OXFAM COACHING UPDATE

Welcome to issue no 15 of the Coaching Update, designed to share ideas and experiences around coaching across our organisation.

In the last update we focused on how to support coachees in renewing their own energy, and how Change impacts on energy levels.
In this update we look at how coaches can respond with agility and adapt their approach according to the needs of the coachee.

Developing Coaching Agility

In this Coaching Update we're going to be looking at how the coach develops agility in responding to different kinds of coaching needs. In reality, individuals request coaching support for many different shapes and sizes of change and growth, and one of the key skills of the coach is to adapt their approach accordingly.

A common barrier to developing coaching agility is worrying too much whether what we are offering the coachee is 'real coaching'!! When we feel that what we're doing doesn't seem to be fitting a text-book model of how things should be done, our energy gets sucked into trying to 'do' coaching by the book rather than engage flexibly with the coachee.

In this update we'll be looking at three different models which show how and why it is important to develop coaching agility.
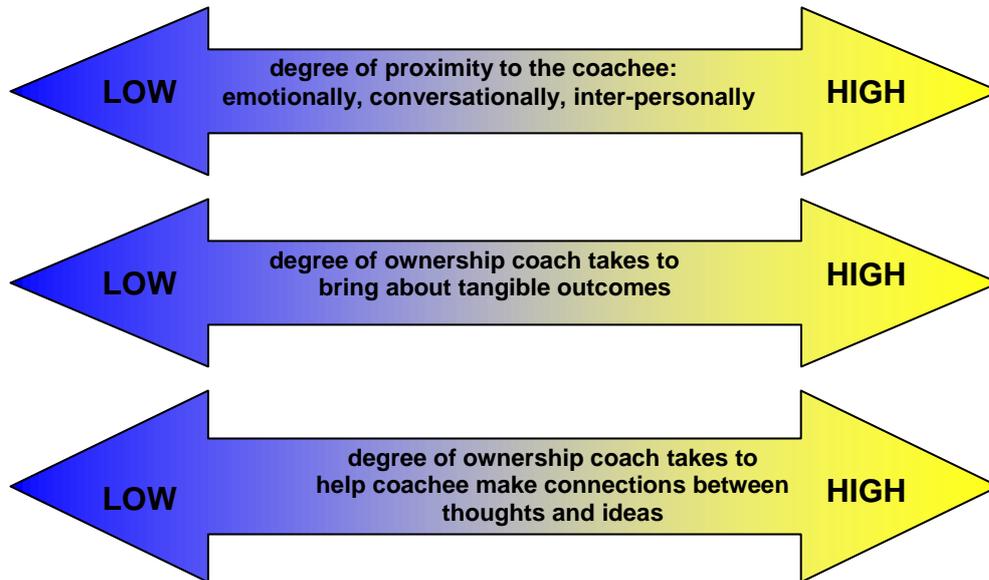
- Walker's 'coaching postures'[1]
- Parsloe and Leedham's situational coach-mentoring continuum[2]
- Silsbee's Septet model[3]

And hopefully after you've read this you'll give yourself greater permission to flexibly serve the coachee, and worry less about the textbook.

Coaching Postures

In his book 'Ecology of Coaching', Simon Walker offers the metaphor of hospitality to help us think about how, depending on what kind of guest you have staying, you adapt yourself to what they need. He talks about different postures the coach can take in relation to different needs, and suggests that the more flexible and agile we can be, the greater

effectiveness we'll have as a coach. He defines three different dimensions in relation to the position the coach takes:

LOW	degree of proximity to the coachee: emotionally, conversationally, inter-personally	HIGH
LOW	degree of ownership coach takes to bring about tangible outcomes	HIGH
LOW	degree of ownership coach takes to help coachee make connections between thoughts and ideas	HIGH

All of these positions are valid, dependent on the context. What's important is that we can recognise what position we are taking on any of these spectra and why. A starting point for a coach is to recognise their default 'settings', i.e. the positions which you most typically take or feel comfortable in when coaching others. For example, you may naturally be a very 'upbeat' coach who is definitely high in proximity and high on taking ownership for there to be clear outputs from each coaching session. Or you may default to a more neutral strategic posture with lower proximity, but higher in terms of taking ownership for helping the coach to make connections and form new meanings. And then there's the therapeutic, supportive coach with high proximity but lower on the other two dimensions, working with a very emergent style. And so on….

