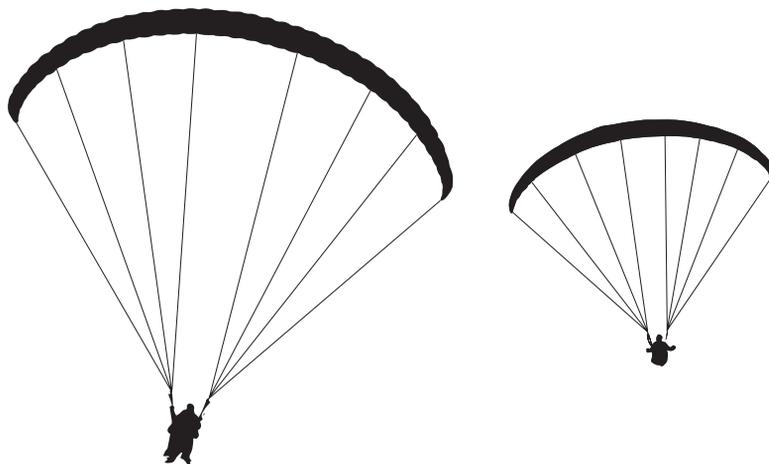


The Coaching Relationship in Practice

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1

Getting Ready: Gathering the Resources to Begin Coaching

I like the metaphor of a journey for describing the kind of experience you are likely to have as you get ready for coaching, because there is no doubt that you'll have a sense of having travelled some distance by the time you complete your programme and feel ready to say 'I am a coach'.

In fact the metaphor touches something very real, as delegates regularly say they are on a journey, and knowing them and the changes they have been through I can only agree, often in a very moving and heartfelt way. It is a journey of personal and professional development, and it is very likely that on your own journey you too will make some important decisions about your life and its future direction. Coaching has that effect.

So what resources do you need to get ready to meet your first coachee? Let's look at four, and consider the relational implications of each:

1. Clarity about what we mean by coaching.
2. A theoretical framework for practice.
3. The skills to implement an awareness-raising coaching approach.
4. A way of structuring the session.

1. CLARITY ABOUT WHAT WE MEAN BY COACHING

As we shall see, there are many definitions and descriptions of coaching, but it's important that you ask yourself this question first because it's likely you'll already have much of the answer. Coaching is a familiar word, used in a variety of contexts, and it's possible that you, or people you know, have already had some involvement with it.

Before reading on, jot down your understanding of coaching:

- What is it?
- What is it for?
- What are its core principles?

In doing this you will begin to establish your own viewpoint which will no doubt shift and change, but you will have begun to articulate your own position from which to evaluate what I and others are saying.

Here are some definitions – see how they line up with your understanding:

Coaching is the facilitation of learning and development with the purpose of improving performance and enhancing effective action, goal achievement, personal satisfaction and fulfilment of potential. It invariably involves growth and change, whether that be in perspective, attitude or behaviour. (Bluckert 2006)

Coaching is about change and transformation – about the human ability to grow, to alter maladaptive behaviours and to generate new, adaptive and successful actions. (Skiffington and Zeus 2000)

Coaching is a process that enables learning and development to occur and thus performance to improve. (Parsloe 1999)

Coaching is unlocking a person's potential to maximise their performance. (Whitmore 2009)

My view, which is rooted in the existential approach mentioned in the Introduction, draws on the metaphor of journey. It is about assisting someone to gain a sense of direction and purpose, which is often lost in the absorption with everyday life, and then set out on their self-chosen path. Coaching is about enabling someone to find their own next step, and to take this step in a skilful and effective way.

How do these definitions and my view line up with, differ from or shift your view of coaching?

However you position yourself amongst the overlapping definitions, the most fundamental principle of coaching is that ***people have the capability to take responsibility for, and make decisions about, their own lives, rather than someone else doing this for them.*** This statement is highlighted as it is the bedrock for all that follows.

Like any manifesto, such a statement is easy to sign up to, and in my experience it strikes a deep chord in people. Yet it can be an extraordinarily hard creed to live up to because we live in a culture where people are told what to do, through advice, suggestions, direction and instruction. Telling is a deep-rooted habit. Parents, friends, teachers, doctors, you and I: most of us do it and do it most of the time. If you want

the evidence for this just listen to others and to yourself. You'll hear variations on: 'What about ...?'; 'I think it would be a good idea to ...?'; 'Have you tried ...?'

There are profound personal and professional issues in play here, as the tell approach is based upon what might be termed a 'deficit model' of relating, i.e. the person I am talking to lacks something which I will provide. Culturally this attitude is rooted in familiar background practices that are so taken for granted that we hardly notice them, and which create expectations on both sides: for example, going to the doctor for advice about what is wrong and what to do. At a more personal level, for most of us, for much of the time, there is a pervasive background belief that the other person lacks something or cannot manage, and therefore we have to step in and provide what is needed. This tendency is likely to be reinforced by a sense that my self-worth is at stake: to be of any value, of any use, I must be able to offer something to help, and this 'something' takes the form of telling. Telling is often driven by the anxiety of not knowing what else to do and the fear of being useless.

