

Remote coaching is increasing in popularity but making it work requires some slight modifications to normal coaching practice, as the relative lack of face-to-face contact can trip up coach and client

IN THE VERY BRIEF history of coaching as a profession, the picture of two people sitting face to face in a room is probably the closest it has come to an iconic image. Yet there are many forces creating a strong pull for using technology to supplement, if not to replace, in-person sessions. The proliferation of websites offering coaching by phone or email may raise some questions that are at the heart of coaching's professional identity (not to mention reminders of the forces of commoditisation reaching our shores).

Still, it is probably a safe guess that most coaches have, at some point, delivered coaching over the phone or via email. Is remote coaching merely a compromise, a second-rate offering? Or is it an adaptive response where benefits outweigh the disadvantages?

Flexibility and the possibility to maintain regular sessions with globetrotting clients are commonly regarded advantages that may outweigh more fuzzy notions of losing the "personal touch". Whatever side of the argument you find yourself on, remote coaching is increasing in popularity, and it requires some subtle adjustments to make it effective. Although the basic tenets of coaching should be maintained, there are a number of considerations and best practices to ensure success.

Build and maintain rapport

It is harder to maintain rapport over the phone, particularly when you are not well acquainted with the person on the other end. The lack of visual and non-verbal cues that are the building blocks of rapport means that extra efforts must be made to ensure that

you are engaging with the person, not just with the problem.

Make it work

- Spend the first few minutes of each distance phone session on rapport-building.
- Smile, you can hear it.
- Be especially explicit and tactful when providing "negative" messages.

Fatal flaws

- Misjudging the level of formality or familiarity.
- Focusing on maintaining positive rapport at the expense of appropriately challenging the client.

Be explicit

To compensate for the absence of visual cues, the coach will need to be more explicit than usual in communicating thoughts, reactions and suggestions. There is also greater need to structure the session as both sides may get absorbed in the discussion and screen out some of the everyday markers of time (such as clocks and non-verbal cues of the other person winding down).

Make it work

- Provide more detail than you normally do.
- Be more explicit with the agenda and in summarising.

Fatal flaws

- Being overly explicit to the point of disrespecting the client's intelligence.

Check reactions

The absence of visible non-verbal cues creates room for error in our reading of the client's understanding and reactions. Silence can be all too easily interpreted as agreement, when it may

be confusion, hesitation or lack of attention. On email, it is important to cue the client to communicate their thoughts and reactions about the ideas you are offering.

Make it work

- Check in frequently with the client.
- Use plenty of active listening.
- In email correspondence, ask specifically about their subjective experience of events to supplement factual information.

Fatal flaws

- Making assumptions.

Be creative and flexible with technology

To fully take advantage of distance coaching, consider going beyond email and phone. Instant messaging, for example, can be useful for brief updates and specific questions.

Video conferencing is an excellent tool for maintaining the visual connection, is as close as it gets to face-to-face interaction, and is likely to facilitate relationship-building. Expensive video conferencing facilities are not necessary, because the necessary features are available for free on popular instant messaging applications – the only thing you may need to invest in is a simple webcam.

Additional support

Consider supplementing your real-time session with information such as e-learning tools, emailed articles and relevant weblinks for the client to read or view at any time in between scheduled sessions.

Some companies that specialise in

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Being able to maintain sessions with globetrotting clients is one of the advantages seen as outweighing the slightly fuzzy loss of ‘personal touch’

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distance coaching also offer a range of online tools including diagnostics, videos, chatrooms and electronic bulletin boards.

Make it work

- Combine technology to suit situational needs.
- Maintain phone or video conferencing as the ongoing, consistent medium – email and instant messaging should be used sparingly.

Fatal flaws

- Neglecting to set boundaries and protocol, so being perceived as being always available for coaching on demand. This is especially true with instant messaging and emails.
- Letting technology determine the way you work, rather than using it as a supplement.

Sample remote coaching format

- 1.** First meeting is face-to-face. Topics covered are exploring issues, defining objectives and agreeing way forward.
- 2.** Regularly scheduled phone sessions. Employ these to explore issues, develop plan of action, review developments and provide ongoing coaching advice.
- 3.** Occasional email correspondence to supplement phone sessions. These could be a combination of planned communications after specific events in the workplace, as well as ad hoc updates or requests from the client.

Further information

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Coach responds with reflections, encouragement, questions to think about, ideas for homework/ experimentation with new behaviours, or relevant articles and resources.

- 4.** Periodic teleconferences with third parties (typically, the client’s manager). Coach facilitates these as opportunities to review progress, align goals, improve manager-employee communications and address current developments. ■