

# The Principal Instruments of Coaching

*'Principles are more important than tools'<sup>1</sup>*

## Addendum

Since this article was written, Angus, with Will Thomas (2010), have proposed a renewed interpretation of the Principle Instruments of Coaching as:

- Exquisite Listening
- Questions & Challenge
- Self-reflective Silences

## Introduction

There is a great deal of confusion about coaching, much of it due to the plethora of coaching models in the market, often presented without underpinning principles.

The three Principal Instruments of coaching are questions, challenge and silence. These Principal Instruments are used to assist the coachee to meet their defined targets. Of the three Instruments, silence is, perhaps surprisingly, the most effective. When the Principal Instruments are coupled with coaching mindsets and a suitable toolkit, you are most likely to witness stunning change and performance in your coachees. NLP provides great tools for change but tools on their own do not make a good coach. The Principal Instruments are offered as a benchmark for all the best coaching methodologies.

## Silence

When a coachee makes a discovery, this psychological breakthrough in perception, or catharsis, is wholly internal. Even if the coach is speaking, the contribution of the coach to the actual event is insignificant. Silence is therefore the dominant of the triad of the Principal Instruments. Silence enables the coachee to think and feel (experience) without being sidetracked by a coach's agenda.

The real work of coaching is done in the coachee's episodes of thinking and feeling where the coach plays no part other than silent witness<sup>2</sup>. The coachee may be re-evaluating what they thought they knew, exploring a fresh perception on what they thought was real and fixed, developing new insight on a situation, understanding the depth and source of their motivation, and so on. The art of the coach is not to know when to be silent but when to break that silence. Our workshops on the 'Power of Silence in Coaching' produce miracles that are testaments to the cathartic potential of coachees, if only coaches will provide a space for that.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gallwey, T. (1999). ICF Plenary lecture

<sup>2</sup> McLeod, A.I. (2002). 'The Power of Silence' *Effective Consulting* 1, 8, 31-32

*The art of the coach is not to know when to be silent but when to break that silence.*

I coached a sales-trainer who is widely respected on the world stage, let's call him Bob. Bob had become stuck. Having decided on an important task he found himself demotivated to accomplish it, let alone start the job. He told me that he had become frustrated because the target was important to him but he kept putting it off. Over the course of the next ten minutes Bob explored his situation with me. He willingly entered the state of his on-stage sales-trainer by getting out of his chair and imagining/experiencing himself before one of his large audiences; ready to demonstrate his influencing skills to them. From that state of being, his alter ego, I asked Bob to offer his 'stuck-self' (still metaphysically in the chair) some advice with his problem. He provided that advice immediately. Shortly afterwards I asked Bob to return psychologically to his chair and then to listen to the best possible advice available from a leading trainer. I simply read back his exact words in the same tone and pace. There was a silence laden with spine-tingling suspense and 'atmosphere'. Bob was transformed. His concentration was internal and acute. His neck colored with blood, his eyes were de-focused, and his whole being became energized. I let the silence run on. When the silence was broken, Bob did so by launching himself to his feet, "I'm doing it right now; sorry to cut the session short!" I couldn't reply because Bob was already out of the room and on his way to his office.

The most motivating behaviors come from self-determined processing. Of course, I might easily have given Bob the same advice myself but I doubt that his reaction would have been so motivated and focussed.

Jill Dann says<sup>3</sup> that: 'in coaching, you have to allow prolonged silences and intervene to push the coachee to reconnect with the moment, bringing them back to it and keeping anyone else silent. If they can revisit the moment they are often astounded by the range of emotions experienced'. Emotion once registered (and whether expressed or not) is a key driver for change. Emotion is vital to motivated action<sup>4</sup>. Silence and emotion are facilitators of awesome power.

## Questioning

In my last article for Anchor Point<sup>5</sup>, I introduced the concept of Conscious Perception as a key creator of choice and change. In the early stages of a coaching cycle, one uses questions to encourage wider perception of the issue and to develop more options. Later, the coachee will be ready to isolate a specific strategy and check its viability.

