't coach from our greatness; we coach from our wounds. It's our experience of our human struggles, our painful experiences, that help us to meet others in their struggles. Those experiences where life brings us to our knees help to forge us as coaches able to truly meet and hold our clients in their dark moments.

On a wider level, we don't serve our profession by being pre-occupied with being coach-like - we need to be human, and to be seen as being human. When, for instance, the Dalai Lama speaks of his reluctance to have cats in his home in case he becomes too attached to them, we see him as a much more accessible and **human** teacher, because he, too, knows what we are going through in our own struggles with attachment.

Conclusion

We coaches are there to serve what wants to manifest, the spark, the essence, or the soul of the client, and as Julio Olalla says, it's our job to get out of the way so that the Gods and Goddesses of coaching can come to the service of that. Hopefully this article has provoked you to explore some of the things that can get in the way. Please, however, don't treat this as another list of things to avoid, or see it as something to get right, but more as a springboard for exploration and discovery about your coaching presence.

Although the coach brings all of their experiences to the coaching, all of their training and techniques, etc., and although a great coach can create a space for extra-ordinary transformations in the client, there is a real sense in which the coach is only providing the space for what's already there in the client to manifest.

For me, the nature of the coaching relationship is beautifully summed up in a quotation from the Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda:

'I want to do for you what the spring does for the cherry trees.'