

Common Coaching Blind Spots: What You Need to Know

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We all have blind spots. Even us coaches. It's part of how we humans have learned to survive – narrowing down what we focus on, labeling our experience to reduce energy drain, projecting our past onto the present to increase predictability. It's normal.

Part of our role as coaches is to be doing our own work constantly - identifying our own blind spots, understanding our habituated patterns, expanding what's above the line and shrinking what's below the line of our conscious awareness. We do this work in coach training. We do this so that our blind spots, our patterns, our conditioning don't get in the way of our coaching.

And yet, they do. We can't rid ourselves of all of our blind spots. Because we're human. All we can do is to keep looking for them.

After having worked with and trained coaches for many years, we've identified three common coaching blind spots – coaching choices made by coaches that reflect the patterning of the coach and negatively impact the coaching.

Stepping Over Certain Emotions

You may be reading this and thinking, "I don't do that. I know some coaches do, but I don't step over my client's emotions". And if so, we invite you to notice that.

What are we talking about? Stepping over emotions refers to a coaching conversation in which a client expresses an emotion, either in words or expression or tone, and the coach doesn't acknowledge the feeling or perhaps acknowledges it and doesn't explore it with the client.

Most coaches don't step over all emotions. However, many coaches step over at least one of the distressing emotions and some coaches step over virtually all distressing emotions. (See more on distressing and pleasant emotions in our [Relational Feelings Inventory](#)).

Coaches will tend to step over the emotions in their clients that they tend to step over in themselves.

Coaches, like all humans, learn at an early age, what emotions are ok to feel, to express and which are not. They learn what emotions are too uncomfortable to feel, what emotions get what reactions and how accessing or not accessing certain emotions protects us in times of conflict or stress. And we learn these things before we have memory, before we have language. They become part of our neurological wiring and as such, form a blind spot over "what is".

Here's an example of a client/coach exchange to illustrate:

Client: "My boss is a real struggle right now. He's constantly finding something wrong with what I'm doing. He's giving very little positive feedback. It's gotten so I hate even interacting with him so I avoid him. I'm starting to hate my job, but I *need* this job." *Client's head, eyes and face droop toward the floor.*

Before you read on, formulate your coaching response. What would you do? Say? Ask? Write it down.

Here are common coaching responses that reflect a stepping over of the emotion of the client.

Coach: What do you need about this job? OR

Coach: How do YOU think you're performing? OR

Coach: How long has this been going on?

Each of these responses is stepping over the client's feelings. An attuned response by the coach might be:

Coach: How are you feeling about this? OR

Coach: Your face looks sad. OR

Coach: Will you say more about the struggle?

Our emotions reflect the meaning we are making of our experience and drive our decision making.

Until we've acknowledged and explored the [emotional experience](#) of our clients, we are working at the surface of whatever they are bringing to the coaching. And whatever "solutions" we co-create won't have a strong foundation in what's underneath our client's "struggle."

Turning Toward the Positive

Some coaches believe part of their role as coaches is to help their clients see the positive, to see what's working, see their strengths, to find the silver lining. Coaches may consciously or non-consciously believe they should turn a client's focus from the negative toward the positive.

Certainly, an aspect of coaching is supporting our clients in engaging in multiple perspectives. However, when we essentially indicate, by our attention, questions or observations, "Don't focus on that! Look at the good/possible/silver lining, instead!", then we are turning our clients away from a part of themselves and discounting or invalidating an aspect of their experience.

Coaches who tend to turn their clients toward the positive, instead of being with them in their distress, tend to do the same for themselves. And they'll tend to like that about themselves (and other people probably like that about them too!). They'll tend to feel "right" and "good" for focusing on the positive, reinforcing their own blind spot.

Referencing the example as above where the client is struggling with their boss, here are common responses of coaches who turn toward the positive in invalidating ways:

Coach: "You're extremely capable. So, whether you leave or stay, I know you'll figure something out. If it doesn't work out with your current boss, what are the possibilities of a transfer?" OR

Coach: "It won't always be like this." OR

Coach: "While I'm sure this is challenging, it's a great opportunity to learn. What are you learning about yourself?"

While none of those are "bad" coaching choices, they step over the present moment experience of the client and do not meet him/her where they are.

Coaching Clients to Act

Three of the eleven ICF Core Competencies for coaching relate to coaching clients to act. Coaching clients to plan and act is completely appropriate at times. And some coaches over rely on these competencies, leaning heavily on questions that direct the client toward planning and/or acting. When we lean too heavily on these aspects of the core competencies, it can indicate a coaching blind spot.

We humans organically discover our own unique ways to self-soothe under stress. And when our clients are under stress, we coaches can non-consciously bring our own self-soothing strategies to the coaching. The way that we tend to self-soothe is reflected in the dimension of our internal experience that we tend to over rely on under stress.

The three primary strategies for self-soothing under stress are 1) to over rely on our feelings and allow ourselves to be flooded by them (this is extremely rare) 2) to over rely on our thinking and to analyze more and longer (this is more common and can create analysis paralysis) and 3) to over rely on our planning/acting, doing (this is most common and is what leads to Ready/Fire/Aim types of behaviors).

A common coaching blind spot is to coach our clients to plan or act (as a non-conscious way of soothing ourselves) instead of being with them in their distressing experience. We will tend to “coach the issue” instead of “coaching the client”, and we’ll ask questions not about the client’s relationship with their issue, but about the issue itself. We tend to try and fix the problems instead of using them as opportunities to bring awareness to how the client is relating to the content of their lives. For more on what we are coaching when we are coaching, [watch this video](#).

Referencing the example as above where the client is struggling with their boss, here are common responses of coaches who turn toward the positive in invalidating ways:

Coach: “What are you wanting to do?” OR “What are you going to do?” OR

Coach: “How are you going to address this with your boss?” OR

Coach: “What’s your plan?”

When we prematurely coach our client toward wants or plans or actions, we are likely to be designing actions without a foundation, without really knowing what’s going on within and for the client.

Summary

How did you do when you compared your responses to the blind spots above? What, if anything, did you learn?

If one or more of the blind spot responses felt familiar, that’s ok. Blind spots are called so for a reason, we can’t see them. And we all have them. So, what are we to do?

Use every means possible to uncover our hidden blind spots.

Whether it’s through assessments like the [EQ Profile](#) or through supervision, therapy, or feedback, we owe it to our clients, our coaching and ourselves to constantly be shrinking what’s below the line of our conscious awareness.