

Coaching: The Under Five's Metaphor and Authenticity

By Dr Angus McLeod

The under-fives have traits that can help us understand more about the needs of coachees. Coaches can also learn from an understanding of child traits. In this article we explore some of these traits and how they can widen our perception. This may help HR professionals to review structures and communication needs. It may also help coaches to create or modify their mindsets (for coaching) and thus help coachees risk more and achieve faster. The metaphor does not invoke understanding about Transactional Analysis (TA, where people are assumed to have a number of behaviour traits based upon three states, parent, adult and child).

Child Traits and the Coachee

There are numerous traits that may make a coachee more or less amenable to, and productive in, coaching. Here are a number that arise from using the child as a metaphor:

- Trepidation
- Reluctant
- Anxious
- Needy for attention
- Needy for support/advice/help rather than facilitation
- Displacement Activity (tics, humming etc)
- Fear & Flight
- Emotional
- Stubborn

Whatever the definitive list may be, what is it that HR Managers and the coach can do to reduce the likelihood of these traits becoming counter-productive? Ideally, we want to establish a good working relationship between coach and coachee and hope to stimulate coachee progress at the highest possible level.

Communication and Rapport

People's need for information varies. Some coachees want to know as much as possible about the process and tools used, whereas others may feel intimidated if they have too much detail. If HR and professional coaches are to work together, then the best approach may be one that echoes the true coaching process, in other words depends upon the state and needs of the individual coachees. For this reason, we find it helpful to offer several strands of information: a simple written explanation of coaching for all coachees, an open meeting for questions and answers (for those that want more) and in-depth resources including book recommendations. The short written information underpins both the confidential nature of the sessions and the fact that the coaches are not seeking to judge or pigeon-hole their coachees.

Before the first session, it is important that the basics are understood - time, place and duration and no interruptions and so these are included in the short written pack. Attention will have been made to ensure that the room is not overlooked and is private. I normally ask for a room with floor space, at least three chairs (for role-play and perceptual work), flip chart, pens, tissues, water and local rest rooms.

When it comes to meeting at the first session, the coach wants to establish rapport with ordinary discussion about journeys, general business matters or headline news. Introduce yourself as they may have forgotten your name! The whole tone of coaching should already be overt: the coach will not offer any judgements and will not have taken a particular space in the room, instead offering that choice to the coachee. I also ask where the coachee would like me to sit, further underlying the role of coach as facilitator and servant leader¹.

After building rapport and before starting to look at an actual issue or target for the session(s), an introduction that reinforces confidentiality is helpful. It is also useful to make a statement such as this:

“The pace and risk that you take is up to you. I do not mind whether the risk to you is small, medium or big and I do not need to know”

Coachees can be troubled by what they consider low-level issues and targets. The phrase is designed to reduce their concerns.

My introduction also contains the following elements:

- Check that the time-frame is still okay and does not need to be shortened
- Defining what coaching is AND what it is not
- Explaining whether non-coaching interventions will be made
- Any contractual limitations (eg. desire to move out of the organisation and counselling)
- Any likely activity-based work including wider use of the room (timelines, perceptual position work, flip charts etc)
- Ownership of the coach's notes (for the coachee upon request)
- Accessibility outside the sessions (telephone and email contact)
- Whether papers and books are loaned or given

While the last two may not seem important immediately, they define some of the boundaries of the coaching relationship. These are important since a coach who routinely offers extra-curricular contact may give the impression that the relationship is special and run into serious problems of transference² or cathectation³.

Reassurance, Boundaries and Consistency

Boundaries, reassurance and consistency are all critical to child happiness and mental health. Boundaries, as we see above, help define the relationship and provide safety and comfort by giving broad context to the coaching relationship. The coachee may also need a level of reassurance in the early stages of the relationship or if the experience of coaching is new. The coach can help by asking questions that relate to the comfort and possible needs of the coachee, here are a few such phrases:

¹ The work of Greenleaf is useful in this context. See for example, Greenleaf, R.K. and Spears, L. 1998. Power of Servant Leadership, in *Focus on Leadership: Servant Leadership for the 21st Century*, 2001, Berrett-Koehler, K. Blanchard, L.C. Spears, M. Lawrence and L. Spears (eds), John Wiley, NY.

² Transference occurs where the coachee assumes and projects certain characteristics or feelings (of their own) as if they belonged to the coach.

³ Cathectation is the projection of emotional traits and feelings that can best be described as like a 'falling in love' experience - in other words, where the reality of the coach's state and emotion does not match the expectations of the afflicted coachee.

- Are you comfortable or is the sun too bright?
- I'm a little warm, are you okay or would you like to take your jacket off also?
- We could, if you like, work with paper or the flip chart, have you a preference?
- We are about half way through, do you want a five-minute break?
- I noticed that you smoke, do you want a break?

Consistency in the context of coaching means a level of predictable language and behaviour. It does not mean that the coach cannot ask a challenging question. But sudden and radical changes of behaviour, without explanation, could be unhelpful as the coachee's attention and mental processing may be centred on the coach rather than on their own material. If the coachee is to move ahead, then the focus of work needs to remain with them.