I'd like you to take some time to think about what I've said here and consider whether it tallies with your own experience.

- What part does 'tell' play for you as a parent, as a friend, or in your professional life?
- What is your first move when someone is in difficulty?

What about from the other side of the coin? What is your experience of being told? Do you want advice and guidance? Do you invite it? How do you react? I know for me there are times when I do want to be told, for example when I go to the doctor. I also know that at times I have a visceral reaction against being told, and can get quite angry. It may be, for example, that I am about to go into an important meeting and someone starts to give me advice about how I should handle it; or I set off in the car and the person next to me tells me the route I should take.

If this sounds familiar, then the fundamental personal and professional challenge is developing the belief that people have the capability to make decisions about their own lives; they don't need me to do it for them. The expression from transactional analysis 'I'm OK – you're OK' (Harris 2012) catches the basic stance of coaching. It means that, in essence, we are both capable of taking responsibility for our lives. It alerts me to the possibility of two familiar shifts in the relationship: 'I'm OK – you're not OK', and 'I'm not OK – you're OK'. In the first situation (which leads to 'tell') I think I am more capable than you and that you need something from me. In the second situation I think you are more capable than me, and I want you to tell me what to do. The expression is a sensitive measure of whether or not I am in the right kind of relationship with you. I recommend you try it out for yourself.

What is involved in implementing the belief that other people have the capability to find their own way forward? We shall see below that there are a range of skills that you can learn that are fundamental to coaching, and are good to have in place when you meet your first coachee. But before we get into the details of those skills, let's consider more broadly what is involved in helping someone find their own way.

You'll recall from the Introduction that from a relational point of view the coaching relationship is co-created. Put simply, you as the coach will inevitably influence the coachee. How can this be compatible with the coachee's autonomy and responsibility? This is a hard question, and one to which we shall return repeatedly throughout the book as we explore more deeply the issues involved. Nevertheless, some initial thinking is important, if for no other reason than to avoid falling into the position of believing that coaching is mostly about models, techniques and skills, which if properly applied will be all that is required – a position that tends to treat people as objects, as passive 'things' to be changed ('If I do *this* – use this model or skill – then *that* will happen').

One way into this is to think about how you are in other relationships when you want to be of assistance, whether as a parent, a friend or a colleague. What is involved? Where is the line between enabling and taking over? The basic question remains the same: do you believe that the other person has the capability to take responsibility and make their own decision? If you don't believe in their capability then you're likely to tell. I know I am most prone to tell when anxious, so have to watch out when I notice anxiety stirring in me. A more useful response is to ask myself, and maybe the other person, what is needed and how can I meet that need in a way that respects their autonomy? For example, you might say something like 'Tell me a bit more about that' or 'What are your thoughts about it?' The notion of 'resourcing' can be useful here: how can you help resource the person, both internally and externally, to enable them to address what matters? And when is something other than asking appropriate – when perhaps they are so overwhelmed by a situation that something more is needed from you? These reflections are flagging up that whatever we choose to do will influence the relationship, and the choices made as to the best course of action are a matter of personal and professional judgement. In coaching, the same sort of judgements have to be made, and at times it is hard to know what is best to do.

There is real value in addressing these issues during coach education and training. There is a great opportunity to examine, in practice, your usual taken-for-granted habits of intervening, and get an understanding of the triggers that invite you to act in certain ways. In the initial stages you'll probably feel the strain of holding back from what you normally do, as you develop a mindset and the skills that offer you the choice of doing something different. It is likely you'll initially feel deskilled as you restrain from familiar behaviours and learn new ones. These skills will open up new possibilities in your relations with others, and widen the range of responding. They won't take away some of the dilemmas you'll encounter, but they will offer greater awareness and additional ways of resourcing others.

2. A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR PRACTICE

If we are to change our usual habitual ways of working it's important to have a framework that makes sense of, and provides guidelines for, this different approach. All that follows in this book is founded on the notion that 'meaning making' is fundamental to being human. We are always seeking and attributing meaning to events, from the smallest act of perception (e.g. that moment of confusion when a 'fly' nearby is suddenly a 'plane' a long way away) to the broadest social, political and philosophical systems. The 'facts' never 'speak for themselves', they only do so from within a pre-existing set of beliefs. This becomes obvious when, for instance, we hear politicians from different parties argue about the same issue, but differ completely and systematically about the nature and meaning of what is going on. In a sense they live in 'different worlds'. No doubt you've regularly experienced the same sort of thing when you've had disagreements with family, friends and colleagues at work – people see things very differently; the facts differ depending upon the viewpoint.