### Conscious Perception

Conscious Perception is stimulated by questioning and challenge around established realities. The art of the coach is to recognize inhibiting and unnatural perceptions and to encourage the coachee to new perceptions. Questions include the following:

<sup>3</sup> Dann, J., (January 2003). Private Communication

<sup>4</sup> McLeod, A.I. (2003). 'Emotion & Coaching' *Anchor Point* 17, 2, 35-41

<sup>5</sup> McLeod, A.I. (2003). 'Authentic Coaching and the Exquisite Self' *Anchor Point* 17, 6, 52-59

Who says?

How do you know?

Say more, convince me?

Always? Can you think of an exception?

Why must you? What other choices are there?

Additionally, there are numerous coaching tools, including those from NLP, that encourage Conscious Perception and many others are illustrated in the book.

It is worth defining why questions are used in coaching:

- To provide more information for both coach and coachee
- To assist the coachee to explore available realities

We can see that questioning may support coaching in many more specific ways. Here are just some examples:

- Developing understanding of the issue and its context
- Exploring historical situations with positive outcomes
- Defining what is in the control and what is out of control of the coachee
- Redefining the target(s) and the time-scales to success
- Encouraging new perceptions
- Helping the coachee to fully associate (experience) their situation/state
- Helping the coachee to disassociate from their situation and be more objective
- Re-evaluating value-judgments
- Revisiting limiting beliefs
- Recognition of patterns
- Evaluating behaviors in the context of the coachee's identity and values
- Defining the level of certainty the coachee has about their success (motivation)

### **Logic versus Feeling**

It is helpful for coachees to explore both their logical and emotional worlds during coaching. In exploring a wider set of options, or where emotional distress is clouding thought and action, questions can be constructed to encourage logical processing. Coaching interventions starting with the word 'how' or 'why' can kick the coachee into logical thinking and logical comparing. Logical responses are particularly likely if the questions invoke judgment rather than instinctive response, or where the question opens up wider enquiry through lack of specificity – the coachee has to think in order to work out what is required of them. Where we want logical, objective mental processing, it can be helpful to use questions that contain 'how' and 'why':

- How much improvement do you think they might then make?
- How is that likely to be achieved?
- Why would that occur?

Clarifying questions such as where, when and what also tend to encourage logical processing.

Open questions attempt to open up the world of the coachee without assuming anything about that world. An example is the question, 'instinctively, how do you experience that?' The coach might easily say, 'what is your view of that?' but this question assumes that the mental registration of the coachee is visual and so best avoided.

Questions can help define the boundaries of the coachee's world-view. They can also assist them to re-evaluate those boundaries and extend what is possible:

- Instinctively, how do you experience that?
- If there were another solution to this problem, what would it be?
- Imagine this happening in the future. What is that experience like?

**Linguistic Tip:  
Experience**

Use the word experience rather than restrict your question to 'see', 'feel' or 'think'. Asking the question, 'how do you feel about it?' will be misleading to the coachee who is exploring a visual and/or auditory experience. The coachee will have a conscious experience but it may not be represented internally as an image, emotion or thought. Even with some limited evidence from the coachee (about the representational preference operating), it is better to use the word 'experience' and they will then tell you how they represent their experience internally. The coach must get out of the way of the coachee's mental processing to get the best possible result.

The brain has no consistent means of filtering out irrelevant information from coaches (and elsewhere). Once a word or phrase has been said, it is captured by the coachee's brain. In the case above, some effort may be expended to explore visual information and accept or reject that assumption. Often we want the coachee to remain in an associated state in order to get richer information and learning from their experiences and these diversions prevent that.

**Expanding Choice**

Before focussing on a strategy, a coachee may need to expand the choices available to them. Conscious Perception, stimulated by questions, is key to that part of the coaching cycle.

