



AGENDA SETTING

Part One: The focus of the session

“What would you like to be coached on today?”

“What will we focus on in today’s session?”

“What is important for us to address today?”

Part Two: The preferred outcome

“What would you like to get out of addressing this topic?”

“What would make this a satisfying session for you?”

“What, specifically, would you like to have in hand by the end of the session?”

10 Common Complications

1. No agenda in mind— “I’m not certain what I want to focus on today.”

Tip: Reassure your client and offer the space to think through the process right now, at the beginning of the session. You can direct the reflection by focusing on the agendas of previous sessions, asking about important goals and values, or focusing on pressing issues.

2. Multiple agendas in mind— “We could either address work-life balance, or my relationship with my supervisor.”

Tip: Remember, these agendas might be more related than they appear, and that there is no reason you cannot address both. Ask your client where she would like to start, and offer the possibility of returning to the alternate agenda a) next session, if it still seems relevant, b) this session if you get through the first agenda, or c) if it comes up in the context of the first agenda.



3. An agenda that is too large— “I’d like to write a book.”

Tip: Reassure your client that it is an excellent topic but remind your client that there is only so much territory you can cover within a single coaching session. This is especially important with the second part of the agenda in mind: using the book example above, it is a worthwhile topic, but the client cannot have written a book by the end of the session. What, specifically, would the client want out of the session? (e.g. To identify a potential co-author, to think through variations on a table of contents, to reflect on whether she should self-publish or seek a commercial publisher, to create a writing schedule and be held accountable to it)

4. An agenda that is too vague— “I need to be a better supervisor.”

Tip: Reassure assure your client that it is an important topic but stress the idea that you can work together to make it more specific before launching into the coaching proper. Often, this means asking some exploratory powerful questions (e.g. “On a scale of 1-10 how good a supervisor are you?” or “What would that look like to your supervisees?”). This is a nuanced point because it often feels like you have started coaching. Still, it is often important to circle back after an initial exploration and set the second part of the agenda so that you and the client can have a clear destination in mind.

5. Competing agendas— “I want to get a promotion, but I also want to spend more time with my husband and kids.”

Tip: There are several approaches here: 1) Point out the apparent conflict and let the client sit with your observation and react to it, 2) Treat it like the multiple agendas complication above, 3) Bear in mind for yourself that these may not be as competing as they seem and reserve final judgment until you explore it further.

6. Agenda focused on changing another person— “I’d like to brainstorm ways to make all my negative co-workers more positive.”

Tip: This amounts to a complaint, and people are more likely to complain when they do not see a solution or view themselves as part of the solution. Be certain to empathize with the client’s distress. A complaint is a description of what the client does not want; in turn, you can focus on what the client does want and facilitate a discussion of how they might help be the architect of that situation. In the example, you could ask what the result of more positive co-workers might be, and the likely answer would be “more effective work,” “more pleasant work,” “we would retain customers,” and so forth. Once you have these types of answers,



you can pivot and say, “That’s really attractive; I can see why it appeals to you. What can you do to help retain customers?”

7. An agenda that is immoral, unethical, or unhealthy— “I’d like to write a revenge book that exposes my whole family for their hand in my childhood sexual abuse.”

Tip: Believe it or not, I have encountered several instances like this: revenge, dodging legal accountability, or using coaching as de factor therapy. In such cases, I recommend not working with the client and referring them out to appropriate providers.

8. A shifting agenda—“I’d like to brainstorm how to tell my boss that Friday meetings are not effective” “I’d like to brainstorm strategies for tolerating Friday meetings” “I’d like to find ways to make Friday meetings effective for the more junior members of my team.”

Tip: This complication typically arises only after the coaching session is underway. As you explore one avenue, the client appears to shift to another and dismisses the first. I find it most helpful to just make an observation about this openly, as in “I notice that each time we start to tackle this issue, you seem to re-define it and we begin the process over again. What do you make of that?”

9. A lack of a clear sense of satisfactory outcome – “I know I would like to address the fact that I feel like an imposter since my promotion, but I don’t know exactly what I want out of this session.”

Tip: Reassure your client that it is fine not to have a clear outcome in mind. Then, offer to take the time and brainstorm potential satisfactory outcomes with them before you start the coaching. You can ask questions related to the focus or theme. Using the example above, questions might include, “What could I, as a coach, offer that a colleague or best friend might not?” “If you imagine the end of the session, what—specifically—might feel good to have in pursuit of feeling less fraudulent?” “There are many things we can do—plan, brainstorm, articulate goals, identify resources—I am happy to do whatever may be helpful for you. What would be helpful to you?”



10. The client is not ready to make a change related to the agenda— “My doctor says I should lose weight, and I know he’s right, but work and the holidays simply make this impossible right now.”

Tip: Here, you can assess readiness for change. Making change is a process that requires increasing feelings of resourcefulness, clear direction, and motivation. You can modify your approach to match the client’s readiness for change. This might mean asking some powerful questions to get more information while setting the agenda. It may seem like you have started coaching, but you are really just outlining the issues. Once you and the client have more clarity, set the final agenda, and begin the coaching proper. Using this example, questions might include: “When would be the right time to make this change?” “What will happen if you don’t make the change?” or “what small changes might be possible even in this difficult time?”