

# COACHING

*What really works*



JENNY ROGERS

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# About the Author

**Jenny Rogers** was an early entrant to the world of coaching, beginning when she ran the BBC's management development department after earlier careers in teaching, television production and publishing. She left the BBC to start her own coaching company and has been a coach ever since, specialising in the world of senior executives. As well as working with her own coaching clients, she trains and supervises other coaches.

Her books range from a 4th edition of *Coaching Skills: The Definitive Guide to Being a Coach*, a book used around the world as the 'Bible' on how to be a coach, to her four best-selling books on the psychometric instruments, the MBTI and the FIRO-B. She has also written books about how to start a coaching business, how to navigate career crises and how to get through a job interview successfully.

Jenny was married for many years to the former BBC Editor and journalist Alan Rogers. He died in 2010. She lives in central London and is close to her two sons and three grandchildren. She is a keen cook, cat lover, filmgoer and walker.

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## Faking it is Not Making it

Almost every week, my email inbox contains invitations to publicise other people's blogs in exchange for having my own sprayed out to what are allegedly tens of thousands of followers, or to take advantage of unmissable opportunities to train as a coach at bargain rates. Usually these come from the same or similar sources. These are so-called life-coaching companies trying to lure in customers with the promise that, by learning a few techniques, these beginner coaches will infallibly create rapport with other people. By creating rapport, their commercial success will be guaranteed. In more sinister style, they often convey that these techniques have supernatural powers, people will not be able to help themselves: they will be puppets, they will simply have to do what you want.

Top of the list here is a suite of techniques that cluster under the general banner of *mirroring*. If the client crosses their right leg over their left, you do the same. If they scratch their right ear, you scratch yours. The people who teach these courses claim that you can and should copy everything a client does, including their breathing. I have never seen a single convincing example of how this could work. I imagine the following scene:

Client: [looks worried] Are you OK?

Coach: [panting slightly] Yes, I'm OK, why?

Client: You seem to be struggling for breath, I was wondering if you're asthmatic.

Coach: Er ... Are you OK? I thought you seem to be breathing a bit fast.

Client: [puzzled] No ... I think I'm just breathing normally.

Coach: Ummm...

Please feel free to adapt this script for a cabaret turn at the next coaches' Christmas party you attend.

We know now from many dozens of studies that warmth and rapport top the list of what clients say works for them in psychotherapy and it must be the same in coaching. The idea of mirroring is based on a real enough phenomenon. This is that when we are genuinely in rapport with another person, we do look like mirror images. It's an unconscious response that results from curiosity and respect on both sides. This is very different from deliberately setting it up in order to convince a client that we like them. Perhaps those who run courses promising instant liking have never noticed that the intention to deceive is obvious. These people seem to me to be the jackdaws of the coaching world: looking for something bright and glittery without understanding that what they have picked up may be unconvincing paste, not diamonds.

Anyone who has been the customer of a salesperson taught to seduce customers by using these techniques will instantly recognise the symptoms. Here is an example. I am in that hallowed temple of white goods, John Lewis and Partners. My quest is to replace my kitchen's leaking, hopelessly inefficient fridge-freezer. I have no idea why one model is more than double the price of another or what features I should be looking for. Such is the competition for a salesperson's expertise on these subjects that JL has a queuing system. After 15 minutes it's my turn. My salesperson does not look happy. He forces himself to make eye contact and asks me in a sulky and notably lacklustre style how I am today. He makes it clear he does not want a reply. We drift to the fridge-freezer section where he languidly points to a few appliances and asks, again forcing himself to give a pouting smile, what I am looking for. I find myself matching him all right, but I'm matching sulk for sulk, sigh for sigh, reluctance for reluctance. No surprise then to find that, although I entered the shop determined to make and pay for my choice, I left without doing so, feeling irritable and disappointed.

All coaches, even the saintliest, know that we can be guilty of the same thing. Maybe we do a better job of disguise but we never fool our clients; they spot it all right. How do they know? Here are some signs: playing with watch, fingers, hair or phone, foot-tapping, hand-twitching, slouching in the chair, displaying a tiny frown between the eyes, an air of tiredness, avoiding eye contact, and giving a pouty smile that does not reach the eyes. Watch any TV programme with a celebrity host to see further examples of where the chilly celeb, who has been ordered by the producers to be pleasant to 'civilians', gives a frosty display of grimacing 'friendliness'. This is about as convincing as the bad acting of a porn star pretending to have an orgasm.

