

Raising the Bar in Coaching – a commentary

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Simon Jenkins' aim was to help 'coaches reflection on their working philosophy with regard to eclecticism' and in so doing, Kaufmann [1] to 'more effectively raise the bar'. This author's commentary focuses on that aspect of raising the bar.

Among individual and shared intentions of Jenkins and the library of authors he cites, there is the often stated, or inferred, aim to:

1. Understand and measure the quality of coaching
2. Provide forms of best practice
3. Create an informed (research) basis for developing both the science and technology of coaching over time.

Jenkins summarizes accurately that the research base (3, above) is minimal. So, as we try to develop and grow our research findings, we may look to the technology of actual coaching practice to help both inform 'best practice' and to inform productive areas for targeted research. Many researchers and buyers of coaching want definitive answers to questions like these:

- Does coach-mindset have more impact on coachee outcomes than the tools/methods used?
- What factors reliably indicate whether a prospective person is amenable to significant change and growth on the coaching journey?
- Does it matter if the coach works intuitively or not?
- What factors determine the different average numbers of coaching sessions (to achieve coachee-outcomes) that different coaches need when working with the same client-projects (varying as we find from 5 sessions to 8 sessions or more?)
- How sustainable is coachee-learning over a longer period (following coaching)?
- What is the evidence for more significance coachee-change when using external as opposed to internal-coaches?

When we look to the aims 1 & 2 (above) what is the most significant contribution that [2] 'informed-practitioners' can offer? Rather than look solely at 'reflective practices' (for example 'thematic factors, Grant & Stober [2]) the coach can rely also on both: a) specific feedback and b) measureable results to inform the quality of their coaching (on both a single session-basis and on a whole assignment-basis). The author provides more meat on the bone, below. Reflection and coachee-feedback can also inform the efficacy of individual intervention-strategies whether these result in significant change for the coachee or not. Due to the internal-experience (including trance-like states) of coachees during coaching, McLeod [3], the coachee may not recall the detail of successful intervention strategies¹. Dilts [4, p. xiii] considers the ability of coaches to induce productive, trance-like states as demarking the difference between large 'C' and small 'c' coaches.

¹ This is also supported by repeated evidential examples from master-classes and available to view (footnote 2)

In spite of possible trance-like states, when the coachee is providing feedback, the coach can assist coachee-recall by giving context to the coachee. The author has found that it is often possible to de-brief the coachee to micro-detail in their feedback. Master-classes² with skilled coach-audiences also provide a rich source of feedback and learning. In these classes, both the coachee and audience are involved in coach-feedback with tremendous learning for all parties.

Specific Feedback for the Coach

Specific feedback is also the prime-driver of developing Emotional Intelligence, [5, p. 266-267., and 6] and is as useful to coaches as it is to coachees. Example questions a coach may ask the coachee for specific feedback can include these:

- In your experience, how significant was our coaching session in respect of the outcomes agreed?
- When you committed to plan X, what else could I have done or changed to make plan X even more compelling/motivating for you?
- If the score 10 is the most challenging and productive coaching you can imagine, honestly, how did this session score?³
- And what is the highest score you can ever imagine giving to a productive coaching experience?⁴
- What worked less well during that intervention?⁵
- What else could I have done at that time?

Measureable Results

The quoted coaching accreditation frameworks/criteria listed by Jenkins miss out further opportunities to raise the bar. The informed-practitioner approach suggests that rather than just aligning 'coaching goals to support organisational aims' and the coach having 'awareness of, and works with the organisation's values, policies and practices' that the coach is better advised to form clear and measureable outcomes expressed as behaviours and that these measureable outcomes/behaviours are:

1. Identified by the coachee and other stakeholders in the organisation
2. Agreed by the coachee and a representative stakeholder (nominated 'coachee-support person')

In this way, measureable outcomes are defined before and during the early sessions in the coaching assignment and then checked by all three parties at the end of the coaching journey. The company, Successful Executive in NSW, for example, also conduct a check on outcomes half-way through the coaching assignment coupled with an alternate coach seeking feedback from the coachee at the mid-way point also. These dual approaches concentrate the minds of all 3 parties on outcomes by providing focus. My own experience in running outsourced coaching provision for several

² Some of these master-classes are available at <http://angusmcleod.com>

³ Note the de-personalization inherent in the question to make answering easier for the coachee.

⁴ Note that this question is to test whether there is a matching between the offered scale of ten and the internal scale of the coachee and to determine what their scale is in fact. McLeod, A.I. & Thomas, W. [7 p.144-146]

⁵ This is a more encouraging question than, 'What was not good?'

companies, together with the experience of Successful Executive also, leads us to offer clients a reduced fee basis where the client supplements the fees by the payment of bonuses to the coaching organisation (and to the coach) on the basis of these measureable, achieved outcomes.

Therapeutic Alliance

Jenkins' properly cites the work of Carl Rogers and his contribution to 'common factors' in therapeutic change. Jones-Smith [8, p. 588] refers to Rogers' four common factors and their significance in 'therapeutic alliance' as 'the glue that keeps the person coming back week after week'. There is though a very significant and unstated difference between the therapeutic context (psychotherapy providing healing of emotional issues from the past) and the context of coaching (shorter-term support of current issues/targets and future aspirations). These differences cannot be overlooked if we are to keep the bar high in coaching. That is, the therapists, whether they are aware of it or not, may promote dependency in certain patients; hence the need, both in the therapeutic practices and in coaching, to understand psychological projection [9] and have mechanisms for testing for transference and counter-transference (for example, professional coaching supervision). In coaching, the psychological profile of the coachee must be adequate to support their emotional and intellectual needs in order to sustain their own progress (without needing to heal scars of the past). If they are not self-supporting, the author would aver that the coachee should be referred to a suitably-skilled therapist before further coaching.

In coaching then, the therapeutic alliance can be measured in the time it takes the coachee to become aware of their first significant achievement from coaching. In my own practice, over some seventeen years, the first significant outcome for the coachee happens in the first session at anything between about 8 and 100 minutes. By continuing to facilitate a coachee to similar enlightenment and success, the 'glue' remains but is based on performance and reward and not on dependency. Our proof of stickiness of the performance coaching glue is that neither I nor my colleagues have ever had anyone curtail their coaching journey, unless they have reached their stated outcomes early.

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