Note that if a coachee is highly procedural, then questions that keep introducing new choices will produce what Shelle Rose Charvet calls 'sensory overload.' For such people, the coach will be able to help the coachee to find an example where they had succeeded in a similar situation and then ask questions about the detailed steps that led to that success. The most important question for the procedure preference person is, 'What next?' This question appeals directly to their logical procession of thought.

Here are some examples of typical coach questions with the assumptions underlined. I have also added an alternative question, in each case, that I think may be better. See what you think.

How do you <u>feel</u> about that?	What is your experience of that?
Could your boss be <u>angry</u> with you?	From your boss's position, what might he be experiencing here?
You look <u>tense and upset</u> .	What is happening with you at this moment?
Maybe you have failed but how do you <u>put that behind you</u> ?	If you did fail as you say, what if anything can you do about that? What have you learned?
You have your target, how do you <u>reach</u> it?	What next?
Those were good steps, what is the next <u>step</u> ?	What next?

Coaches invariably talk too much and introduce too many of their own words and interpretations into the coaching arena. Unless we wish to spring the coachee out of their associated state, we are best advised to limit the amount of assumed experience we communicate by asking 'clean' questions.

**Linguistic Tip:**

**So, if I hear you correctly**

This phrase shows the coachee that you are listening and that your question is only to clarify your own limitations and understanding. When supported by accurate reflection of the coachee's language, it shows effectively that the coach has been listening attentively and that there is no judgment inferred about the coachee's ability to communicate clearly.

**Linguistic Tip:**

**Zero Through Ten**

This device is a useful measuring stick and is favored by John Whitmore; I use it frequently. It is a good way of getting information about the experience of the coachee without making presumptions. It can be applied just as readily to describing the level of perfection of their experience '*how perfectly real is this experience, zero through ten?*' as to the extent of their commitment, '*So, how certain are you to complete that action on time, zero through ten?*'

**Could you contradict that?**

The question is offered when a statement is given of absolute fact, when other more useful possibilities occur to the coach. When the coachee looks for contradictions to their own argument they necessarily have to change their focus on their situation and enter a state closer to that of a dispassionate observer. In so doing, they gain Conscious Perception and new scope for useful action.

Joanne: "He gives me no credit for contribution in the team."

Angus: “***Could you contradict that*** by looking at the Personal Development Review?”

She thought for a moment.

Joanne: “Yes, he has scored me nine for participation.”

### **Encouraging State Change Using the Present Tense**

Where it may be useful for a coachee to explore a real or imagined situation, language constructs are critically important in encouraging and maintaining state. One element of these constructs is the use of present tense, here is an example:

Angus: “Helena, if we were in that room with Alan now, where in this room ***is*** he, and where ***is*** Helena?”

Note the change of tense. I wanted Helena to have an experience of that situation in the present and to connect as holistically as possible with that earlier experience, in that moment. Perceptual positions also require the same type of construct. Here is an example:

Angus: “If you have advice for Mary, what ***is*** that advice?”

The Perceptual Positions enable emotional distance. Having determined what the positive advice or solution is, the coachee is typically invited to accept that view when back in the First Position.

### **Reflective Language and State Maintenance**

In the context of coaching, we do not want to lead the coachee’s mental attention into that inhabited by the coach. Tim Gallwey says that he had to learn how to teach less, so that more could be learned by his coachees. The best way to avoid diverting the coachee is firstly to reflect the exact language proffered by the coachee and secondly to ask questions that are as unloaded as possible.

Reflective Language helps maintain a coachee more closely in their experience so that they may enrich their learning. While reflective language is used widely in coaching, its greatest use is in questioning. It helps the coachee to experience a real or imagined scenario in the present. The other words used by the coachee are kept the same. Here is a coaching example:

Brian had little experience of presentation in spite of a technical education and career. His area of work was not academic but the technical content of his work was detailed and highly professional. The success of his company’s products hung on the innovative developments he initiated. As a member of a professional body, he was given the honor to make a keynote presentation at a biennial conference. His thoughts were entirely negative. I asked Brian if he could imagine a scenario which had a good outcome and what that might be like.