Most coaches typically recognise themselves in 3 or 4 of the 8 possible combinations, but also find some combinations are definitely out of their comfort zone. There's a judgment call to be made in terms of how flexible we can be whilst remaining authentic to ourselves, but my observation is that we commonly under-estimate how flexible we can actually be whilst still being true to who we are. It's often precisely when we are deeply grounded and at ease with ourselves that we are able to move through different postures with agility; I think of this as analogous to strengthening our body's core muscles, which enable us to keep our balance even when we are leaning or reaching out in different directions.

> **Which 'postures' would you be likely to adopt with the following coachees?**
> **Use the different dimensions above to help you think through your response.**
>
> 1. The coachee is exploring some challenging work and personal issues, and seems to just need time to make sense of their thoughts and emotions
> 2. The coachee has recently taken on a new role, is lacking confidence, and is working on some performance goals in relation to their new position
> 3. The coachee is technically excellent but socially awkward, and has been told they need to develop their people skills

4. The coachee is exploring strategic thinking in relation to their team and a number of different projects
5. The coachee is going through some personal transformation around their identity and purpose, both in life and work

Directive and Non-Directive

Another perspective on coaching agility relates to the degree of 'directiveness' in the coach. Many models of coaching advocate a purely 'non-directive' stance, drawing as they do from a Rogerian person-centred approach which is based on the premise that each individual holds within them the answers to their own problem.

This view is being questioned more recently within the coaching community; Blakey and Day's recent book 'Where were all the Coaches when the Banks went Down?'[4] is a provocative challenge to the non-directive person-centred dogma. What they are saying is that the coach can and should have a role in sharing his or her perspective, and challenge the coachee's thinking more robustly, rather than just agree to working to an outputs driven agenda, no matter what.

We won't dive into that debate just now, and I think being overly iconoclastic regarding the person-centred view undermines what is at the heart of coaching. But it's probably helpful to expand on what is commonly meant by 'directiveness' in a coaching context, as this is the issue which seems to be at stake. In my experience, the concept of 'directiveness' cause a lot of confusion, and anxiety in the coach.

I suggest that there are three principle ways in which the coach can be directive, i.e. *steer the coaching conversation in a particular direction*.

1. **directive regarding process**, e.g. make suggestions about how a conversation might be structured, a tool or model which might be useful to introduce, offer a way of framing the issue which might be of help
2. **directive regarding content**, e.g. offer own knowledge or perspective, or examples of how others have tackled a situation, share any concerns you may have, share an image or metaphor which comes to mind, suggest an agenda item
3. **directive regarding outputs**, e.g. offer suggestions for actions which the coachee might take forward, steer the conversation in an outcome oriented way, hold the coachee accountable to actions

Viewed in this way, it's hard to see how coaches can be anything other than directive, to some degree. Even taking a 'non-directive' stance is a form of direction. Silence is a powerful tool, and we shouldn't kid ourselves that not saying anything means being completely non-directive. So perhaps we should learn to accept and live with the idea that by our very presence we are being directive at some level.

In light of the above, I think it's more helpful to view coaching as an act of 'co-creation' – the coach is not just a facilitator for change, but is actively involved in it themselves. So the coaching is not happening *'over here'* – dependent on the skills of the coach, or *'over there'* – all down to the choices of the coachee. It's happening *between* coach and coachee, and the future is being dreamed up – 'possiblised' within that shared space, with varying degrees of imputs and interventions from the coach.