The gestalt school of psychology explored this meaning making in perception in the early decades of the twentieth century, and their analysis is important for us here. Gestalt is a difficult word to translate, but it basically means that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, and that, crucially, when we perceive something we do so immediately as a meaningful whole. For example, I hear a car door slam, or footsteps along the path, rather than a collection of different sounds which I then add together to infer what I've heard. The gestalt psychologists gave many examples of how we immediately ascribe meaning, 'completing' patterns that go beyond what is given to perception (see Figure 1.1).

I would anticipate that you will find it hard, if not impossible, not to see a panda, a circle and a rectangle in Figure 1.1, yet in fact each figure is incomplete. The 'panda' is an arrangement of black marks on a white background; the 'circle' and 'rectangle' are just some broken lines.

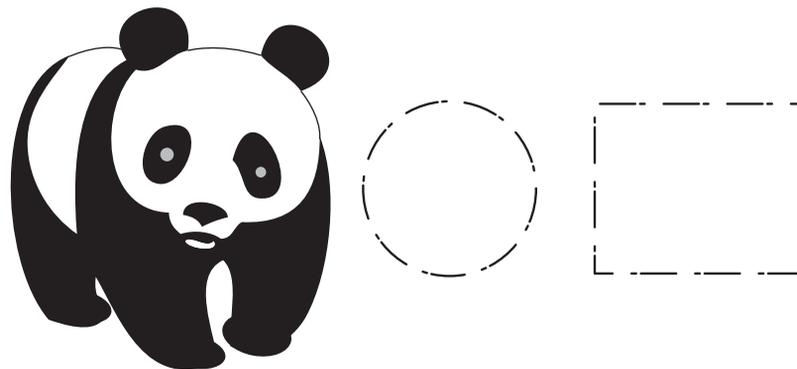


FIGURE 1.1 Completing incomplete patterns

The gestalt psychologists demonstrated that in an ambiguous situation there is the possibility of seeing more than one meaningful pattern, using what are now very familiar images (see Figures 1.2 and 1.3).

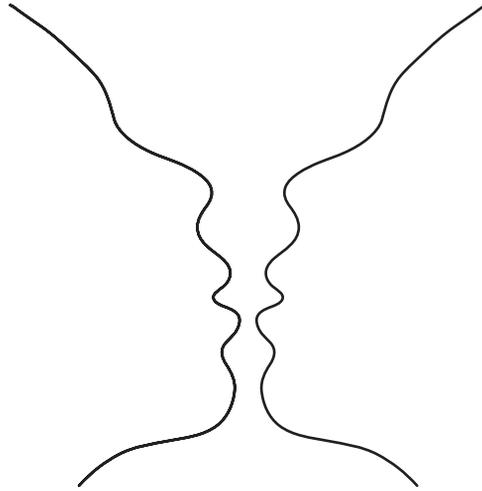


FIGURE 1.2



FIGURE 1.3

You can probably easily see the vase/faces and, perhaps less easily, faces of a young/older woman in Figures 1.2 and 1.3. Notice again that you'll be seeing each as a meaningful whole – for example, either as a black vase or white faces (rather than black marks on white backgrounds).

Notice in addition that you'll not be able to see both images at the same time, e.g. you'll not be able to see both young and older women's faces in the same moment (though you may switch perception from one to the other very quickly). This is because perception is organised around meaningful wholes, which the gestalt psychologists analysed in terms of 'figure' and 'ground', concepts that will be important throughout this book. The 'figure' is the something we 'see', the meaning we attribute to what we perceive: so the figure may be the black vase or the white faces, or the young or older woman's face. Each figure takes on meaning through a particular way of organising the 'ground' (short for 'background') – the 'source material' for the figure. For example, the black and white patches that form the mouth and chin of the older woman become the neck and choker of the younger woman. In a sense, the 'ground' becomes invisible, integrated as it is into the figure.

What is the importance of all of this for coaching? First, the coachee's issues, goals and agendas arise from the meaning they are attributing to the situation – their 'interpretation' of events. In other words, certain ways of making sense of situations have become 'figural' ('My manager always takes the other person's side

against me’). All that happens, all the self-evident ‘facts’, are interpreted in terms of that figure – even events that might seem to challenge the dominant figure (‘Yes, he seemed to take my side then, but he was only doing so because you were there; he didn’t really mean it’).

Second, this dominant figure (with its fixed meaning) shapes and limits the possibilities of action – possibilities that only reproduce the existing situation (‘Well I suppose I could just ignore it’ or ‘Well I think I’m going to challenge him on it next time it happens’). For something new to happen, a ‘fixed gestalt’ (i.e. fixed way of interpreting the situation) has to be loosened to allow the possibility for a new figure, a new understanding, to emerge (like the switch from the face of the older woman to the face of the younger woman).