Brian: “***People would be nodding and clapping*** at the end.”

Angus: “**People are nodding and clapping.** What else do you notice?”

Brian: “I feel a weight off my shoulders. I can now be a participant again.”

Note that Brian used the future conditional tense and I responded with the present tense. He then replied in the present, perhaps showing that he was more closely ‘associated’ in his state. This does not prove anything but is an indication that he may have been deeply involved in his experience and hence learn more from it.

## Clean Language and Symbolic Modeling

One of the simplest and widely known models of human psychology suggested<sup>6</sup> by Nobel laureate, Roger Sperry in 1981, is that our cognitive processes are largely split into mental activities on the left or right side of the brain. Thus, logical processing, comparing, organization, structuring and arithmetic are all thought to be activities that predominate in the left-brain. The right brain is concerned with emotion expression, creative inspirations and play.

Body awareness and creative mind-play will stimulate ‘right-brain’ activity as will questions inviting expression of any metaphoric and symbolic descriptions of their state. Tompkins and Lawley developed Symbolic Modeling<sup>7</sup> as a major development from the work of David Grove’s Clean Language. The language and questioning of Symbolic Modeling encourage coachees to explore their metaphoric world and find compelling solutions. Here is an example:

Philip: “I feel frustrated with myself.”

Angus: “**And what is this** ‘frustrated with myself’ **experience like?**”

This is the metaphor question, inviting the possibility of a metaphor. In this case Philip shared it with me.

Philip: “It’s like trying to get through a dark doorway with a big, shadowy face-less figure in the way, like filling in the whole doorway.”

Angus: “A big, shadowy faceless figure is in the way of the dark gateway, what else?”

Philip: “He is the stupid policy-geek buried somewhere at head-quarters, his pockets are full of useless statistics, he is a light-weight but is filling up that gateway and I want to get past him, push him over, but he is wedged in.”

Angus: “This wedged-in geek is filling up the gateway and you want to get past him, push him over. How can you change this situation to make that possible?”

---

<sup>6</sup> See for example: Erdmann, E., Hubel, D.H. & Stover, D. (2000). ***Beyond a Wall Divided: Human Values in the Brain-Mind Science of Roger Sperry***. Authors Choice Press

<sup>7</sup> Lawley, J., & Tompkins, P. (2000), ***Metaphors in Mind***, Developing Company Press, London.



I was inviting Philip to find a solution that might make the doorway bigger or float away, that might make the policy-geek shrink.

Philip: “I have a pin-stick on my desk. Completed orders go on that. I am pushing it into the geek’s stomach and he is just a bag of wind, he is shriveling, going translucent pink and the papers are drifting away in the wind, there is just a pink mat with the words ‘You’re Welcome’ written on it.”

Angus: “And you pushed the pin-stick into his stomach and he has shriveled down to a pink mat with the words ‘you’re Welcome’ written on it’. **What happens next?”**

Philip: “I skip over and through, the gateway is polystyrene, breaking up and is flying away. All my orders are on the stick. The phone is ringing.”

The whole philosophy of Symbolic Modeling highlights the skills of clean, unloaded questions and reflective language.

### Questioning for Values and Purpose

We know from the work of Bateson and Dilts<sup>8</sup> and the Hierarchy of Logical Levels that the most influencing levels to inspire change are Purpose, Identity, Values and Beliefs. Questions can be constructed to encourage learning in these areas when exploring motivations for change.

Angus: “Philip, in your work, what are the two or three most important things you **value** about what you do and achieve?”

Philip: “I get value for money without crippling my suppliers and have good working relationships with them all. I am always ahead of expectations. I contribute to the business.”