Challenges can temporarily reduce the quality of rapport and this is acceptable because the coachee is invariably willing to work at a higher level of risk after these periods having successfully learned from the experience. These episodes of challenge and success deepen the working relationship, fuelled by good experience. A small number of NLP-trained people (who are new to coaching) think that it is vital to maintain rapport at all costs but this is detrimental to coaching. Risk and success deepens trust in the coaching dynamic and in my experience this often leads to new levels of risk and pace.

Mentoring Interventions

The metaphor predicts that the coachee may be needy for support, advice or help rather than coaching facilitation from time to time. This would move the session from one of coaching to that of traditional mentoring where advice may be given. Advice-giving is not coaching intervention. One reason for keeping a high level of coaching interventions is that the discussion stays focussed on the coachee's material and not on the coach's wisdom. Another, is that coaching reveals compelling strategies that are found by the coachee and these are more likely to be successful and more beneficial to their learning and self-confidence (with those new strategies) than simply giving them strategies of our own.

One could say that ***classical mentoring creates dependency whereas coaching stimulates independence.***

Although mentoring interventions are best kept to a minimum, with pressures for time, my colleagues sometimes provide ideas and suggestions and always preceded by a phrase like:

"This is not a coaching intervention but..."

These phrases keep the core processes of coaching consistent – a need, as highlighted above. We also find that such interventions seem to be made only where they relate to some smaller element of an issue or target, never with a major issue. Where such interventions are made, I recommend that the coach offer three or more possibilities so that the coachee decides which, if any, are interesting to them. A choice of two strategies or solutions is not that helpful because the mind is very well conditioned to comparing (one against another) and this process tends to restrict the likelihood of creative, imaginative thought. Three seems to offer a memorable number of solutions and often stimulates solutions that are a variant on one of them. This is possibly due to the more active mental process of sorting rather than one of simple comparing.

Emotion

There are times when providing a space for emotional expression is helpful and times when it is not⁴. Coachees may sometimes be too emotional to move on effectively. Sometimes they may not be emotionally connected enough to be motivated to action.

Where a coachee appears to be over-emotional this may manifest in a number of ways, for example:

- not having identified the nature of the issue logically
- making judgements
- not finding a strategic path to moving ahead
- returns again and again to the same issue,

In these cases, it can be helpful to invite the coachee to take a more detached view of their situation. If others are involved (as they often are) the coachee may learn something from exploring the 'second-position' (imagining that they are in the other party's shoes in that situation⁵). An even more remote state is that of the third-position (observer) from where the coachee may revisit the situation as if from a comfortable distance and seek learning from that⁶.

At other times, a coachee may be so detached from the issue, at an emotional level, that they are not moving ahead. They may talk about their experience without feeling and may avoid the personal pronoun 'I'. Emotion drives our motivation, whether consciously aware or not, and so inviting increased emotional 'association' can help a coachee to be motivated to drop or resolve a particular issue. If the coachee uses 'one' or 'you' when they are talking about their own experience, they can be invited to repeat what they have said using 'I', thus:

You have just said, 'You don't need that' when I think you might have said, 'I don't need that'. Could you repeat that using 'I' instead of 'you'?

Sometimes, where lack of emotion may be an issue, I will invite the use of another perceptual position, the Contrived Second Position⁷ where the coachee is invited to imagine helping the coach or another third party with a similar issue', viz.:

Coach: Okay, imagine that I have this problem exactly. How do you advise me?

Coachee: Get it sorted and out of the way

Coach: Okay the best advice I have for you in this situation is this, 'Get it sorted and out of the way'.

The coach then leaves a silence. This may create a period of great concentration during which the coachee's experience becomes more emotionally associated and real. When they break the silence it is usually to share a definitive action.

⁴ See for example, McLeod, A.I. 2002, Emotional Intelligence in Coaching, **Rapport**, 58, 53 and McLeod, A.I. 2003. Emotion and Coaching, **Anchor Point**, 17, 2, 35-41

⁵ These positions comprise part of the NLP model of Perceptual Positions.

⁶ Perceptual positions are detailed in many standard texts on NLP including, Knight, S., 2000, NLP at Work: The Difference that Makes the Difference, 2nd edition, Nicholas Brealey, London or see my own book, referenced below.

⁷ McLeod, A.I., 2003, *Performance Coaching – The Handbook for Managers, HR Professionals and Coaches*, Crown House Publishing, Carmarthen, UK and NY

Child Traits and the Coach

A number of traits spring to mind that may be useful to the coach. Some of these are:

- Open to learning
- Trusting
- Asking questions for understanding without embarrassment
- Warm
- No need to be right
- Authentic

Authenticity

The 'five-year old' coachee may easily sense when someone cannot be trusted. In building and maintaining rapport, the degree of comfort the coach has with themselves (as well as their behaviours and mindset) make an impression on the coachee that can be more or less helpful to them. The coach's authenticity is certainly of great value⁸. Faking it is not an option! Coaches need therefore to be of the right stuff. Not everyone can inspire confidence and establish high levels of trust. This will be easier if the coach is honest and happy to be himself or herself, not role-playing.