Congruence and rapport are two-way processes. If the client can't be congruent and warm with us, then it will be extremely hard for us to be congruent and warm with them. We search each other for signs of rapport. All of us are experts at interpreting what we experience. We judge by eye contact, handshake, clothing, age, height, vocal tone, accent, facial expression, body posture, how much space there is between us and then on how unforced all of this seems. It is amazing how much reliable feedback there is on both sides.



Some people are stiff and shy when meeting others for the first time. It is understandable that they may be anxious about the idea that they should open up to someone they have only just met. They may be fretting about your fee or distracted by what has happened earlier in their day. They may be nervous because they are meeting you on your territory and they don't know quite what is expected of them, wondering if they can trust you. You may misinterpret any of this as hostility and sometimes it might be. Or it can be the other way around and you might be overawed by a client who is older, more senior, more articulate, more gracious. You might be meeting them on their territory where they have the power conferred by being the host. When any of this happens, you will be aware of having to work hard to avoid falling into an unhelpfully wary state. If we cannot be our true selves with clients, they are unlikely to be their true selves with us.

Coaching is about creating rapport and asking good questions. But you can't do this if you are overwhelmed with worry about whether you are competent or about whether coaching 'really works'. Your first task is to work on your ability to listen. None of us can ever get good enough at it. Notice where you distract yourself by doing any of this: thinking that you already 'know' the answer to the client's problems; wanting to share your own experience; yearning for the client to like you; having too many currently unresolved issues of your own; being unable to suspend the urge to criticise; loving to explain, interpret and theorise; feeling that you have to rescue or reform the client. All of these get in the way. They need to be replaced by curiosity, empathy, observation and the wish to understand.

Language is important. It is a myth that non-verbal communication is hundreds of times more important than what is said. If that were true then no one would ever need to learn a foreign language; we could converse with grunts and gestures. Listen for the metaphors and similes that clients use because they will be a reliable guide to the client's preoccupations. The most apparently banal clichés are worth exploring, so when a client says they are 'in a dark place', ask what kind of a dark place it is. One client who used this metaphor startled and moved me by saying, 'it's a submarine where all the lights have failed'. We spent a good 10 minutes discussing the despair that this further metaphor implied. Another client repeatedly used the word *structure* when she was telling me about how she ran her company. We looked at what this meant for her and how she coped with team members whose need for structure was considerably less than her own.

As coaches, we need to be capable of triple observation. We are observing ourselves, we are observing the client and we are observing ourselves observing. When we do this, we may notice that something has happened to the rapport. The coach is leaning forward eagerly but the client is slumped. The client is talking fast, while the coach seems to be drawling. Both parties will be aware of it at some level but the person who needs to take action is the coach – and sometimes this will mean doing some overt matching or making an immediate and obvious change in your own body and speech. The reason for doing it is not to be manipulative but to ask yourself why the mismatching has happened.



Unless we are brilliant actors, we just cannot fake rapport; it is too complex. It may grow slowly, so be patient. It can't be speeded up by inflicting 'techniques' on the client. It is certainly possible to accelerate the process by noticing what is happening and being determined to stay interested, curious, welcoming and understanding. This is very different from *acting* interested, curious, welcoming and understanding. That is the paradox. You can't do it by faking it.

Nervous presenters are often told that they can overcome their terror of speaking to a live audience by faking confidence, for instance standing tall, keeping their heads up and their voices strong. This may work for public speakers. In the case of coaching and how to create rapport, *fake it till you make it* is not good advice.

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# Switching Off Judgement

Looking back at the history of 'talking cures', it is easy to see that Carl Rogers' work and ideas were a mid-20th century turning point. They represented a distinct change from the early days of psychoanalysis where the role of the therapist was diagnosis and interpretation. To do this, you had to be cleverer and more insightful than your patient, seeing yourself as a detective-like figure who interrogated early life for clues and then made your pronouncement. Psychoanalysis became much more than that as it evolved, but there is no getting away from the emphasis it placed on the therapist's judgement.

