

Coaching Skills

Session Notes: Agenda

Overview

I call agenda and accountability the "bookends of coaching." I emphasize a two-part agenda. Many people teach similar approaches to setting a coaching agenda, but many do not. My fanaticism about this technique has emerged over years as I have supervised coaches and seen how often a one-part agenda leads to mediocre coaching. First, set the theme or topic. Second, get clarity on where the coaching session is headed-- what is possible within the session and would feel satisfying to the client.

As you learn to coach, feel free to just focus on these two questions, but do not start the coaching proper—the main portion of the coaching session—until you are clear on the second part.

Additional points:

1. This is more advanced: Sometimes, it takes many questions to clarify that second part of the agenda. Clients often have not thought about this previously, and so need some hand-holding through this process. The act of setting the second part of the agenda can be an intervention itself because it is so clarifying. You can ask a few questions to help the client think through what they might want out of the session.

For example, a client wants to "discuss how to handle my micromanaging supervisor." When asked what they want out of the session, they say, "I am not exactly sure." Some strategies for dealing with this include:

- "Take a moment. We have time. Think about what you might want out of our discussion today. What might be most helpful?"
- "What is your instinct? What does your intuition tell you would be helpful?"
- "If you were able to address this issue adequately, what would you have? How could we use this session to step toward that?"

2. At the PCC and MCC level of coaching, there is an expectation that coaches take more time. I have spent ten or occasionally 15 minutes setting the agenda. The extra time is needed because more exploration goes into the agenda. These are more typical questions for more experienced coaches:

- What would you like to be coached on? (part one of the agenda)

- What about this is important to you? (clarifying to help set up part two)
- As we coach on this topic, what themes do you anticipate we will address? (clarifying to help set up part two)
- What would you have at the end of our time together that would make this a satisfying session? (part two of the agenda)
- How will we know that we have achieved that? (establishing a clear measure of part two of the agenda)

3. Sometimes, the outcome of the agenda (the second part) is abstract, such as a client who wants increased satisfaction, confidence, or clarity. When this is the case, using a 1-10 scale to make the abstract concrete can be helpful.

4. Please refer to the agenda handout. It lists ten common complications that can occur in agenda-setting. This should be a reminder that coaching is easy to learn, but hard to master. A good agenda is crucial but can also be trickier than you might expect. The recordings of the coaches setting agendas should also help you better understand this skill.

5. It is important that it is the client who articulates what the agenda is. I typically check the agenda with the client so that I know we both agree, and then make a clear demarcation that the coaching is beginning.

6. Where possible, I try to make my first question specifically about the coaching outcome that the client has requested. For example, if the client's agenda is "to get three ideas of how they could be a better manager," you might start by asking, "What's one idea you have?" I do not always do this, but I can be helpful.

Fun Fact!

In 2020 and 2021, I experimented with just asking the second part of the agenda. Instead of asking my clients what they wanted to be coached on, I simply asked, "What would you like to take away from this coaching session?" I thought it had the potential to streamline the coaching session (I am always looking for ways to create really deep and effective 15-minute sessions). It did not work as I hoped. Consistently, the clients would say, "Well, I should give you some background on what I want to talk about" and then would say a bunch of stuff about the first aspect of the agenda (theme/topic) and then I would have to repeat my question about the second part of the agenda. It was interesting to experiment with, but it didn't work out, so I abandoned it and returned to the classic approach.