

# **COACHING SKILLS I HAVE COME TO QUESTION**

**By Cinnie Noble, LL.M., PCC (Professional Certified Coach)**

When I was trained as a mediator - 10 years before embarking on my coach training in 1999 - we were also taught the importance of paraphrasing, reframing, and summarizing and that these competencies demonstrate good listening and empathy. I was happy they were considered core competencies by the International Coaching Federation when I started my coaching journey and had already developed strong skills in this regard. Then, a series of things occurred, and I began to question the extent to which these skills are always truly effective.

The reality is our perceptions of our clients' words and experiences come from our lenses, our intuition, and our assumptions and do not necessarily reflect theirs as much as we may think. Our attempts to use these skills might not always be appropriate or well-received and expecting clients to correct us if we do not have it right may be more of a disservice to them.

A first realization that I was questioning these skills was when I was creating a model for coaching people to strengthen their conflict competence. Colleagues and I interviewed and coached over 50 individuals who participated in year-long research. During this time, we tried a range of coaching techniques to discover what worked most effectively to move people along the continuum of where they were to where they wanted to be. In doing so, we regularly included the above-mentioned techniques. Besides wanting to develop a specific coaching model I wanted to discover if the same techniques I had been using necessarily applied in the context of conflict management coaching and whether different tools might be helpful.

One of the findings was that most people involved in the study said they did not find that reframing, summarizing, and paraphrasing moved them along their journey. Nor, did they experience that these skills necessarily demonstrated empathy or good listening. I was surprised though admit many of the subjects' comments resonated with my own experiences as a coaching client and what I observed about the impact of these skills when supervising trainee coaches. So, I undertook to find out why these skills were not well received by so many.

## **PARAPHRASING AND SUMMARIZING**

The common reasons research subjects gave for disliking paraphrasing and summarizing were that their usage "took up THEIR airtime," that they were

"distracting" and "interrupted their train of thought." Many expressed that the coaches' "spin" on their experience was a "*pro forma*" exercise the coaches seem to think necessary. Many found the use of these skills "unnecessarily repetitive" and even "annoying." Similar words (like "annoying") came up especially when coaches shared their assumptions/intuition about what they perceive is going on for them (the research subjects) – and their perceptions were not accurate.

Many other people described hearing what they just said being repeated – in the form of a summary or paraphrase – as "redundant" and "time-wasting." Others heard coaches' descriptions about what they were thinking and feeling as "simplifications", "minimizing", "inaccurate" and "rote". Commonly expressed statements were also to the effect, "I don't need to hear back what I just said." Others wondered why the practitioner chose certain things to "highlight" that were not as important to the speakers as other parts of what they shared. Most research subjects said that they did not like correcting the coaches' assumptions and perceptions about their experiences.

## **REFRAMING**

When it came to the skill of reframing, I heard from many members of the study variations of "it just didn't land when the coach attempted to make my negative experience a more positive one" or, when coaches attached their (the coaches') words to the emotions being expressed.

"Off-putting", "patronizing" and similar descriptors were used by research subjects when their negative statements were reframed as reflective of their positive values or needs. This was especially the case when they just wanted to talk and reflect and not have their experiences "labelled." Others even described reframing as an effort by the coach to "flatter" them. As referred to above regarding summarizing and paraphrasing, research subjects said they did not like correcting coaches' "take" on their experiences.

## **COLLEAGUES' VIEWS**

While contemplating the above reactions to these skills during my research, I connected with other certified coaches, besides those who participated with me in the study, to obtain their input. Most said they have also questioned the effectiveness of these competencies as a demonstration of coaching excellence. Their various reflections included that they do not think these skills necessarily support the concepts of self-determination and self-actualization, adult learning principles and the philosophy that clients are creative, resourceful and whole. Other peers expressed that using

these skills means we are doing the clients' work i.e., by using our instincts and voice rather than facilitating or trusting our clients' ability to do so.

I concluded that the findings of my research were not specific to conflict management coaching, and this inspired me to rethink the use of these skills in general and to consider when and how to use them.

## **CAVEAT**

Though most people in the research voiced their dislike for the skills being discussed there were some who said they did not mind their use, and that they experienced them as what the coaches are supposed to do.

I will add - although I do not routinely incorporate the above-mentioned skills in my coaching practice there are times I do. With some neurodiverse clients and people who are highly emotional and those who are challenged in their efforts to process their experiences for instance, it is often important to focus the coaching conversation and use skills such as reframing, summarizing and paraphrasing to do so.

## **OTHER SKILLS TO CONSIDER**

I expect you already incorporate, in your practices, a range of methods to facilitate client self-determination and that demonstrate listening and empathy. Below I have listed a few ways that work especially well and better than those referred to above. These may be ones you also use, and I look forward to hearing from readers who will share theirs, too.

Early in the contracting phase, by way of co-creating our relationship, I ask clients how they best experience empathy and good listening. Clients typically respond with a range of insightful responses, and accordingly, I take direction from them. I invite clients to let me know if, at any time, they are not feeling I am being present. During our engagement I ask, at times, if the client feels heard and that I am understanding what they are experiencing. I ask what I might do differently.

Occasionally, between sessions, I send articles and memes relevant to what the client is working on or going through. Gestures such as these, that demonstrate listening and empathy, also serve of course, to build rapport, trust and increase connectedness that make the coaching conversation even more effective.

Besides increased silence and somatic communications (which I cannot emphasize enough as ways of showing we are listening and caring), other

helpful ways that also support self-determination and self-awareness include asking questions that tap into clients' brains and hearts instead of ours. This may, for instance, mean asking clients what **their** intuition is telling them, and inquiring what they are hearing themselves express. I sometimes ask clients what they are not sharing (or may be reluctant to share); I question what their body would say – if it could talk- about how the client is doing; I ask them to identify the emotions, (values, needs) that are coming up for them. I might ask them "what's most important to you that you want to ensure I hear about what you are experiencing?" I may inquire "what three words describe the impact of this situation on you?" A few other powerful questions include "what am I not asking you?" "what don't you know here?" and "what's the question that you fear I might ask?". I could go on.

## **SUMMARY**

I imagine and accept that not all readers will agree with or like my findings about the use of summarizing, paraphrasing, and reframing. The reality is there are many ways to show empathy and listening and to support our clients' coaching journeys. I have found clients feel heard without me using these skills; they find **their** voice and express **their** words; they use **their** brains and hearts; they experience compassion and empathy; they gain deep insights and new perspectives; and they reach their goals.

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