Rogers' theories about 'unconditional positive regard' from therapist to client have been immensely influential, even though he never seems to have thought of them as an exact prescription for therapist behaviour. I see his ideas as being part of the 'human potential' movement, which began after the Second World War and whose genesis was as much social as philosophical. It could not have happened without the changes produced by two wars, universal suffrage, prosperity, the decline in religious belief, the increasing accessibility of higher education plus the changes in public health produced by clean water, antibiotics, vaccination programmes and the arrival of reliable contraception. Rogers, and other pioneers such as Eric Berne, the developer of Transactional Analysis, stressed the importance of choice. When we acknowledge that we are free to choose, we can avoid the lure of martyrdom and victimhood. As a result, we may make better quality decisions. Carl Rogers saw the role of the therapist as providing the necessary conditions where this could happen, through withholding the judgements which are a familiar and necessary part of everyday life.

Rogers' principles have been criticised, for instance by people who point out that 'unconditional positive regard' is in itself a value that the therapist or coach is imposing on clients, or that it is not enough to produce movement in attitudes and behaviour. But the underlying case for it remains as strong as ever as a starting point for any conversation in which the aim for one human being is to help the other to change. You are accepting, you do not judge. This enables the client to feel heard and, unless that happens, nothing else can happen.

That's the theory and it underpins virtually all coach training programmes. In practice, it can be astonishingly hard to do. The clue is in the word 'unconditional'. As infants and small children, what we invariably experience is that attention, love and acknowledgement are *conditional*. They are conditional on rules set by the adults in our lives; we are too small, too immature and too powerless to be able to put them into any kind of context. The rules themselves will vary hugely: be diligent at school, be physically strong, do exactly what I say, be pretty, dress nicely, honour God, be sporty, put other people's needs before your own – and so endlessly on. What we learn is that we will get love only if we obey these rules. The rules are underpinned by implicit or explicit values. It is taken for granted by those around us that diligence, physical strength, obedience, prettiness, dressing well, being godly, being sporty or putting other people first are by definition good things to be, so we generalise them to encompass our world.

As we mature, if we are lucky, we acquire the independence of thought associated with education, reading, debate and being exposed to people who are different and whose values are different. We gradually come to see that what we learnt in childhood may not be as reliable as it once seemed. There are no universally held values among human beings. Even the apparently sacred bond between mother and child is breached in those agrarian societies where boys, with their greater muscular strength, are more highly valued than girls, and where female foetuses can be aborted or girl infants abandoned and left to die. All of this we may know intellectually, while the underground river of attitudes, absorbed in childhood, may continue to run somewhere in our psyches.

For clients, our offer of unconditional regard is going to be a welcome and unusual relief from the exhausting business of defending yourself. It means that they do not have to be 'interesting', 'articulate', 'clever', 'humble' or to assume any of the many disguises and subterfuges they adopt in their everyday exchanges with colleagues and often with friends and family too. Our attention as coaches is not conditional on any of these things. It is worth pondering the word 'judgement' itself. A judge pronounces, decides on truth. Judgement involves identifying wrongdoing and then punishment. This is not the role of a coach. Where there is a difficulty, it is not our job to ask, 'Whose fault is this?' – the default mode of the world at large.

Our promise of a judgement-free zone extends to the entire cast in the psychodrama that the client brings. The client vividly describes their boss as a bully, but as their coach it is wise to hold back on agreeing. You have far too little data to know where 'truth' lies. By judging the boss, you could raise the

suspicion that you will be privately judging the client. Stay neutral. The role is to raise the client's awareness of what is going on, including what part, even if just the smallest one, that the client has played themselves. Sometimes I have met the allegedly tyrannical boss or 'cold' sibling and have found them to be nothing like the description that the client has given me. This is not to criticise the client for their apparently warped view, only that you have heard it through their filter and this often innocently edits out their own part in creating a dysfunctional relationship.

