

By Eyal Pavell

➔ You will never have a second chance to make the first coaching meeting successful. Get it right and it's half the work done. But get it wrong and the chances are you will never see your client again.

THERE ARE NO hard statistics about the percentage of coachees that do not return for the second coaching session. But numbers for other consultative professions, such as counselling or psychotherapy, show that about a third of clients choose not to come back.

The reason for this high rate of attrition is that there are more critical junctures in the first session than in any other. Indeed, the tasks are many. The coach needs to be efficient in exploring the issues, prioritising goals, setting expectations and beginning to provide solutions. On top of this, they will need to establish trust and lay strong foundations for a working relationship.

The uniqueness and beauty of coaching as a discipline that combines problem-solving with a personal dimension also presents the challenge for the coach to ensure that both are done successfully from the start. Otherwise, the meeting can turn into a detached problem-solving discussion or little more than a friendly chat. There is no set formula for making the first session a success, but some critical things need to be done.

1. Get to know your coachee

You will probably have received some information about your coachee before you meet them – and this can be dangerous because it can taint or limit your view of the person. A coach who wants to understand the coachee's world will need to listen with real curiosity and a good degree of naivety. Where is the person coming from? What do they really care about? Why did they choose this course of action? By asking the right questions and listening with empathy, you can get to the issues



Illustration Adam Howling

that really count, and then add your alternative perspectives on ways of coping. It's fine to hypothesise and entertain theoretical models as long as you are also prepared to let go of them.

- *Make it work*: Do this first. Go where the energy is; believe everything they say; probe; ask focused, open questions such as: "What would happen if you disappointed your boss?"

- *Fatal flaws*: Relentless interrogation and failing to stand back and reframe occasionally.

2. Define the need

The need to clarify the issues to work on is non-negotiable for the first meeting.

The things that led the individual to seek coaching can range from the relatively straightforward (presentation skills) to the undifferentiated (leadership). Questioning that is explorative, appropriately challenging and non-judgmental, and that is accompanied by a heavy dose of active listening, is essential even when the issue is quickly and easily articulated by the coachee. This is both to ensure clarity and specificity (such as: "Under what circumstances do you struggle to communicate effectively?"), as well as to confirm that the issue initially raised is indeed the critical one, and not, as in some cases, part of another issue.

There is evidence that the process of answering questions asked in certain ways is in itself beneficial, sometimes even more so than a subsequent intervention. Still, remember that you will need to be efficient in moving things along to define the topics you will be working on.

- *Make it work*: Demonstrate curiosity, good questioning skills and active listening. Take mental notes of the coachee's motivation, learning style, openness, general skills level and personality.

- *Fatal flaws*: Making assumptions without sufficiently exploring issues; speaking more than listening; defining issues too broadly; getting stuck in question mode.

3. Imagine the ideal

It's good to get out of "problem mode". Starting to imagine what success would look like is empowering for the coachee and critical in shaping the outcome of the work. As a coach, you will need to engage both the heart and mind for the greatest impact. First, ask

people learn best when they are at the edge of their comfort zone.

- *Make it work*: Offer practical, closely tailored advice.

- *Fatal flaws*: Advice that is overly simple or complex; too much advice; not getting real buy-in; not following up in the next meeting.

5. Pass the chemistry test

Running in parallel with the explicit discussion about the task or issue are some implicit questions that the coachee will ask as a continual evaluation of the coach on a more personal level: can I get along with this coach? Do I like them? Are they smart enough? Can they understand me and my job challenges? Will they keep my confidence? Can they help me to solve my problems? Do not underestimate how important these silent questions are to the coachee, and take the time to answer them genuinely.

- *Make it work*: Build rapport; share some information about yourself; clarify the boundaries of confidentiality.

- *Fatal flaws*: Evading questions; working too hard to impress.

6. Set the framework

Coachees do not usually know how coaching works and every coach has their own style. While maintaining the required flexibility, giving a clear sense about what to expect is always good.

Towards the end of the meeting, set the framework and expectations: the estimated number and frequency of meetings and topics to be covered; and planned follow-up activities, such as 360-degree surveys or meetings with managers. Capture these in writing.

The plan will be flexible and subject to change, but is a useful tool to clarify and contract on, and both coach and coachee should bring it to every session.

- *Make it work*: The focus should be on development, not on a development plan: keep it simple; set realistic goals and include progress checks.

- *Fatal flaws*: Getting lost in the details; being overly prescriptive; forgetting to revisit and update the plan. ■

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Further information

- D Peterson and M D Hicks, *Leader As Coach*, Atlantic Books, 1996.
- R Hargrove, *Masterful Coaching*, Pfeiffer Wiley, 1995.
- R Kilburg, *Executive Coaching: Developing Managerial Wisdom in a World of Chaos*, American Psychological Society, 2000.
- C Fitzgerald and J Garvey Berger, *Executive Coaching: Practices and Perspectives*, Davies Black Publishing, 2002.

About the author

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questions that encourage the coachee to imagine a successful outcome, such as: "What would it look like if you were a really charismatic presenter?" Next, translate the aspirations into tangible goals and actions. These should be specific and behavioural – for example, "present with impact at board meetings".

- *Make it work*: Ask questions that get the imagination going; define actions and goals succinctly.

- *Fatal flaws*: Too many questions; too many actions; woolly terminology.

4. Give (some) advice

Getting the participant to take action can, and should, come before getting a full insight into the issue. A suggestion or two that the coachee can start to experiment with is a powerful means of reinforcement and of exploration in subsequent meetings. It also helps you to understand the coachee's learning style. The guidance for action should be at the right level for the coachee –