How do we loosen the grip of the existing figure? The approach taken throughout this book is that we do so through the process of raising awareness; we constantly invite the coachee to attend closely to their experience of the situation, the figure and the ground, and through so doing anticipate that new figures will emerge – new ways of making sense of the situation. If and when a new figure emerges it often happens as a sudden moment of realisation, an ‘a-ha’ moment, when the whole situation is seen anew (suddenly seeing the different face). This new understanding changes the terrain and opens up additional possibilities for action (‘OK, I can see that I always feel that people takes sides against me. I need to work on this’).

Let’s turn now to how we go about this; how, in concrete terms, do we raise awareness?

3. THE SKILLS TO IMPLEMENT AN AWARENESS-RAISING COACHING APPROACH

Let me describe a scenario that is commonplace in the first coaching practice sessions and which you too may experience. Your coachee begins by outlining their situation and their difficulties, and having got to the end of the story there will come a moment when the coachee sits back and it is your turn to speak. At this moment there is often a palpable sense of the responsibility for ‘solving’ the difficulties shifting from the coachee to the coach, and it is likely that you will experience a sense of the responsibility landing with you, along with a keen sense of anxiety regarding what to say next. In this situation, even though you are primed not to and are hardly noticing what you are doing, you are likely to find yourself drawn into giving advice, or, mindful that you are not supposed to do so, feel at a loss as to what to do next. The question is: how do you go about implementing the coaching ethos and translate coaching principles into skilful practice?

There is a useful mantra that catches the spirit of what to do next: ***ask not tell***. The coachee has the answers. Your job is to ask questions, or use other skills, to help them find those answers. And it is important to underline that these skills are carriers of the relationship; they play a vital part in building the relationship.

You will experience for yourself – as observer, coachee and coach – the powerful relational impact of these skills when used well or poorly.

Good attention and deep listening. Participants on workshops who witness an experienced coach working with a coachee are often astonished by how little the coach actually says and how closely they attend to and listen to their coachee. There is often shared agreement from those watching that they would normally have ‘jumped in’ much quicker and would have been unable to tolerate the long silences.

The coach and coachee typically have a different story to tell. Usually neither is aware of anything special about the silences; rather the coachee often speaks of a deep sense of connection with the coach, of really being ‘heard’, and in that hearing they listen more to their own experience, becoming more aware of what they think and feel, and of how they behave. The coach is likely to have a similar experience, of connecting to the coachee and getting a deeper understanding of their situation, often becoming very moved by it and finding that what they need to say next and when to say it come forth without effort, without having to think beforehand ‘What is the next thing I should say?’

Developing the capacity to really listen, and the confidence that what needs to be said will just emerge (rather than having to plan what to say), come with experience, and it is likely that developing this capability will be a challenge to you that takes effort and some self-discipline at first. It involves putting aside all the other things that tug at your attention and instead tuning into the coachee and what they are saying. One of the great pay-offs for you as a coach, something that participants on programmes discover to their delight and relief, is that when listening deeply they find that what to say next is ‘called out’ without having to anxiously prepare beforehand what to say.

Conversation is turn taking, and after you have listened it will be to your turn to speak. What can you say that does not involve you taking responsibility for the subsequent direction of the conversation? How can you avoid ‘taking the reins’, and instead enable the coachee to deepen their awareness of their situation? Paraphrasing, summarising and empathy are powerful skills that are fundamental here.

Paraphrasing is listening to the coachee and then passing the meaning of what they have said back to them. You may use the coachee’s own words, or it may be that you use words that are similar but not the same, as long as they closely catch the same meaning. For example:

Coachee: I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed at the moment. We are being just a bit too successful, as many of the bids we have recently put in have been accepted but we haven’t got enough resources to manage it all. And it is all landing in my lap to sort out! There isn’t the time, and clients are increasingly unhappy because they don’t think we are giving proper service – and I know we aren’t. I just feel constantly stressed and cannot switch off even out of work time.

Think of how you might respond here. Maybe write down what you might say. You could take the reins and say something like:

Well, have you thought of prioritising?

Or:

Don't you think it would be a good idea to speak to your manager, as it is clear that something needs to happen to deal with the workload?

Or:

It's important to separate work from home; you need to find a way to switch off, to properly look after yourself.

Or you could take the paraphrasing option, saying something like:

So the business is doing well and there is lots of work coming in, but you're the person having to manage it all, and it's too much. You know the clients are right to be dissatisfied. All this is leaving you constantly stressed and worried, unable to switch off, even at home.

On paper, such paraphrasing can look artificial and stilted, and on being first introduced to paraphrasing people often laugh and say something like 'They'll just say I'm repeating what they've just said'. However, in practice – and when done in a skilled way – this does not happen, and paraphrasing is experienced seamlessly as a natural moment in an ongoing conversation.