It is inevitable, as you widen and deepen your coaching experience, that you will meet clients whose behaviour or beliefs you find unpleasant or with which you strongly disagree. In my own practice, I have worked with clients who held racist or sexist views. I have met clients whose obsession with accumulating money was overwhelming, and many more whose behaviour with their staff was authoritarian, dismissive and sometimes abusive. I work as a volunteer job interview coach at a charity whose aim is to get unemployed women back into work. Here, I occasionally meet women who have served custodial sentences for extremely serious crimes. It is most unlikely that in the normal run of social contact I would feel affinity with any of these people, yet they appear regularly in my coaching room and it would be unusual not to enjoy working with them.

It is not easy, nor is it in any way 'natural' to be non-judgemental. While we all have the capacity to be non-judgemental, like empathy, it has to be learnt and this learning can be painful.

It starts with self-awareness as so much does in successful coaching. In your coach training, you will most probably have done work on your own taken-for-granted and 'limiting beliefs'. That's a helpful beginning. But, as you begin to coach beyond the sacred circle of your own colleagues and social contacts, you will find that you seem to like some clients a lot more than others. There will be some where you feel an instant and vivid sense of connection and some where you feel antipathy. Where you feel dislike, the point here is not what this says about the client but what it says about you. The first place to look is at the likelihood of the phenomenon known as *projection* or *splitting*. This means that what we fear might be true, or know to be true about ourselves, is too difficult to face, so we turn dislike for ourselves into dislike for the other person.

The giveaway is the intensity of the feeling; it is out of proportion to what the client has said. We are somehow taking it far too personally. There was a year in my life when my husband needed 24-hour care; we had minimal state help, so money was draining out of our bank accounts faster than we could put it in. I found it uncomfortable to manage my overwhelming feeling of dislike for a client whose problem was that she had a wealthy husband who wanted her to give up her career in order to be a trophy wife who lolled about at home. Poor client. She did not deserve the half-hearted coaching she received from me and she drifted away before I could address my own shaming departure from coaching principles.

Prejudice is inevitable: it is hard-wired into us. We have not evolved from the brains we had when we first emerged as a species 200,000 years ago. Then, in a small group of probably no more than 150 people, when life was short and

perilous, it was essential to be able to spot the difference because difference meant a threat to survival. A disabled child, a frail elder, an incomer from elsewhere, someone who held unconventional views – all could mean disaster for the tribe. This is why we all know how to spot the 'Other', whether they have a different skin colour, a different accent, different clothing or different opinions.

In supervision, I explore my own likely prejudices and, when supervising others, encourage them to do the same. There is the coach who has a viscerally negative response to fat clients; the reason is that she has battled obesity all her life. Then there is the person who reminds you uncomfortably of someone in your earlier life, perhaps someone of whom you felt afraid most of the time. This was true for a coach whose aggressive, high-flying banking client evoked memories of her own aggressive father who had also been a senior banker.

Without self-awareness, we are likely to judge others in a generalised way on what we think of as their 'personality', while, when we make the same mistakes, we explain it away as having being caused by the situation. If I am more abrasive than I need to be in a conversation with the person who is late delivering my groceries, I will explain it by saying that it was a one-off and that I had an unusually pressing set of commitments that day; whereas if I see someone else behave the same way, I might describe them as 'rude' and 'thoughtless'.

The client is more than just their behaviour. This is why in hearing clients describe behaviour which crosses some boundary for you, the challenge is not how to condemn it but how to enquire into it. Nor do you need to imply that you approve of it. You are replacing judgement with curiosity and open-mindedness. You are exploring how decisions were made and what their consequences were, or might be. When people make mistakes, it would be rare for them to be solely responsible, so good questions here are, 'Who else was involved?' or 'Talk me through how this happened' or 'What went through your mind in the run-up to this incident?' or 'Let's discuss what's shaped your assumptions here'. Nearly always there will be a long-standing cultural element in the organisation, in the client's social environment or in their personal history which has facilitated whatever has happened.

In coaching, we are mercifully free from the need to diagnose and label. When we label other people, we imply that we know what their motivation is. We can never be certain of our own motivation let alone what motivates other people. Beware of thinking of a client as 'narcissistic', 'sociopathic', 'lacking self-esteem', 'depressive' or 'neurotic'. This is like the bad old days of clinical practice in hospitals where staff would refer to 'The Hernia in bed 2' or 'The post-op Hysterectomy who isn't eating'. These labels objectify people and narrow our view of them; we stop seeing them as unique and they become their label in our eyes. The client may have a history of depressive illness but they amount to more than their depression; it does not define them.