Values are very important in influencing beliefs and behaviors. As Philip appeared to have a dilemma at the level of identity or value, my question was pitched at this high level in order to help him restructure what was important in deciding what to do.

<p><b>Linguistic Tip:</b> <b>What is most important?</b></p>
--

<p>This question invites beliefs, values and purpose, all at the high end of motivated change according to the Hierarchy or Logical Levels model.</p>
---

---

<sup>8</sup> Adapted after Bateson, G. (1973) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Colorado: Paladin Press

**Linguistic Tip:  
Journey into the future**

Detachment from the emotion around an issue can help find rational ideas that can move a coachee to new Conscious Perception. By journeying well into the future, the proximity to short-term issues is given greater perspective; objectivity is raised. It is also a good place to seek the answer to questions about life-purpose, the most influencing level of change.

**Context-Free Questioning**

Questioning can be approached in such a way that the coachee explores their issue and reaches motivated targets without the coach having to understand anything about the situation. For example, the people involved and the time or place to which the issue relates. This type of questioning is sometimes called context-free questioning/coaching. It is particularly useful where the coachee is dealing with highly sensitive issues, be they emotional, political, strategic or interpersonal. For example, they may have a sensitive issue regarding a senior Board member. By taking away the need for the coachee to express the details of their knowledge and experiences, they can roam freely through their solutions without concerning themselves with the appropriateness or otherwise of expressing factual information. If a coach is going to deal with such situations then the coach will fluidly move to context-free questioning. This will help preserve the coachee's preference for secrecy and will not bring extraneous stress to the dynamic. Since the coachee's responses tend to be silent or monosyllabic, in the example below I have left out most of the coachee's responses unless helpful to the reader.

Coachee: "It's an awkward situation. The individual concerned is highly influential and regarded."

Coach: "So, in this situation with this individual, could you bring that event to mind now as if it is happening in this room?"

Coach: "And if it is happening in this room, have you a sense of where you and that individual are in this room - move if you wish, I can move out of the way too, if it helps."

Coach: "Being in this awkward situation with this individual, how real is this compared to how it was, zero to ten high?"

Coachee: "Seven."

Coach: "If you will, try to make this situation with this individual more real. How are you seated in this situation, what, if any, body sensations do you have? How do they look? What is their posture like? How does the light catch them? How warm or cool is it? Do whatever you feel necessary to make this situation more real, in your own time. Signify to me, if you will, when you are ready."

Coach: "What do you really want to say to this individual if you are totally free to do so without any come-back? I do not need to know what that statement is unless you choose to share it with me."

Coach: "How would he take what you say, where ten is good?"

Coachee: "Zero."

Coach: "Are you saying that you would prefer not to say what you really want to say to this individual?"

Coachee: "Certainly not."

The coach may then bring the coachee back into the dynamic and check that they are back. There are many possible strategies to be followed including the Second and Third Perceptual Positions, all in the context-free mode. Here is another line of exploration seeking a realistic outcome.

Coach: "I would like you to consider what, if any, realistic acknowledgement or action you want from this individual. Will you do that and then tell me whether it is an action, acknowledgement or something else."

Coachee: "Acknowledgement."

Coach: "Imagine, if you will that you are looking through a special telescope at the awkward situation you experienced. You can make the situation closer or farther away as you choose. You can hear as well and you can make the sounds louder or quieter at will. You can make the image bigger or smaller, more clear or more out of focus, even dark if you wish. I would like you to be far enough away to take the long-view of the situation but close enough to have a clear impression of what is going on. If you are agreeable, could you indicate when you in that long-view situation?"

Coach: "What is happening in that situation over there? Is there any advice that you could give that would help achieve the outcome?"

The key to context-free questioning is to maintain the language of the coachee where it is offered and to seek their willingness to take a new step. The coach must also test how real any new state is and offer interventions to help them achieve a high level of success. Continuing in this way, specific targets can be reached and a high certainty of success assessed from feedback. The coach may never know what that outcome was.