What, then, is the value of paraphrasing, and why do we do it?

- It ensures that you accurately understand what the coachee has said. If you have not understood, the coachee has the opportunity to correct you.
- It demonstrates to the coachee that you are carefully attending to what is being said – this may be a new and powerful experience for them.
- It ensures you follow rather than lead the coachee. This allows the coachee to unfold their story at their own pace and in their own direction. It allows you to take your turn without taking responsibility for the direction of the conversation.
- It assists the coachee in gaining a little distance and objectivity about their situation. Your paraphrasing allows the coachee to 'hear' what they have said, and this helps in gaining clarity about the issues. In a way, with your paraphrasing, the issue is moved from a perhaps inarticulate 'something' within the coachee to something more definite that sits in the space between you, something you can both have a perspective on. It brings more to the fore – makes more 'figural' – what is normally just the 'ground', and in doing so allows the possibility of new meanings to emerge.

- It allows you breathing space, particularly at the beginning of the session – a moment to gather your wits and tune into the coachee. This can be very helpful, particularly if the coachee is conveying a complex story, the situation seems very stuck, or you feel under pressure to respond with an ‘answer’. Paraphrasing gives you something to ‘do’, something to say, so that you take your turn in the conversation, begin to get the story out, and not grab the reins.

A very practical question may come up when you first try this out – when to paraphrase? It is likely to be most appropriate when you first meet a coachee, when all the information about the person is new, and/or when the coachee tells you a lot of (sometimes fairly complex) information and you need to ensure you understand. You’ll also experience that moment when if you hear much more information – then you’ll begin to forget the ‘story’, like a container about to overflow, and this is often a moment to intervene.

When you first try out paraphrasing you may be unsure about how to do so without seeming impolite or intruding, especially if the coachee is in full flow and speaking without leaving convenient pauses. The important thing is to indicate your wish to understand them, saying something like ‘Can I just stop you for a moment so I can check I’ve got what you are saying?’ or ‘So what I hear you saying is ...’. Usually coachees don’t feel intruded upon, and instead hear your words as part of the normal turn taking in conversation; they listen to what you say and respond accordingly.

The real magic of paraphrasing is that after you have spoken, the coachee most often picks up from where you’ve left off and says more about their situation, often going in a direction that is surprising, even surprising themselves, as a new theme or thread emerges – ‘figures’ which would be lost if you’d stepped in and asked a question about an aspect of the story that seemed important to you.

Summarising is similar to paraphrasing. It reflects back the content of what the coachee has said but over a more extended period of time, and so is likely to be used later on in the session. Like paraphrasing it ensures the accuracy of understanding, but it also does something extra, which is important. It is a way of gathering up the themes, strands and elements of the whole story, putting them alongside each other, and in doing so helps the coachee clarify confusions, contradictions and conflicts, and perhaps find coherence and direction in what they are saying. You can also summarise when the coachee seems stuck, has apparently reached a dead-end, or when the session has lost focus and seems aimless. Summarising at these times can be likened to throwing all the pieces of the conversation into the air, and often the coachee will listen, perhaps sit back a bit, and then take one aspect of the summary as the next natural step to follow.

Empathy is perhaps the most basic, most fundamental form of human contact there is. Extensive research has shown that for both infants and adults the capacity for, and experience of, empathy is at the heart of well-being and good relationships

throughout life (Goleman 1999; 2007). To be understood by another person is one of the most deeply meaningful experiences we can have. Empathy is often described as standing in the shoes of the other person and seeing the world through their eyes: the ‘ground’ of their being. This is a good metaphor because empathy is rooted in our shared humanity and shared culture, so that as I put myself in someone’s shoes I can grasp what the world looks and feels like from that position, and it is from this basis that I can reach out to the other person and have a relatively well-founded sense of their experience in the world. Empathy is often referred to as a skill, but skill is only the external form of a fundamental capacity and intention to tune into another person in such a way as to catch, in all its complexity and feelingfulness, the other person’s experience.

Have there been occasions when someone has listened deeply to you and you’ve felt understood by them?

- What was that experience like for you?
- What difference did it make to your understanding and involvement in the situation?
- What was the impact on the relationship between you and the person you were with?

Though fundamental to human experience, there are many blocks and barriers to empathy and it will be a vital aspect of your personal development, in service of your professional development as a coach, to address them. These blocks and barriers include fixed assumptions and prejudices about people, an unexamined certainty about what is happening (perhaps because you’ve ‘been there’ so feel sure you already understand, or based on preconceived theoretical assumptions), a reluctance to enter into the emotional experience of the other person, and a lack of awareness and experience about taking an ‘empathic stance’, i.e. the movement to trying to grasp what the other person is experiencing in all its fullness and immediacy.

