

Chapter One

WHAT IS COACHING?

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In this chapter, we will study the basic coaching process and the characteristics of the coaching conversation, distilling the key aspects of the work of the coach. Exploring a historical perspective of coaching will help us to realise how the response to ‘What is coaching?’ provides only a partial and incomplete picture. This brings us to the conclusion that a comprehensive definition of coaching remains elusive.

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The answer to ‘What is coaching?’ is neither simple nor straightforward. We think that it ought to be, and is, possible to provide a single comprehensive definition of coaching. After many years of coaching, I am still unable to solve this conundrum. The responses to the question of ‘What is coaching?’

give us a whole constellation of different facts and facets. But these only provide a partial picture and, no matter how hard we try to define this view, we may never reach a single answer. Let us examine responses to ‘What is coaching?’ and collect together some of the key pieces of this puzzle.

• THE FOUR ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE COACHING PROCESS •

Literature on coaching presents a number of iterations and permutations of the basic process. My goal here is to crystallise the essential elements of the coaching process, and provide a basic platform on which we can build.

PAUSE POINT

Take a moment to jot down how you see the basic coaching process. See if you can select what the key elements are from your own understanding and experience of coaching.

The coach basically helps to guide the client to do four key things in an iterative way:

- 1 To be more open and aware.
- 2 To clarify a desired goal.
- 3 To expand awareness around this goal.
- 4 To focus, respond and realise the desired outcome.

If you think of this iterative process in three dimensions it takes the form of an increasing spiral of improved performance, development and learning, as illustrated in Figure 1 (opposite).

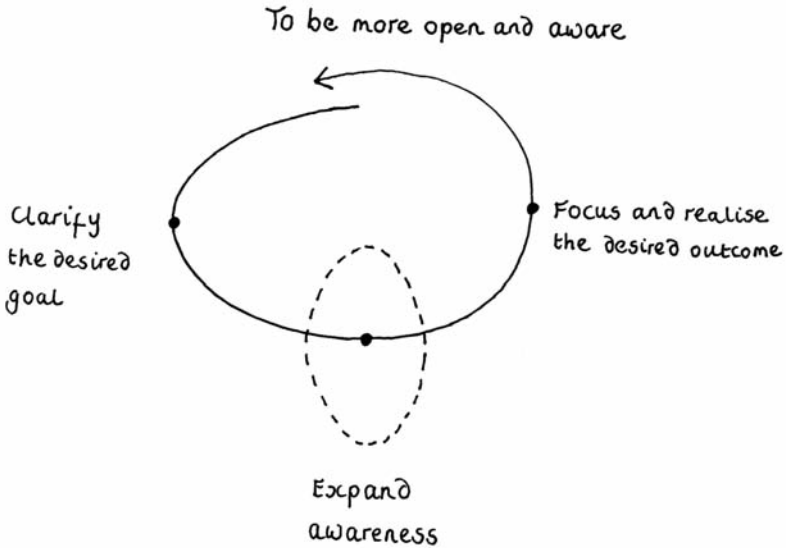


Figure 1

THE COACHING FRAME – HELPING THE CLIENT TO BE OPEN AND AWARE

The essential elements of coaching happen within a window of time, where the client steps out of their routine into the coaching frame and goes back again. This frame marks out a time and a place that are set aside for coaching. Your purpose in setting the coaching frame is to create an environment where the clients feel very safe and comfortable – a place where they are willing to face and will contract to deal with their real challenges. This frame is a kind of safe container and somewhere the clients can find a trusting relationship, feel heard and are open to challenge and exploration. The importance of the coaching frame and its key aspects are illustrated in Figure 2 (p.10).

Within this frame you may explain a little about what coaching is, answer any pressing questions, share what you ideally would