Parsloe and Leedham's Coach-Mentoring Continuum model offers a helpful framework for deciding what level of directiveness to offer (whether in process, content or outputs). They define four key areas which coaching addresses, and suggest that different strategies are appropriate to different parts of the spectrum:

skills/knowledge   performance   development/potential   transformation

more directive
less directive

A coach is more likely to *legitimately* act directively where the skill or will of the coachee is lower, the outcome for the coaching is more specified, and especially when the coach has relevant knowledge and/or experience to share with the coachee. They are likely to be less directive when exploring potential and personal transformation, where the outcome is hazy or unknown, and can only really be measured intrinsically by the coachee.

> ***Think about your own experience of change for a moment, and what was involved in helping you:***
>
> - build your skill or knowledge in a particular area?
> - enhance your performance?
> - develop personally and professionally to fulfil more of your potential?
> - navigate a personal transformation?
>
> If you had had a coach available to support you through any of these changes – what kind of support / challenge would you have wanted from them? How directive or non-directive would you have wanted them to have been?

If you answered these questions honestly, you'll have realised I'm sure that in reality, we rarely experience one level of change only. For example, what may be framed as a career coaching need may really come down to a performance issue, which may in turn be related to an individual's skills and knowledge. Or what manifests as a performance issue may be related to an individual's inner transformation; they are becoming a new version of themselves and are no longer able to meet the expectations which others have had of their past self, they are redefining their own meaning and boundaries.

Coaching Voices

As a final addition to our understanding of agility in coaching, I want to introduce Silsbee's Septet model[5], which identifies the seven voices of the coach. Silsbee (2004) identifies the seven voices as:

Master: stays self-aware, models growth and learning, remains fully present
Partner: defines, negotiates, and shares responsibility for the coaching relationship with the coachee
Investigator: finds out what the coachee's true needs are; gathers information about the coachee's situation, desired outcomes and possible actions
Reflector: Provides feedback and develops self-awareness in the coachee
Teacher: provides distinctions, language, and knowledge new to the coachee

Guide: provides impetus and ideas for action
Contractor: encourages mutual accountability and monitors coachee follow-through

The 'Master' role is located in our ability to be grounded, present, at ease. In this role we are self-aware and compassionate. The Master role helps us to know which of the other voices need to come into play at any given time, like a producer making adjustments to a graphic equaliser in a studio. The other roles vary according to the needs of the coaching assignment, but the Master role is a constant.

Think of a recent coaching conversation or assignment

- Which of the voices in the Septet model were you accessing?
- Which could have been louder?
- Which could have been quieter?

Final thoughts

Seen in the above ways, the idea of a 'one size fits all' coaching methodology is clearly untenable. The handrails which may have been helpful to us at the start of the coaching journey may be valid in certain contexts, but can't provide for the colourful and diverse range of eventualities we are likely to encounter with our coachees. So when we learn to view coaching agility as a core competence, to be developed and explored, it opens up our horizons to what coaching can be, and the fluidity with which we can serve coachees across a wide range of needs and contexts…..

………But what (if we abandon a more rigid mindset regarding what coaching can be) helps us to discern whether we are still 'coaching' or not, whether our motivations in supporting coachees are 'pure' or self-serving, or whether we are inappropriately crossing a boundary? That will be the topic of our next Coaching Update, but until then, I'll leave you to think about those questions!

References

1. Walker, S.P. (2009) *The Ecology of Coaching*
2. Parsloe, E. and Leedham, M. (2009) *Coaching and Mentoring: Practical Conversations to Improve Learning* Kogan Page
3. Silsbee, D. (2004) *The Mindful Coach: Seven Roles for Facilitating Leader Development* Jossey Bass
4. Blakey, J. and Day, I. (2009) *Where were all the Coaches when the Banks went Down? Advanced Skills for High Performance Coaching*
5. http://www.dougsilsbee.com/books/tmc/septet/the-septet-coaching-model for more information on Septet and link to free questionnaire

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