

CRACKING THE SHELL

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Peter Hawkins highlights the limiting mind-sets coaches often acquire in their training that they must unlearn in order to work systemically. He offers seven ways to help coaches break down those barriers in order to progress further in their craft

Over the past 20 years I have had the privilege of working with several hundred experienced executive coaches from a wide range of countries, either teaching them to be coaching supervisors, transformational coaches, systemic team coaches or acting as a supervisor and/or mentor to their practice.

I have continually been struck by how coaches, in order to progress further in their craft and practice, have had to confront a number of limiting mind-sets acquired in their original coach training. These beliefs and attitudes were useful and practical in the early stages of coach development, but have since become barriers to further learning.

Gradually, I have come to recognise some of the most common belief systems that were prevalent among many of the coaches I encountered and that our supervision has needed to focus on to unearth these deep beliefs and assumptions and to explore whether or not they were still useful. These have included both my own beliefs and assumptions as well as theirs.

I hope this article helps you do the same.

1. The client is the person opposite me

Coaching has, rightly, trained new coaches to ensure they are focused on the individual client and their needs. Learning to switch off the focus on yourself and to focus completely on another, to listen to their story from their perspective, not from your own reactions, associations or judgements, is both important and a challenging task.

However, coaching needs to move beyond providing personal development, and contribute to a broader change agenda in the client's team, organisation and wider stakeholder world. To do this, we need to stop seeing the individual opposite us as the client, and rather see them as a partner in joint service of making a difference to the client's stakeholder world.

2. I need to be on their agenda of what they think they want

Many coaching relationships start by asking the client: “What do you want from coaching?”

This is based on the assumption that individuals: a) know the development they need, and b) know how coaching can help with that development.

Increasingly, I doubt both assumptions. Looking back on my life and the important times of my own development, I concluded that I was often unaware of what I needed, but that life had an uncanny way of presenting the next lessons I had to learn. Often, my colleagues, family and friends knew more than I did about the learning I needed.

3. Leave your experience outside the coaching room

Coaches are taught how to break the pattern of trying to give helpful advice and to solve problems for their client. However, this, for a number of coaches, develops into a belief that they need to leave their experience outside the coaching room. I doubt this is humanly possible.

Also, many executives have indicated that one of the benefits they want from coaches is to learn from the experience of the coach in working with executives across a much wider range of companies and settings than the executive may have available to them.

4. Interventions are always questions

Often, coaches training in new approaches will ask: “What questions do I use for that part of the process or model?”

When we video coach supervisors, one of the patterns that sticks out is that they work hard to formulate every response as a question. What also becomes clear is that many of the questions interrupt the embodied exploration of an issue by the client, as they have to stop and work out whether they have understood the question; what they think the coach or coaching supervisor is getting at and then “think out” an answer.

Many coaches will ask the simple question: “How do you feel about that?” hoping to evoke more emotional engagement, without realising that such a question necessitates the other person switching from actually feeling something to thinking about their feelings.

Increasingly, my colleagues and I have discovered that tentatively half-sharing half-formed understandings does more to encourage the other to stay at the learning edge of their unknowing and assists the joint hearing into thinking, rather than the sharing of pre-cooked thoughts.

Also, we can deepen the experience if, instead of serial listening, we “listen in parallel”; listen with our bodies as well as our ears; not listening to them telling their story, but empathically travelling with them as they re-experience their story.

As listeners, we might echo a phrase or a word with slightly amplified resonance, so the client both hears the empathic listening, but also hears themselves more deeply.

5. You should not interrupt

When I have watched videos of coaching or coach supervision sessions, another pattern regularly arises. The coach is operating under the rule that they must not interrupt and that they must wait until the client pauses and then they should paraphrase what the client has said.

If we watch the video speeded up, it often reveals that the client is animated while the coach is very still and contained. This is followed by a quick burst of animation from the coach, before they return to a passive, still coaching posture. We have termed this serial listening.

One byproduct is that the coach is focusing on making sense of what the client is saying rather than empathically feeling alongside what the client is experiencing.

In supervision, many coaches will reflect on clients who spend most of the session telling self-reinforcing stories that the coach is sure they have told before. As coaches we need to help clients change the story they are telling.

6. You end with an action plan

The early and widely used process models of coaching, such as CLEAR (*Contract, Listen, Explore, Action and Review*; Hawkins & Smith, 2006; 2013) or GROW (*Goals, Reality, Options, Will/What will*

you do; eg, Whitmore, 2010) train coaches to move from listening and exploration to some form of intention and action planning.

When we explored common patterns in coaching supervision with a number of experienced coaching supervisors, we discovered that the most common frustration of coaches was that their clients would leave with new insight and new intentions and action plan, but would frequently come to the next coaching session not having followed through.

We were reminded of the old saying: “The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.”

More striking was the fact that many coaches then blamed the client: “He was not courageous enough”; “she clearly was not committed”; rather than exploring how they could change their coaching to avoid this pattern.

We discovered that it was important to start the change process within the coaching session, not just talk about it, but start to be it. We (*Hawkins & Smith, 2010; 2014*) developed the notion of the “fast-forward rehearsal”, asking the client not just to tell us their plan to confront their colleague, but to rehearse their opening line, receive feedback and then rehearse again. Many coaches who we have trained in what we term “transformational coaching” reported this has dramatically increased the amount of new intentions that translate into followed through action.

7. Coaching is about personal development

Coaching has grown out of the worlds of humanistic psychology, sports performance coaching and personal growth. Many coaches see personal growth and individual development as the ultimate goal of coaching. They believe that if only everybody focused on their individual growth and development, their organisations, countries and the wider world would resolve their complex systemic challenges.

Individual awareness and development are an important part of a much greater learning process, in which the fixation on individualism can become a major block to wider systemic development.

Coaching needs to be as much concerned with unlearning and not just learning; surrender and not just growth, and in serving the wider stakeholder world, not just human development.

Coaching needs to become part of a much more urgent and important endeavour: the shift in collective human consciousness that our collective ecology is requiring from us as a species.

To illustrate this, let me end with a delightful parable from Cynthia Bourgeault (*2008*) illustrating the limitations of personal development.

It's called: *Acornology*.

Acornology

Once upon a time, in a not-so-faraway land, there was a kingdom of acorns, nestled at the foot of a grand old oak tree.

Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, fully Westernised acorns, they went about their business with purposeful energy; and since they were midlife, baby boomer acorns, they engaged in a lot of self-help courses. There were seminars called: 'Getting all you can out of your shell.' There were woundedness and recovery groups for acorns who had been bruised in their original fall from the tree. There were spas for oiling and polishing those shells and various acornopathic therapies to enhance longevity and wellbeing.

One day, in the midst of this kingdom, there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, apparently dropped "out of the blue" by a passing bird. He was capless and dirty, making an immediately negative impression on his fellow acorns. And couched beneath the oak tree, he stammered out a wild tale. Pointing upwards at the tree, he said, "We . . . are . . . that!"

Delusional thinking, obviously, the other acorns concluded, but one of them continued to engage him in conversation: "So, tell us, how would we become that tree?"

"Well," said he, pointing downwards, "it has something to do with going into the ground . . . and cracking open the shell."

"Insane", they responded. "Totally morbid! Why, then, we wouldn't be acorns any more." n

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