

Four Questions for an Artful Feedback Interview

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For many executive coaches, the first step towards a successful coaching engagement is gathering relevant data and helping their client to assess the current reality. When I first started coaching, I primarily used self-reported assessments to provide this data. They are easy to implement, provide solid personality/behavioral insights, and have the credibility of a reputable brand behind them. Yet they also have their disadvantages; most notably, it's hard to self-report your own "blind spots."

Given this challenge, I now subscribe to Marshall Goldsmith's stakeholder centered approach and conduct personal interviews to initiate coaching engagements. An artful interview can help a coach to see what the client cannot and, because the data is coming from key stakeholders that the client deems as critical to their success, there is great credibility in the data collected. Key to that last statement is the word "artful," which I see as a combination of efficiency and relevance. In interviews for client, typically, I only have thirty minutes to establish trust and get to the essence of what will best serve my client. Over the years, I have experimented with the right questions and approach to make my feedback interviews more artful. Here are the questions and approach I now use:

After an introduction and connecting briefly on a personal level, I explain the coaching process, the importance of candor in delivering feedback, and how grateful my client is that the interviewees are participating in their development. I also explain my experience with feedback interviews and what measures I take to ensure anonymity and confidentiality in what they offer. Finally, I ask them how well they know my client and how often they interact with one another, so I can assess the weight of their answers. Then we jump into the following questions...

1. What are (insert client name)'s strengths and where is he/she providing value?

I am looking for two types of strengths in their responses. The first kind is "being" strengths, or ways that their character/personality is working well for others. The second is "doing" strengths, which are tangible behaviors/actions that provide others value.

2. What does (insert name) need to do more of?

Here I am looking for constructive feedback in terms of perceived deficiencies, unmet needs, or missed expectations.

3. What does (insert name) need to do less of?

Here I am looking for detracting habits/mannerisms, overdone strengths, or anything that is taking away from the client's effectiveness. Sometimes it helps to ask about a situation when my client is less than their best.

4. What advice would you give (insert name) that would help him/her to become his/her absolute best as a leader?

This is my favorite question. I set the stage by saying "imagine (insert name) is sitting here right now...they can't do everything we've talked about today and your job is to focus them on what's most important to their success." Then I offer the question and ask that they try to put their response into three sentences or less. It's always interesting to hear what they come back to and often their most profound insights emerge in this moment.

With smart follow up questions based on their responses, the whole process averages about 25 minutes and typically yields the information needed to embark on a successful coaching engagement. I hope you find this process helpful.