I have my own example when coaching my daughter Alex. She had been stressed because her examinations were coming up and she had so far only done about ten minutes of revision on one occasion and a little less on another. She was willing to be coached and we walked a Time-Line in the back yard using two hula-hoops that she picked and moved to signify the 'present' and her 'future desired target'. The whole session took about an hour and she was considerably happier afterwards than she had been before. Later we sat down and I asked her whether she would mind sharing the target objective with me.

"I have decided not to do any more revision. I do not believe that I need to revise in order to pass."

I was horrified, imaging what her mother would say when she found out what 'I had done' and the impact on me should Alex not meet her own, and her mother's expectations. I need not have worried. Alex took top marks in three subjects and just one level down in the fourth, ahead of her expectations and desire. Her place at University was assured. Both my daughter and her mother were happy. I was relieved!

## Challenge

Challenge is the third of the three Principle Instruments. Challenges have similar outcomes to questions but often the approach is confrontational. For example, a challenge may require the reassessment of a firm belief. Challenges can be offered as statements or questions and can be especially helpful where a coachee is very stuck in a pattern of negative thought. At casual glance, challenge may seem at odds with the rapport philosophy of NLP. However, maintenance of the most exquisite rapport is not helpful in the coaching context. Rapport is critical before coaching interventions commence but it must be risked if the coach is to be broadly effective.

Giles: *"I'm useless at presentations!"*  
Coach: *"So, you are the worst presenter on the planet?"*  
Giles: *"I'm not that bad."*  
Coach: *"What are you 'not that bad' at, in presentations?"*

Here, the aim of the challenge is to encourage the coachee to reframe their perception of their abilities so that they may have the confidence to do something about their skill level. The next intervention provides a base for that by exploring positives.

John: *"The problem is insurmountable!"*  
Coach: *"You are probably right. Let's ignore it and work on something else."*  
John: *"I cannot ignore this, I must do something!"*  
Coach: *"If I had this problem, where would be the best place for me to start now?"*

Here, the challenge is 'discounting' the enormity of the issue and very likely to get a reaction. In this case, luckily perhaps, the effect is to accept action. The coach's question is designed to get the coachee to disassociate emotionally from the issue and appeals to their ability to 'observe' from outside the problem and at the same time to 'help' the coach. A good coach uses challenges.

*maintenance of the most exquisite rapport is not helpful in the coaching context*

## Conclusion

It has only been possible to provide a snapshot of the many purposes and techniques of questioning and challenge; the reader is invited to see my book, 'Performance Coaching' for a wider review.

While a model and a set of tools are often seen as the basis for coaching, this has led to much confusion about what coaching is and how to procure it. A multitude of branded methods has done little to help the market by adding to the confusion.

The Principle Instruments of coaching help to establish what is at the core of all good coaching brands. These are questions, challenge and silence.

The actual tools used are far less important than the principles that underpin coaching. Where the coach can add an appropriate, authentic coaching mindset together with established skills in (clean and reflective) interventions, they will experience elegant and effective coaching results. Whether the coach works from one particular model or a range of models is then of little importance.

## Addendum

Since this article was written, Angus, with Will Thomas, have proposed a renewed interpretation of the Principle Instruments of Coaching as:

- Exquisite Listening
- Questions & Challenge
- Self-reflective Silences

---

This article is the third of our adaptations from the new book, 'Performance Coaching: The Handbook for Managers, HR Professionals & Coaches'. ISBN: 1904 424 058. It can be ordered from Crown House Publishing US., PO Box. 2223., Williston, VT-05495. Phone: (877) 925 1213 or web (purchasing): [www.chpus.com/](http://www.chpus.com/)

Angus is at Into Changes, 651 West Carpenter Lane, PHILADELPHIA, PA19119.

Web: [www.angusmcleod.com/](http://www.angusmcleod.com/)

Email: [ourinfo@angusmcleod.com](mailto:ourinfo@angusmcleod.com)