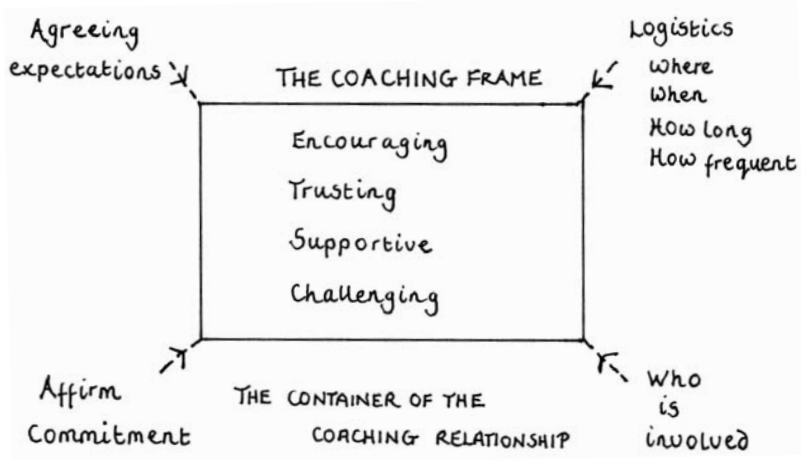


Figure 2

like to happen and something of your experience of coaching to help the client to build trust and confidence. It presents the ideal chance for you to affirm your commitment to the client's development and growth and to explore how this can be encouraged.

You'll also need to agree the logistics and the practicalities of meeting and of working together; the time, duration and frequency of each session as well as the total period over which the coaching will initially extend. And you can agree if other individuals will be involved – examples may include the sponsor of the coaching work or peers who are keen to provide the client with feedback relevant to the coaching.

The coaching frame is essentially a 'window' through which the clients can explore. Here they look outwardly into their environment or organisation, and look inwardly to explore what may be affecting their development, learning and performance.

CLARIFYING THE DESIRED GOAL

With the supportive frame in place, the activity of coaching can begin. A key step is to allow your client to explore the scope of their field of interest. This offers the coach a chance to get to know the client better through careful observation, listening and checking. It is valuable to gain an insight of your client's values and vision. The next key step is for the coach to help the client to clarify their goal by mirroring back key aspects of the conversation, checking perceptions and agreeing a shared understanding of the situation – coaching is a results- and solution-focused activity.

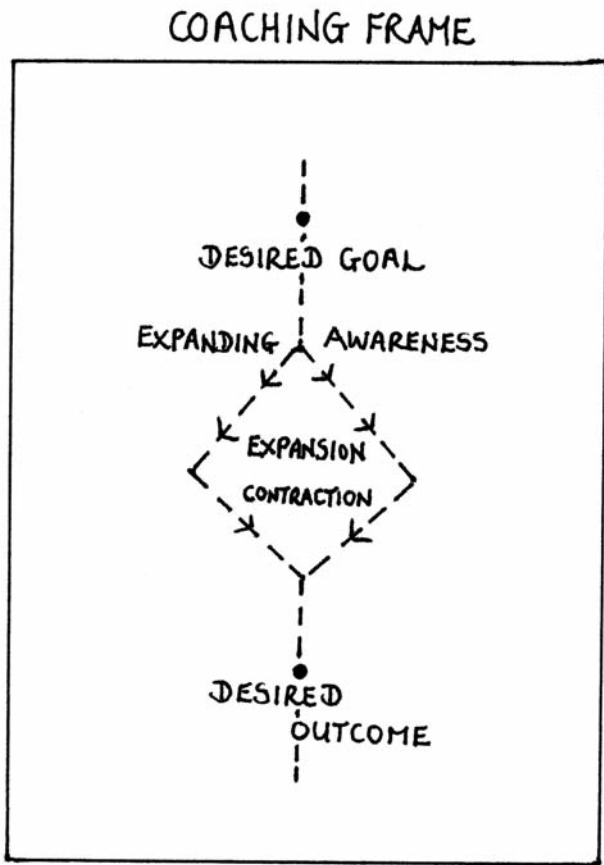
EXPANDING AWARENESS AROUND THE DESIRED GOAL

The third essential phase of coaching is where the coach guides the client to open and expand their awareness around a desired goal. Careful questioning, observation and the use of what I call the 'living mirror' of the coach largely achieve this. I cannot overemphasise the importance and value of this mirror to coaching. The living mirror is unique in its capacity to observe and reflect. Through this interaction, the client remembers and recognises their core attributes. It is through the living mirror as one of the essential instruments of the coach that the client is defined, constructed and co-created. The value of the mirror to the coach will be explored in more detail in Chapter 4.

FOCUS, RESPOND AND REALISE THE DESIRED OUTCOME

At the core of coaching is an ability to help to expand the client's awareness and focus their attention and learning. This dynamic expansion and contraction is at the heart of

coaching. It allows the client to recognise new or different choices and to take firm steps towards their desired outcome. The coach helps the client to discover choices and is a witness to their commitment, encouraging the client's willingness to take responsibility and act to realise their desired goal.