Empathy can be categorised alongside paraphrasing and summarising as one of a group of ‘reflecting skills’; indeed paraphrasing and summarising can be viewed as stepping stones to empathy. On first meeting someone you’ll have little or no understanding of their situation, and paraphrasing and summarising can be used to build a picture of their circumstances. Then there is a gradual movement from this outside, external stance to entering more into their world, stepping into their shoes, and in so doing gaining a sense of what it’s like to be confronted by their situation, with its conflicts, uncertainties and possibilities. It’s likely you’ll feel emotionally moved as you tune into the other person, and it is most likely that the relationship between you will deepen.

This careful listening to another person and actively striving to see the world through their eyes is the first step in empathy viewed as a skill. The second, vital

step is communicating this understanding to the other person. It is not enough for you simply to have an empathic understanding; to be interpersonally significant you must communicate that understanding to the other person. Most often, but not always, this communication is through the use of words. Empathic understanding *does not seek to change anything*, rather it is a human form of contact that says '*Yes I am with you, and I really want to understand what it's like to be you at this moment.*' Paradoxically, the experience of being understood is often a powerful stimulus for change.

For example, imagine a colleague comes to you and is very upset. He went to a meeting with his line manager hoping to get some support and advice about a difficult situation that he's very worried about. They had agreed a time to meet but she was 20 minutes late. She was clearly in a bad mood and rushed. They went into her office and he began to tell her about the situation, when her mobile phone rang and she then spent five minutes on the call. When the conversation resumed she listened only briefly before expressing frustration that he was bothering her with the problem and that she expected he would be able to sort it out, implying, he thought, that he was not up to the job.

As above, think of how you might respond here. Maybe write down what you would say. You could respond to this in many ways. You could say:

Well you know what she is like, she never gives anyone time or support.

Or:

Yeah, same thing happened to me with her last week.

Or:

Don't let her get to you; she is just having a bad day. I think she is under a lot of pressure.

Or:

I think Jo had a similar situation to deal with lately; try talking to her.

Or:

Never mind. Let me get you a drink.

Or:

Yes I can see you are in a difficult situation. Have you thought of trying ... ?

Responses such as these are familiar because it is sometimes hard to know what to do if someone is upset, and we usually wish to be of help in some way.

At the same time each of these responses would deflect, in one way or another, what my colleague is experiencing right now. How might you go about formulating an empathic response? Here would be my process:

Step one: active listening

The empathic response would form as I put myself in the other person's shoes and imagine what it is like approaching this particular manager with a problem, and notice in myself some anxiety at the prospect. I get a sense of this anxiety rising as the manager is late, probably mixed with irritation at being kept waiting. I put myself in their shoes as the conversation begins and the phone goes, waiting with anxiety and frustration whilst the line manager takes the call. Then I catch what it would be like to be spoken to in such a dismissive way

Step two: communicating my empathic understanding

As I seek to respond I try to catch what is at the heart of what my colleague is experiencing right now – the powerful mixed feelings about being treated that way, with the continuing unresolved situation still in the background. I say something like (and each person will catch and express this in their own way):

So you've tried to get some help and feel you've been treated with no respect. I can see you're really upset and angry with her, and you haven't got what you need to deal with the problem.

The likely response to an empathic intervention is that (even though apparently hardly noticing it) the person feels 'heard', understood and now in a position to open up more on the situation, begin to reflect upon it and find their own way forward. For example, they might say:

I *am* angry; how dare she treat me that way! But I'm still stuck. Maybe I need to sort things out with her first; try to clear the air.

Listening, paraphrasing, summarising and empathy are all skills that enable you to play your part in the conversation without taking control of it, and it's important at a practical level to have something to do, something to say, as an alternative to the 'tell' interventions. But it is clear that these skills do something more than simply give you something to do; you'll experience a deepening of the relationship, and often themes emerge in the conversation that come as a surprise to you both.

There is likely to be a sense of developing trust and also a certain tension in the air at the possibilities of what else might be said. So what is happening such that the coachees are beginning to understand themselves and their situation better?

This takes us to the heart of how raising awareness helps the coachee find their own way forward. Coachees know far more than they are normally consciously aware of about the circumstances in which they find themselves. In our everyday dealings in life we operate on the basis of tacit knowledge of situations that enables us to engage effectively without having to think about everything first. Tacit here means ‘we can know more than we can tell’ (Polanyi 2009). Coaching is about raising into awareness what we know but cannot yet tell. Through awareness raising we enable coachees to reconnect with aspects of the ‘ground’ that they know but cannot yet tell, and in doing so we enable new understanding to emerge. So raising awareness is at the heart of coaching; it is what coaches are constantly seeking to achieve through the interventions they make. It is an alternative route to ‘tell’.

