

Coaching in Another Language: The Impact on Core Competencies

Katertina Kanelidou

Can coaching in another language positively impact a coach's performance?

Twice a week I mentor coaches in a multicultural environment. Some coaches may think that coaching in a non-native language could be a barrier to effective communication and their performance, but my own experience taught me that coaching in a foreign language gives me opportunities that I probably wouldn't have if I only coached in my native language.

A [survey](#) conducted in January of 2017 proved this assumption to be correct. The first part of the survey consisted of a questionnaire for coaches who coach or have coached in a non-native language. The results showed a considerable impact on the Core Competencies. This impact, as it was estimated by the replies of the coaches, fluctuated between 41 and 80 percent.

More specifically:

Establishing the Coaching Agreement (50-percent positive impact)

There is a need to be absolutely clear. We assume less of the client's understanding, we pay more attention to the terms that we use, and we more often check understanding with the client. As a result, there is ease in alignment, more accurately regulated expectations and a clear and memorable agreement.

Establishing Trust and Intimacy (52 percent)

The clarity and the attention given when creating the coaching agreement already has an impact on trust. Additionally, the following has been observed:

- Deeper curiosity
- Respect for diversity
- Establishment of rapport not only with words, but also with tone of voice and all additional nonverbal cues

The above can lead to a connection at a deeper level, a stronger sense of intimacy and a safe space where clients open up faster.

Coaching Presence (63 percent)

Coaches reported that they are more mindful, alert, focused, attentive, engaged and concentrated. There is an *“extra effort”* on the coach's part. They are more open to not knowing and better tapped into their intuition. Opportunities here are for better connection and less danger of falling into routine.

Active Listening (80 percent)

Active listening tools are more consciously applied; coaches ask more and assess less. They listen at more levels (emotions, energy, beliefs, etc.); they listen for intent rather than rely on assumptions; and they try to listen and understand in depth.

As a result, clarification is swifter and easier. There is more focus from the coach, and less assumptions, prejudice and judgment.

Powerful Questioning (63 percent)

The results here showed that questions are cleaner, simpler and more precise; they are to the point and cut-through. As the coach is mindful of the cultural diversity, the questions challenge the client's beliefs and frames of reference in a curious and respectful way.

Direct Communication (65 percent)

The language used is thoughtfully selected, as coaches have increased awareness of the impact of words and use more direct vocabulary. Coaches step out of cultural codes and bring more objectivity. They talk less and give more space to the client, allowing communication to flow. An observation was "Not to fool around even in the native language," which shows an impact that expands beyond the sessions in the foreign language.

Creating Awareness (59 percent)

The opportunity here is about broader awareness. Some reasons are:

- Coaches get out of the way more, allowing the client the space for awareness to emerge
- As the reflection is more intense in search of precise expression, we think more
- Cultural diversity helps us see things from different points of view
- The attention to nonverbal communication and deep listening makes it easy to detect incongruence

Designing Actions (49 percent)

With the awareness that "Words create worlds," things are articulated carefully when designing actions. There is more clarity in checking different options, choosing steps and finding the client's own way. Simpler, bolder and straightforward actions have been noticed.

Planning and Goal Setting (43 percent)

As both coach and client tend to be precise, the goals are clearly defined and explored. Coaches facilitate the process and the understanding of it with intuition and simple language. Cultural awareness and sensitivity are present when exploring and creating a plan.

Managing Progress and Accountability (41 percent)

The positive impact here is attributed to simpler lists and less excuses; clarity on accountability (which is easier to express in a foreign language); and higher intuition.

Coaching happens in conversations. The language that we use in these conversations matters, and we must indeed be bilingual: speak our language and the language of our client. But what we need to remember is that this language is not defined or restricted by any native language. Coaching in different languages can actually expand our competencies as we noticed above. In the words of a participant, “As we build trust, our shared human experience becomes more apparent to both parties and the differences become a source of interest. And, through one another, we learn more about ourselves.”

Katerina Kanelidou, PCC, has over 20 years' experience as a coach, trainer, mentor, educator and therapist. Based in Athens, Greece, she works with leaders from around the world supporting them to overcome their challenges and thrive even in the most adverse environments. She is the founder of SixStepsAhead, a global faculty member of the International Coach Academy and a steering committee member for the CoachActivism program. Connect with Katerina on Twitter @KatKanelidou.