**[THE TALENTED COACHEE](http://www.coaching-at-work.com/2016/06/30/the-talented-coachee/" \o "Permanent Link: THE TALENTED COACHEE)**

****

June 30, 2016 by [Coaching at Work](http://www.coaching-at-work.com/author/admin/)

**In a typical ‘map’ of coaching, the coach owns the process while the coachee owns the content and outcome. However, research by *Dr Paul Stokes* suggests coachees are contributing much more than that**

Typically, the literature and research that has been done on coaching tends to privilege the roles and skills of the coach. Despite commentators placing the coachee at the centre of the coaching relationship, this does not extend to affording the coachee any process skills as part of that relationship. The coach is assumed to own the process while the coachee owns the content and outcome.

What is noticeable about the rise in the popularity of coaching is that it has occurred not only in business coaching, but in life coaching too.

Steve Peters, author of the *Chimp Paradox\**is one prominent example of a celebrity coach, working with sports stars, such as snooker player Ronnie O’Sullivan and former track cyclists Sir Chris Hoy and Victoria Pendleton.The idea of celebrity coaches and mentors has extended into reality television shows, such as *The Apprentice, The X Factor* and *The Voice*. Furthermore, a number of lifestyle gurus, such as Paul McKenna and Scott Alexander, have developed books, mobile phone apps and DVDs, and their websites boast of celebrity endorsements.

What these examples show is that there is a cultural predisposition, in the UK at least, with the idea of the coach or mentor being a key player in individual success, to the extent that the coach claims credit for the achievements of their coachees and validation of their processes and methods.

However, for me, this ‘map’ of coaching did not seem to describe the territory as I was experiencing it. My sense was that coachees were doing more than just providing the content for the coaching session – they were having a significant influence and impact on how the coaching was done.

In order to explore this, I conducted qualitative research looking at the process role that coachees play within the coaching relationship. I found that clients demonstrated two sets of skills: enabling and defensive.

Clients used a range of conversational devices – engagement with metaphor, being clear about goals, stating what’s important – which enable coaching conversations to progress. The enabling strategies they used were practising difficult conversations, scenario planning, remaining open to different processes, seeking to challenge their own thinking.

The defensive strategies, however, include deflection and diversion, where the client employs these, often unconsciously, to protect themselves from embarrassment or threat and to avoid engaging too deeply in areas that they do not wish to discuss in depth at that particular time.

The devices and strategies are often employed in combination with each other as the relationship progresses. These skills interact with the skills employed by the coach to inform how the coaching relationship plays out.

It was important to recognise that the defensive skills employed by the client could render the skilled coach relatively powerless in terms of progressing the conversation, and the relationship, despite having a range of skills, tools and techniques at their disposal.

The client was able to fend off the coach by moderating their responses, avoiding areas of greater depth and vulnerability, but still seeming to engage in a relatively open dialogue, from the coach’s perspective.

EnablingSkills:

**Examples**

***Framing the conversation–Selecting a path for conversation***

**Here, a client is talking about her role as a chief executive of a small social enterprise and is clarifying what she would like the conversation to focus on as well as what she wants from her coach:**

***Coachee:***“I think the thing that’s at the front of my head at the moment is my team. And **how can I best go about getting them to perform**and maybe getting them to perform as a team. I’ve organised a team-building, coaching thing for them in the northeast, a day for us all together to talk about what we’re going to do as an organisation. And then they’re going to get individual coaching from that. I want to be able to make the most of that for them. All I’ve done is organise it yet. It’s not happening ’til next month. I wanted to talk about that with you and **your insight into that**. But I think I kind of wanted to start from scratch and get some sort of like **tools for working better with them**, ’cause it’s not working very well at the moment.”

Noticeably, while it is tempting to credit the coach with asking about what the client wants, the sections in bold show how the client contributes to the process by selecting how she wants to talk about her issues. This gives the coach some obvious routes to pursue with their coaching, thus enabling the conversation to progress. This is a skilled activity on the part of the coachee.

