

Coaching Skills

Session Notes: Accountability

A Caveat

Let me preface these notes by saying that this is just my opinion and not some widely accepted or standardized approach to coaching. My goal is to encourage you to expand your thinking about accountability and—ultimately- to arrive at your own conclusions about the topic.

Overview

There are three distinct ways you can think of accountability in coaching:

1. Classic Accountability. It is traditional to think of accountability as holding someone else responsible for their promises or actions. An example of this is ensuring that a client follows through with their stated goal of going to the gym three times during the week. In coaching, the classic questions that go with this are A) What will you do, B) When will you do it, and C) How will I know? Here are some ideas that you might find worth considering regarding this approach to accountability in coaching
 - Do you, the coach, need to be part of the story? Sometimes, coaches and clients assume that the coach is the most natural accountability partner and that this is one of the primary purposes of the coach. I am not so sure. First, when the coach asks, “What support, if any, do you need?” it empowers the client to choose their own forms of support and accountability (e.g., a best friend, their journal, themselves). Second, the coach must be clear about what their role is. Does the client want the coach to encourage them during the process? To scold them if they fail? To simply bear witness to the process? To explore something?
 - Do you want to create a success-failure dynamic for your client? Engaging in this type of accountability strongly suggests to the client that their actions will be evaluated on a continuum of failure—partial success—success. This might be fine, or at least fine, for some clients.
 - Does your client actually need this? I’ll give you a personal example: if I say I am going to do something, I am probably going to do it or have a very good reason why I change my mind or do not do it. I don’t need an external person looking over my shoulder for most

things. If I say I am going to the gym on Monday, I am highly likely to do that unless something unforeseen (illness, emergency, sudden scheduling shift) comes up. I can think of an exception to this, and it is deadlines. I find external deadlines from editors helpful in that they create structure and a schedule in which I can plan my work.

2. Experimentation rather than homework. Although it is common in coaching to talk about “homework,” the tasks a client engages in between sessions are not assigned by the coach. They are created by the client and emerge from the insights and explorations coming out of the session. Further, a huge part of coaching is learning. One definition of coaching is engaging clients in self-directed learning. Framing actions as an experiment avoids the success-failure paradigm and emphasizes learning for the client. Here, you can use a few minutes at the beginning of the subsequent session to inquire about what the client has learned, no matter what they ended up doing.

3. The end portion of the session. Sessions typically close with accountability. The session's conclusion includes several parts and represents a shift from the exploration portion of the session. If the exploration yields insights, the conclusion is about using these insights. You must make certain to leave room for this at the end of the session—perhaps 10 minutes, as a rule of thumb (depending on session length). Common questions—or variations of these questions-- in this portion of the session include:
 - What learning has emerged from our conversation so far?
 - What might you do with these insights going forward?
 - When, specifically, are you thinking about doing this?
 - What do you expect to happen?
 - What are you hoping to get out of this?
 - What support, if any, might you need?
 - How have we done in terms of the agenda we have set for this session?
 - Would it be okay to end here?