Authentic Mindsets

Creating a mindset for coaching is useful⁹ and recommended by many coaches. By mindset, I mean principally a set of beliefs (B) and values (V) and this may be augmented with statements of identity (I). Here are a few that might be helpful, if genuine:

- The coachee determines the pace and direction they wish to take (B)
- I am a servant in the relationship (I)
- People are paramount (V)
- People have their own solutions (B)
- Facilitated solutions are always better than advice (B)
- I am an enabler (I)
- Honesty is critically important (V)

If the coachee is to feel comfortable then the coach's mindset also needs to be realistic and honest and be formed from a genuine repertoire of such statements. Let's look at one of the above as an example:

People are paramount

Where these statements would be expected to result in a behaviour, I ask audiences to think of each statement in different contexts. These contexts include times when their behaviours suggested that the statement is most exquisitely true and other times when significantly false. I ask them to represent that range (or repertoire of experience) of perfection on a scale of 0-10 (ten high). I may then, for example see that one person has a range between 2 and 9 and another from 0 to 7.

⁸ McLeod, A.I. 2003. *The Authentic Coach & The Exquisite Self*, **Anchor Point**, 17, 6, 52-59

⁹ McLeod, A.I. 2002, *Mindsets for the Coach – Coach with Attitude!* **Effective Consulting**, 1, 8, 29-30

Unless the score is ten, then that person cannot prepare their coaching mindset honestly without qualifying their statement. The statement will be partly true and sometimes false. Ranking the range of their experience enables them to give greater contextual depth to their understanding of that statement. This allows the coach to be more honest with themselves. This process can result in a more congruent set of statements and thus to a more authentic mindset.

Statement	Least True	My coaching experience	Most true
People are paramount	3	7	8
I am an enabler	2	9	9

I then ask the audience to set down a score for what they think they achieve in the context of coaching. This score may not go beyond the range already set down since that range embraces all their life experience including coaching. This process contextualizes the statements more thoroughly and honestly. By repeating this for each of the statements they then have a template from which to prepare their mindset for coaching in a realistic, honest and authentic way.

There are some beliefs for which a behaviour will not necessarily result. For example, believing the statement, 'People have their own solutions' may not result in a particular behaviour but may be more or less true from the coach's experience. This can be ranked similarly.

Statement	Least True	My coaching experience	Most true
People are paramount	3	7	8
I am an enabler	2	9	9
People have their own solutions	0	8	10

If they wish, they can of course set down a comfortable average from their experience of coaching.

Overt and Covert Traits of the Five Year Old Coach

In looking at lists of useful traits that a coach might have, we note that some may be obvious to the coachee and others less so. I call these Overt and Covert traits but the old term 'Non Verbal Communication' would apply similarly to 'covert'.

Lets look at examples (including some specifically 'adult' traits) taken from the metaphoric model.

Overt	Covert
Listening	No need to be right
Considerate	Hopeful
Assertive	Unshockable
Patient	Trusting
Respectful	Open
Humble	Comfortable with emotion
Warm	Asking questions for understanding
Non-judgmental in action	Non-judgmental in thinking

The above traits may not sit exactly on either side; some of the overt traits will be obvious by behaviour very quickly (listening, considerate, warm) whereas others may take time; covert traits like unshockability may be quickly observed by a highly stressed and emotional coachee who tests the coach immediately.

One may wonder why delegates place value in coach traits such as individual openness (rather than openness to learning, for example). In the coaching relationship it is quite possible to have many sessions without any open statement from the coach. Indeed, the whole dynamic of coaching reduces expression by the coach to a minimum. However, it is thought that the coach who is capable of honest and open expression (but not actually doing that) is more likely to have a quality that encourages many of their coachees to risk and succeed at the higher levels. This again assumes that coachees, like the rest of us, have gut-feelings about people and that we respond to those feelings.

State of Being

The discussion so far has moved to an area that is fraught with mystique and intangibles! We understand fully that we distrust some people without any evidence. Instead we may rely on gut feeling, insight or intuition. Is it not likely therefore that these intangibles also affect the quality of the coach as experienced by the coachee? If true, then the coach who is genuine, who is skilled and who believes and values facilitation is more likely to witness remarkable advances by their coachees. We will have to wait for hard evidence!

Conclusion

The metaphor provides a starting point for exploring the coaching dynamic with a particular bias and this seems to be helpful in exploring traits that may inhibit or encourage coachees to risk and challenge themselves at higher levels. HR staff and their coaches, whether internal or external, can improve the likelihood of superb coaching outcomes by attending to factors that give comfort to the coachee and that enhance the mindsets of their coaches. Coaches who are honest and true to themselves are more likely to encourage coachees to deal with bigger objectives and take bigger risks.

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