None of this means that you have to like or feel the same way about every client. It is not about being 'soft' or being easily manipulated. You can decline work with people where the values clash seems to make it impossible. Nor does it mean that all behaviours carry the same weight. Some of what clients

describe may make you recoil in its extremity. The Christian philosophy is useful here: you condemn the sin while accepting the sinner.

As coaching has grown, it has become an attractive commercial proposition, not for people practising as coaches so much as for people selling the notion that coaching is 'easy' and a lucrative way to earn a living in a new career as a 'life coach'. They offer courses, podcasts, blogs and books. In so many of these companies, some of them very successful, what they are really doing is aiming to teach novice coaches how to replace one set of client beliefs with another. When you look carefully at how this is described, you will see that these alternative beliefs are pre-determined. They are about optimism and self-esteem. The websites are full of slogans such as 'living your best life', 'listening to your inner starlight', 'finding fluidity in joyfulness' or 'nurturing compassion for yourself'. You might say that surely these things are benign; they are what we all want – and that could be true. But it is a false trail in coaching because it starts with the assumption that the coach knows what is best for the client: *living their best life, listening to their inner child*, and so on. The coach, who may be drawn to the work because they have similar issues in their own life, already has the diagnosis and the cure before they have even had their first session with the client. They know what the problems are, they know what the solutions are. Coaches trained in this approach are at severe risk of missing what the client truly wants, engaging in a well-meant programme of ineffectual reassurance about the client's 'unique and wonderful you', probably offering some expensive and pointless 'rescuing' (Chapter 14) and entirely missing the real agenda and the underlying issues. Such coaches are fooling themselves if they believe that they have suspended judgement.

By staying open to hearing more, you may find that what starts off looking like a simple issue of right and wrong, strong or weak, good or bad, turns into something much more nuanced as you learn more about the person, their background and the immediate circumstances that have brought them to you. A client who had serious difficulties with assertiveness displayed the same lack of assertiveness in her early conversations with me. She apologised constantly, for being just a minute or two late, for her coat being 'heavy' as I hung it up, for asking for peppermint instead of regular tea. It would have been easy to have felt just like I already knew her colleagues did – annoyed by this unnecessary deference. Instead, in commenting on it in a neutral way with her, I suggested we should enquire into its biography, saying, 'If this lack of assertiveness were a person, where was it born, how did it develop, what does it do for its owner?' Her reply, which was about growing up with an angry and controlling stepfather, showed me how this client had needed the protective shield of submissiveness to keep this man's worst characteristics at bay. Her answers led to a series of productive discussions about its likely lack of usefulness in the present.

The journey to shedding judgement as a coach can be long and slow, as it has been for me. I grew up in suburban Cardiff where people's family histories, houses, décor, clothing, styles of eating and opinions were seemingly identical. There was a narrow band of behaviour that was acceptable for women:

getting married young, having children young, giving up paid work if you were a mother, being heterosexual, not boasting or showing off, being white, being British, working hard, deferring to men and to anyone in authority, being self-sufficient, being frugal – I could go on – and on. As a social environment, it was saturated in disapproval. From about 15 years old onwards, it felt stifling. But it was still a bracing surprise as a young adult to meet openly gay men when I was sharing a flat with a friend working in the theatre. Then there was a giddy first love affair with a Nigerian fellow student, then another jolt when I realised that a good friend truly loved his wife and yet had been serially unfaithful. Then I met working mothers whose children were not crazy delinquents. Then I slowly realised that nothing terrible would happen if you went against so many of these 'rules' which involved harsh judgements against people who were different.

Today I am proud to call myself a Londoner, a citizen of possibly the most diverse and tolerant place in the world, though of course we have our bigots like any other city. I have come a long way from those Cardiff days. I'm thankful that education gave me the chance to free myself from needing to operate on those tramline opinions that I remember so well from childhood, but as a journey it is still incomplete and always will be.

Coaching is not about being approving or disapproving of who the client is and what they do. It is to identify the choices, overt and unconscious, that they are making and then to explore the consequences.