Awareness-raising questions and ‘invitations to explore further’: paraphrasing, summarising and empathy all involve playing back to the coachee what they have said. Questions and invitations to explore further are other powerful ways of raising awareness, and as such are central to coaching practice. They are used to invite the coachee to hold their attention on, and attend more closely to, their experience of whatever they are talking about. I liken this to looking at the sky at night. A quick glance at the sky may reveal a few stars. Take more time and attend more closely and many more stars emerge; they were already present but not yet in awareness. Likewise, I tacitly know far more about situations than I’m initially consciously aware of: awareness-raising questions and invitations to explore further bring into view (make explicit) what is present in the ‘ground’ but not yet ‘figural’.

Here are some of the questions I regularly use:

- ‘What is happening to you right now as you say that to me?’
- ‘What are you aware of right now?’
- ‘What else comes to you as you sit with that thought?’

Here are some invitations to explore further:

- ‘Say some more [or tell me some more] about what happened between you and your manager.’
- ‘Stay with that thought’, or ‘Stay with that feeling’, or ‘Let’s just stay with that a bit longer.’

These questions and invitations hold the coachee’s attention on what they are talking about, and what is happening for them as they talk about it. This process of raising awareness can be taken a step further by bringing the issue more ‘experientially near’, that is, more ‘in the room’, in the here and now of the session, so that the coachee can experience it more directly and deeply.

You might say, for example:

- ‘As you said that your energy changed, you seem much more animated.’
- ‘The expression on your face changed as you said that – what happened for you then?’
- ‘You’re telling me about your relationship with that direct report: what impact would it have if he were to walk through the door right now?’
- ‘Imagine she is sitting here, on this chair, right now, what do you want to say to her?’

These are just a few of the kind of awareness-raising questions and invitations you can use. It is useful to have some examples of such interventions and try them out for yourself. Of course, there is a danger in taking these examples as things you ‘should’ say: a list to be learned. The important point is not to hold on to the particular words but the intention behind them – raising awareness. You’ll see and hear many different ways of doing this, and find out along the way those that sit right with the way you work. Having said that, I have seen many people on training courses writing down the kind of interventions they have heard others use, or seen in coaching demonstration sessions, and said later how useful these formulations had been, and you might like to do the same. It seems that doing this provides a useful resource at the beginning; something for your own distinctive practice to coalesce around.

Your development as a coach will take place as you become more familiar with the kinds of skills described above. They are skills and therefore do develop with practice, ideally to the point where they become taken-for-granted, familiar, background ways of relating. They will change you and your relationships with others. I strongly recommend that you try out the skills in non-coaching situations, such as with family and friends, and at work. They can be used in a small way, such as one-off paraphrasing. Some of the most moving moments on courses have been when people have reported how paying attention and listening more, briefly reflecting back, or empathy has profoundly shifted relations between partners, or between parents and children. I vividly recall a person saying how his son got into a fight and the police had been involved. Instead of shouting at him, which was normal practice, he simply asked ‘what happened’ and listened. Everyone in the room was moved by his account at how this ‘simple’ beginning transformed what then happened in the relationship with his son. Trying out the skills in this way builds confidence and competence which you can take into your coaching with coachees.

4. A WAY OF STRUCTURING THE SESSION

Alongside the question of what skills to use is the question of how to structure the session. Structure is important in giving a sense of purpose and direction to the conversation: a sense that, to some degree, you know where you are going. The GROW

model is the best known and most-used model in coaching, and has proved its worth as a way of structuring the conversation. I'll not go into detail as the model is described in many publications (Whitmore 2009), but I do recommend you read it and get to know it well. I'd rather offer a few thoughts about how you might apply it.

The four stages of GROW:

1. **Goal** – what do you want to get from the session?
2. **Reality** – what is the current situation?
3. **Options** – what are the possible courses of action?
4. **Way forward** (wrap-up) – what are you actually going to do?

The first stage is about establishing the goal for the session, which can be achieved by saying something as simple as 'What would you like to get from this session?' There are differing views about whether establishing a goal is helpful or not, as sometimes the coachee may not have a clear idea about what they want to talk about (Clutterbuck and Megginson 2013). They know there is something 'there' but do not have a sufficient grasp on what it is to be able to directly address it. In such a situation the 'goal' can be to talk about what 'it' might be, seeking to make explicit, make figural, the tacit sense of something that needs addressing, and this can be a very valuable thing to do and be clarifying in its own right.

However it is framed, whether as a goal or maybe a less focused exploration, inviting the coachee at the beginning to say what they want from the session is extremely useful in giving a sense of direction and purpose. It's something to navigate by in the subsequent conversation. It's likely that at some stage in any coaching session you'll feel a bit lost as to where the conversation has got to, or is going. Rather than you taking responsibility at this point to move the conversation along, you can use the agreement made at the beginning of the session as a reference point and ask the coachee about where they've got to and where they want to go next. It is also quite possible that along the way more clarity will be achieved about the subject under discussion, or that the initial goal will be superseded by other concerns, and it may be appropriate to renegotiate the contract at that point about the purpose and direction of the session. However it goes, inviting the coachee to identify what the session is about, and holding to whatever is agreed, keep the 'centre of gravity' of responsibility and initiative for the session with the coachee, a fundamental aspect of the 'ask not tell' approach.

