

Extract on ‘how to run a coaching session’

This extract provides advice for a coach working in a commercial setting. The second section goes on to give guidelines on counselling. Remember you are not a counsellor! It is included here out of interest and because some of the advice applies to coaching.

How to run a coaching session

There are a number of basic steps that go to make up a successful coaching session and these are:

1. Agree a contract for the meeting - state the aim of the meeting, make an outline plan, and agree how long it will last. Both people need to work together on these items so that they can both ensure that the meeting goes to plan.
2. The coach listens firstly to the client's view of the difficulty and then gives their view. I don't think it is helpful to get into a conversation, but rather let one person have their say and then the other, with the client speaking first.

Some interesting questions that seem to help are:-

“What have you been doing well?”

“Where have do you need to improve?”

From the generalised description of where the client needs to improve, it is then possible to come up with a clear statement of the most important issue or issues that need to be tackled.

3. On the basis of this statement, it is then useful to get into joint problem solving. I often find the “Deming Cycle” of Plan - Do - Study - Act very helpful as the basis for work throughout these phases. In the cycle, the client and coach can begin by assessing the current situation and then making a plan of what the client will do with clear goals and specific actions and a description of how they will know if it works (plan). The client can then implement the plan (do), evaluate whether it works and what can be learnt from it (study) and finally decide whether to put their learning into practice throughout their work or to re-cycle (act). Both people can contribute - two heads are often better than one! At this stage, the first step is obviously to develop a plan for improvement, agree the basis for monitoring progress and decide what further support may be helpful.
4. Review the meeting. What did the coach do well, what helped, what could have been better? What did the client do well in using the coach's help? Both people speak to these questions - the coach can demonstrate that they are open to being coached on their coaching in order to improve their coaching skills.

If either person gets stuck at any point or the issue turns out to be more personal than task, it is always possible to switch to a counselling approach and then return to the coaching role after dealing with whatever feelings are getting in the way, if this is appropriate.

How to run a counselling session

Counselling aims to enable a person to express feelings and emotional tensions in order to free up their intelligence, creativity, zest, co-operation, and confidence so that they can get on and deal successfully with challenges in their life and work. The counsellor has the job of enabling the client to function well as an independent, powerful person in the workplace. This probably means they will need to guard against offering advice because counselling is not primarily concerned with finding solutions to difficulties. After an effective counselling session the person will be better able to sort out whatever they are struggling with, decide what to do next, and implement whatever decision they have made.

Before they begin, the counsellor will find it helpful to remind themselves that their job is to give one hundred per cent of their attention to the other person. This means giving up any pre-occupation with their own concerns, including any feelings of inadequacy, timidity, fear, or embarrassment about how well they are performing as a counsellor. These kinds of feelings are likely to be around for most of us but we need to decide not to pay any attention to them.

They will need to take an attitude to the other person of unconditional approval, encouragement, delight and respect. They will have confidence that the person they are paying attention to, is absolutely fine in every way and is capable of overcoming any difficulties that they have.

A typical counselling meeting will probably begin with the same kind of contracting phase that I described above in the coaching process. Having established the parameters of the session, the rest of the session will probably go through four stages:-

1. The counsellor needs to look, listen, observe, and think about their client, until they can clearly distinguish between the person and the difficulties that the client may be struggling with. It is most important to see these two aspects clearly and differentiate between them.
2. Very probably these difficulties are rooted in the ego or “chronic coping patterns” that the person who is being counselled has taken on over time and the counsellor needs to ask them two important questions:

What are the feelings that they have about themselves, other people in the situation or the situation itself?

What patterns or rigidities have they adopted over time in order to be able to cope with such situations?

3. The counsellor then needs to think of as many ways of helping the client to step out of their ego as possible. In practice, this might mean describing the situation they are in from an outside perspective, providing an alternative positive viewpoint, coming up with an antidote to the bad feelings, offering the truth about the inherent humanness of the person, or inviting them to make a decision which would

confound the pull of the distress. From such a range of possibilities, the counsellor should select one and try it.

4. Make the intervention. If the conditions are good and the intervention is accurate, the client may well release feelings and as a consequence begin to see where they have limited their thinking. They will then be able to use this information to come up with a fresh, new, and accurate response to the situation. In the workplace most people are unlikely to feel safe enough for powerful emotions to be released. However, in most situations, one of the indicators that this process is happening would be that the person is able to talk deeply and honestly about how they feel about the circumstances with which they are struggling.

Once a person has had the opportunity to talk about their difficulties, the person is likely to re-evaluate past painful experiences and begin the process of becoming free from rigid behaviour or irrational attitudes.

(Source: Taken from Simmons, M. New Leadership for Women and Men: Building an Inclusive Organisation, Gower 1996 and used with permission of the author)