THE BASIC COACHING PROCESS

Figure 3

• THE BASIC PLATFORM •

If we think of the basic process of coaching as a platform on which we can build, then this is illustrated diagrammatically in Figure 3 (opposite), which shows the key dimensions we have discussed.

HOW IS THE CONVERSATION OF COACHING DIFFERENT TO ANY OTHER?

To demonstrate the difference that the basic elements of coaching make to conversation, let us compare everyday conversation with a coaching conversation.

A TYPICAL EVERYDAY CONVERSATION ABOUT WORK

- Person 1: How are things?
 Person 2: Not good. I'm not feeling good at all.
 Person 1: I'm not feeling too good either today.
 Person 2: I'm having problems with the boss.
 Person 1: I wouldn't put up with that if I were you.
 Person 2: I'm not sure what to do.
 Person 1: If you're unhappy you should get out – it's not worth it.
 Person 2: I *am* unhappy.
 Person 1: I've got a friend in a very similar position – she got out because she decided that no one was going to tell her what to do.
 Person 2: How's your work?
 Person 1: Couldn't be better.
 Person 2: I think I must be doing something wrong.
 Person 1: Maybe you are.
 Person 2: I worry about it.
 Person 1: My work's going great, things are going really well.
 Person 2: Lucky for some.

- Person 1: Hope to get promotion this year.
Person 2: Promotions are rare in this organisation now.
Person 1: Mine's due.
Person 2: I think you'll be lucky – things are changing.
Person 1: I think you're wrong on this one.
Person 2: We'll see.
Person 1: I don't want to rub it in but it's a cert.
Person 2: I think you're mistaken.

A COACHING CONVERSATION

- Coach: What's important to you today?
Client: Er (*pause*). . . in truth (*pause*). . . I'm concerned about my relationship with my new boss.
Coach: You look very concerned. Tell me more?
Client: We've not got off to a good start for some reason. I've a lot of experience in this job and I feel as though I'm being over-scrutinised.
Coach: Mmm (*pause*). Tell me how does that impact you?
Client: I feel as though I'm being watched. I feel boxed in, as if my freedom has been taken away.
Coach: I see. Is there anything more?
Client: (*Pause*) I don't know what I'm doing wrong.
Coach: You may not be doing anything wrong (*pause*). How aware is your boss of how you feel?
Client: Not at all, I'm wondering if it might be the time to sit down and explore with her why this is happening.
Coach: What's your hunch why this is happening?
Client: My boss is new to the role (*pause*). I don't think she's found her feet yet.
Coach: How is it not to find your feet?

- Client: (*Pause*) Its scary I suppose.
 Coach: Scary?
 Client: Yes. When you're scared you tend to cling on
 and over-scrutinise (*pause*). Ah ha! Is that why
 I'm feeling micro-managed?
 Coach: Might your boss need something from you?
 Client: I might ask her (*pause*). Yes, I could ask her how
 it's going. Then explore if I can help in any way –
 with my experience. I would be happy to try that.
 Coach: Sounds like a part of an important conversation.
 Client: Yes

COMPARING CONVERSATIONS

What key generalisations can we draw, by comparing these conversations, that helps to develop our understanding about what coaching is? When the coaching frame has been agreed and the coach guides the process, the client is given full attention and questioned openly, the pace is slower and there is space to pause and reflect. In contrast, in the example of everyday conversation, little attention is given to either person and the questions asked are largely closed. The intention is commonly to prove your own point and rightness. In contrast, the focus of the coaching conversation is the client's exploration and learning.

• WHAT THE COACH DOES •

The coach guides and helps the client to develop and learn. Their approach is largely non-directive, though at times the coach may challenge or intervene to reframe situations. The answer to how the client can learn, and desires to learn, rests with the client, not with the coach. Once more the role of the coach is to help to guide the

client to realise their inherent learning needs and fulfil them. While the coach employs their experience, the client is empowered to discover their own resourcefulness and conceive their own solution.

Very rarely does the coach instruct or direct: predominantly the role is one of guiding and facilitating

IS THE DICTIONARY DEFINITION OF COACHING OUT OF DATE?

If you were to turn to a dictionary or encyclopaedia to find out how coaching is defined, you may return doubly confused. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines the verb to coach as ‘to tutor, train, give hints to and prime with facts’. The on-line encyclopaedia *Wikipedia* similarly describes coaching as ‘a method of directing, instructing and training a person or a group of people, with the aim to achieve some goal or develop a specific skill’.