'Reality' is the second stage, where the coachee is invited to explore their situation more deeply. The coach helps the coachee raise their awareness of what is going on and who is involved, paying attention to both the external world and their own inner world of thinking and feeling. In ordinary conversation this second stage is often missed out completely, or addressed in a very cursory manner, often leaping from goal to options ('I'm having problems with getting agreement from my manager about what has been agreed and I think she keeps changing the goalposts' ... 'OK, so what do you think you can do about it?'). In my view most of the work in the session should normally take place in the 'reality' stage, because

it is here that we help raise the coachee's awareness of *what they know but cannot tell* – bringing into focus, making explicit and articulating that tacit, background understanding they already have of the situation.

When the reality stage is done well the final two stages tend to be relatively straightforward, as the way forward is very likely to follow naturally from the new possibilities arising out of the awareness raising.

I know that people new to coaching find GROW useful, then tend to dismiss it later as they get more experienced, often on the grounds of being too restricting as their practice develops. Personally I like it, as it is simple and effective, probably because it mirrors the natural stages of the process by which people identify and take their next step. It's also a useful resource if I get a bit lost in a session, as I can ask myself (and perhaps the coachee) about what are we trying to do (the goal) and where we have got to in achieving it.

A word of caution: Models are useful but it is important for you to consider your relationship with them. I have heard of occasions when people coming out of a coaching session say they have been 'GROWed', by which they mean they have felt they've been on the end of a process where the model dominated the session at the expense of sensitivity to what they needed as coachees. So I recommend that you familiarise yourself with GROW and other models of coaching but then hold them 'lightly' – as useful supports that can be damaging if they come to dominate your practice at the expense of the coaching relationship.

CONCLUSION

One thing that may surprise you, and that it is good to be ready for, is the kind of relationship with coachees that can quickly develop, even in what might initially seem like the artificiality of observed coach practice sessions. If you have a good structure to the session, carefully attend and listen to coachees, and invite them to more deeply connect with their own experience; this often builds a closeness and intimacy which is not present in normal everyday life. People often report – with a mixture of awe, anxiety, concern and delight – that in the very first session coachees say things which they have never told anyone before.

On reflection this is not surprising, as they are being invited to talk about something that matters to them; they are being listened to, and have the opportunity to explore what is going on. Often coachees report a sense of feeling 'lighter' – of renewed hope, excitement, possibility and purpose at the end of a session. How you respond is vital here and cannot be separated from how you are as a person. Can you allow this sense of closeness and intimacy, or does it raise anxiety in you (maybe named as concern about 'dependency') such that you pull back and become more 'business-like'? In my experience it is the people who can stay emotionally engaged, and see this as a 'normal' aspect of the coaching relationship, who become the kind of coaches who can be transformational for their coachees.

KEY POINTS FOR PRACTICE

The subjects we have covered in this chapter present some of the toughest challenges to people as they get ready to begin coaching, and you are likely to be similarly challenged. As preparation for practice:

- Without making any judgements about yourself, listen out for your own style in terms of asking and telling.
- Experiment with holding back from giving advice, suggestions and direction, and see what this is like.
- Informally try out the skills described in this chapter, maybe with family, friends or colleagues, as alternatives to tell: listening, paraphrasing, summarising, empathy, awareness-raising questions and invitations to explore further. You can do this in a small way – just ‘one liners’ – and see what happens.

RECOMMENDED READING

Shainberg (1983) ‘Teaching therapists how to be with their coachees’, in J. Westwood (ed.), *Awakening the Heart*. Though written for therapists, this is a delightful and very moving exploration of what it means to listen and pay attention, and the transformation that can happen. I strongly recommend it to you.

Rogers (2012) *Coaching Skills: A Handbook* is a book to buy as a resource, as it covers the core skills and other aspects as you start off and develop as a coach.

Whitmore (2009) is the classic text to read here. Many see it as having founded coaching in the UK. It is short and easy to read, giving a fuller description of GROW plus the importance of awareness and responsibility.

Clutterbuck and Megginson (2013) *Beyond Goals: Effective Strategies for Coaching and Mentoring* invites deeper consideration of the place of goals in coaching. If you wish to read some evidence-based studies around goals there is Grant (2012) ‘An integrated model of goal-focused coaching: an evidence-based framework for teaching and practice’, *International Coaching Psychology Review*; and Grant (2014) ‘Autonomy support, relationship satisfaction and goal focus in the coach–coachee relationship: which best predicts coaching success?’, *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*.

Clarkson with Cavicchia (2013) provides a good introduction to gestalt, written from a counselling perspective.