

Being Authentic in Challenging Coaching Relationships

By Mark Raymond

As coaches or managers, are you coaching anyone who you think doesn't want to be coached, or says they do but doesn't appear to be listening to you? I have been reflecting lately on what coaches can do to maximise the benefits of coaching. As coaches, we generally assume that the coachee will be open to coaching. I don't think this is always the case. Sometimes coachees are told to have coaching by their managers and they aren't ready for it; other times the reason for needing coaching might also be the reason coaching won't be effective.

Early on in my professional coaching career I was asked to coach someone at the direction of their manager. During two coaching conversations the coachee did nearly all of the talking - about their leadership strengths, about what others weren't doing but should be doing. I remember at the time it felt like I could have left the room and he may not have noticed I wasn't there. I also remember having negative thoughts during the conversation - about the coachee, about the process, about me, and slipping into a mood of resignation, all of which I was doing my best to hide from him. These thoughts remained unspoken and my story was that I thought it would be useful to continue with the conversations to build trust and maybe then the coachee would open up. That didn't eventuate – I wasn't asked back after those two conversations. I don't think I provided much value and the experience left me thinking that I had compromised myself by not sharing my assessments with him.

More recently I had a similar thing happen. Again, it felt like I could have walked out of the room and come back and the coachee may not have noticed. For me there was an inconsistency between what the coachee was saying and what she was doing – she said she wanted to use the coaching to develop herself but spent most of the conversation describing in great detail the various successes she had had. When I asked questions to clarify, she stopped what she was saying, responded briefly and continued to talk about her successes. The conversation continued on the same way for most of the session, with more questions from me, including a question to clarify why she wanted coaching, given that everything was going so well.

The following session started the same way, but this time I stood up from my chair and called a time out. After a few moments, I asked the coachee for permission to give her my perspective on how the conversations had been for me. I described the facts of the conversation as I best could – that she had spoken for nearly all of the conversation about her numerous successes, that she hadn't asked me a question, which I said seemed inconsistent with her wanting to develop. She said that she wasn't aware of doing this but agreed that it had happened. I then described the impact for me, which was a feeling of frustration about not being listened to and what I was doing there, that she wouldn't develop if the conversations continued on this way, and that I felt like we were wasting our time. She nodded to me in response. I then put to her

that if this was my experience in a conversation with her, maybe this was how others found her as well. She looked down and started to cry, and stated that while she had been trying very hard, perhaps she needed to change the way she interacted with others.

From that point on our relationship changed. It was a important moment in our relationship and for her development. I was being of more service to the coachee by being more authentic, and the coachee started to listen more to me, and most importantly, to others including her staff.

I was reminded of this coaching experience in a moving scene in the film “The Kings Speech”, in which Lionel (the speech therapist) provocatively occupies a chair in Westminster Abbey, which is exclusively reserved for the current King or Queen, and challenges King George VI’s belief that he doesn’t have a ‘voice’. It’s a powerful moment that is transformational for the King.

What I learned from my experience is that there is a responsibility that comes with coaching - to provide a safe and also a challenging environment for the coachee to learn and develop. I realised that by managing myself emotionally and having the courage to take a risk to be *respectfully provocative*, I can take care of the coachee and open up a potentially powerful learning opportunity.

Some closing questions you may find helpful are:

- Is there a coachee or staff member that you have a coaching relationship with that you suspect may be going through the motions?
- What do you know about the coachee that you haven’t yet shared with them – what hunches, opinions and facts do you have?
- What can you do to challenge them while also making it safe for them?