Both state that the central objective of coaching is tuition and instruction. This description and definition of coaching bears little resemblance to the actual role employed by the majority of the coaches of today. How can we make sense of this confusion? Can this confusion help us to answer and learn something more about what coaching is?

• COACHING IN CONTEXT •

In the early 1960s this was indeed an accurate definition of what coaching was thought to be, and sports coaches of this period worked by instruction, seeking to pass on their expert knowledge and experience to their clients. At this time the coach was

viewed as the technical expert who taught and instructed the clients to learn.

In the 1970s our understanding of coaching changed quite profoundly. This was thanks to the pioneering work of Tim Gallwey who began publishing a series of books about the art and practice of sports coaching from 1974 onwards, one of which is featured in the suggested reading at the end of this book. What this pioneering work highlighted was something that turned our definition of coaching on its head – that instruction and tuition by the coach was more likely to inhibit the learning of the client than foster it.

The capacity to learn and develop is influenced by the client's own interior state. A directive and instructional approach can often magnify a fear of failure that can inhibit the client's capacity to learn. How our clients judge and criticise themselves can strongly interfere with their capacity to learn. The implication here is that development and learning is more self-directed than instructed, and originates from the inside out.

What was realised is that the client alone holds the key to unlock their own developmental learning and potential, and this is achieved by a process of self-management and self-discovery. Commonly, as we will explore, the client is blind to the control exerted by their inner voices of judgement and criticism. It is the role of the coach then to help the client to move past these barriers – a coach who has experience of the inner process of development and learning, who can adopt a largely non-directive approach. Coaches today, in my experience, largely support a non-directive and facilitative approach, so the dictionary definition of coaching appears to be quite out of date.

COACHING IN THE LITERATURE

Beyond the dictionary definition of coaching, the literature contains many different definitions. These differ and overlap, but all have a place and value. Each definition contains a number of the important facets of coaching that are highlighted from asking the question ‘What is coaching?’ and yet it seems quite impossible to find a single comprehensive definition from this approach.

In coaching literature, for example, we find that some coaching definitions highlight the importance of improving performance. Others seem to look deeper and place a focus on either development and learning or change. Some highlight the coaching conversation, others the coaching process.

Figure 4 (below) illustrates the many different interpretations of coaching and shows just how problematic it is to seek a single comprehensive definition. I see these different definitions as the pieces of a puzzle that can never quite be completed.



Figure 4

THE ELUSIVE DEFINITION OF COACHING

The need to define coaching is further complicated by how we strive to differentiate it from related professions such as mentoring, counselling, psychotherapy, management, leadership and parenting. We believe that it ought to have its own unique remit and differentiated niche. It is pertinent to stop and pause and consider whether, rather than seeking to define coaching, might we learn something more by resisting this temptation?

THE EVOLUTION OF COACHING

This is because no matter how much effort we place on seeking a single comprehensive definition of coaching that answers the question ‘What is coaching?’, it ever remains just beyond our reach. Might the role of coaching be less fixed than we imagine and maybe more of a moving target? Does the shift from the role of instructor to facilitator mark one of a number of significant steps along a continuum of learning? Instead of trying to define what coaching is, would it be more helpful to consider whether the coach plays several roles? Might the role of the coach be a wayfarer whose journey is inwards, with the object of discovering the person’s nature and depth of humanity, and then using this to help to guide the performance, development and learning of others? We will explore and develop this topic more fully in Chapter 7.

COACHING AS FACT AND MYSTERY

Because of the coach’s inward journey, coaching has an enigmatic quality, which, by its very nature, is difficult to pin down. I think of coaching as a natural blend of both fact and mystery.

Our rational thinking treats mystery as if it were the vast unknown and will fear and reject its existence. But in our need for certainty let us not throw the baby out with the bath water. Might it be that an exploration of the coaching enigma gives us a deeper understanding of what coaching is and, in turn, may lead us to masterful practice?

If you can accept this invitation, then your need to define lessens. What emerges is the possibility of a more integrative vision of coaching. This vision can see and acknowledge how the basic coaching skills may be valuable to, and employed in, other occupations. Can we open our minds a little more to explore and accommodate a wider and deeper appreciation of what coaching might be? Only with this integrated vision are we able to see both the wider scope and focus of coaching and so support the possibility of its continuing emergence and evolution.

Mindful of this invitation, let's now consider why we coach and explore how this provides insight to the nature of coaching and masterful practice.