# Reframing thinking–Challenging dominant ways of thinking

**In this example, the coachee is talking about her business ideas with her coach, but displays a sophisticated ability to engage with metaphor, moving between the literal and figurative with relative ease:**

***Coachee:*** “I think I’ve gone from still having lots of business ideas and lots of ideas with career and stuff in that area. I’ve cleaned my house from top… not cleaned, like done stuff, like totally emptied it, which has felt really good. And not just a room, like literally the whole house. I’ve pulled up carpets and painted floors and done… And **I was thinking about that in terms of like my body** as well, thinking how the top is my head and the cellar being my heart. Don’t know why the cellar’s my heart. It probably should be my feet or something. So that’s kind of happened.”

The offering of and engagement with this metaphor ultimately results in the coach being able to work with that metaphor and, together, reframe the client’s motivation in relation to her business development ideas. This is a skilled activity on the part of the coachee.

# Defensive Skills:

**Examples**

***Deflection–Distancing language***

**In this extract, the client is discussing challenges she’s facing when trying to have a difficult work conversation with someone she line manages, about her work performance.**

**In particular, she’s trying to talk through the relative advantages and disadvantages of doing this with her coach:**

***Coachee:***“So I think there may be an element of fear that if I have a conversation with her, then it comes back to bite me.”

***Coach:*** “Okay. So say a bit more about the fear.”

***Coachee:***“The fear. I suppose it’s all about making sure that you’re working within…. that if you’re having a conversation with somebody about stepping up, you’re doing it within the parameters of, with, council guidance.”

What is noticeable about this, is that, when the coachee is asked to expand on her fear, she moves from talking in the first person to the third and moves away from her feelings to talk about the organisational context.

It would be easy to dismiss this as ‘just the way people talk’. However, this deflection had the impact of (a) moving the conversation onto safer territory and (b) enabling the coachee to stay in the relationship and the conversation longer. Again, this is a skilled activity.

# Diversion–Use of humour

**In this example, the coachee is exploring how he can experiment with different ways of engaging with people, moving away from his more typically cerebral style that he uses at work, towards one more centred on feelings and authenticity.**

**The following exchange illustrates how he uses humour in this context, to deal with a difficult and potentially sensitive issue:**

***Coach:*** “Would you be able to envisage different social work environments where you would be able to talk about yourself in that way?”

***Coachee:*** “Yeah, I think so. Not work. You know, I’ve been with this organisation so long I know a lot of people, I don’t think that this would be too stretching ’cause you already either know people well or carry an assumption about them and it wouldn’t be a test. But I think socially, yeah. I was just thinking, I was talking about the split with my wife. If I ever want to go back on the dating game and find somebody else to share my life with, that is going to be a crucial test. Get on Match.com and go on dates. Thanks!”

***Coach:***“Can I make a suggestion at this point? Gok Wan’s programmes are really good*[laughs].*”

***Coachee:*** “Who?”

***Coach:***“Gok Wan. I’ll tell you after *[laughs].*”

Again, it would be tempting to see this conversation as ‘banter’. However, the impact is that the coachee, albeit largely unconsciously, successfully diverts the coach away from the difficult territory of his personal relationships at work and at home, on to safer topics. This could be seen as inhibiting the depth of the coaching conversation, but has the benefit to the client of defusing an emotionally difficult conversation yet enabling them to continue with the coaching. It also serves to strengthen the relationship. Once again, this can be seen as a coachee process skill.

In summary, coaching can be reframed as a process where both participants have process skills to bring to the conversation and relationship, rather than conceiving of the coachee as the passive recipient. This is not to dismiss or downplay the skills of the coach, but rather, to develop a more complete picture of the process skills at play in coaching relationships.

\* S Peters,*The Chimp Paradox*, London: Vermilion, 2012