

Coaching Skills 2023: Creating Client Awareness—Follow-up Notes

Coaching is engaging clients in self-directed learning (and, yes, planning and execution). You will recall there is a period of exploration after the agenda, which gives way to planning and goal setting. The most common technique that coaches use to evoke this type of awareness is questions, often called “powerful questions.” If one were forced to boil down coaching to just three technical skills, I would argue that they would be agenda, powerful questions, and accountability (all on a foundation of ethics and coaching presence).

There are, however, many non-question techniques that can promote learning and increased awareness in clients. Non-question interventions are statements the coach makes that can work as de facto powerful questions by allowing the client to consider something, reflect, and react. They can also demonstrate that you are listening actively (a core competency) and can help to establish trust and safety (another core competency). They include, but are not limited to:

1. Tracking energy- - truly noticing shifts, even small ones, in your clients. You are constantly looking for physical, emotional, or physiological cues that show spikes and dips in “energy” (broadly understood as emotional and physiological arousal). You will be doing this skill every single coaching session, at least the tracking portion (maybe not always commenting on it, but often). The skill works by noticing the shift and then commenting on it, bringing it to the client’s awareness, and holding it out for their reaction or interpretation. I love that this skill forces you to listen well and be in the moment, so it is directly linked to coaching presence.
2. Summarizing- - This is one of the most ill-used skills in coaching, in my opinion. Too often is used to buy time to think or parrot back language. Many coaches believe that summary is vital to active listening and should be used before asking questions. I disagree. You are free to arrive at your own opinion. I do believe that summary can be used to raise client awareness if you do it strategically and well. Summary is not just repeating back client words. Summary is a distillation or a synthesis of client language. Moreover, a coach’s summary does not have to be 100% accurate to be effective. I will provide two examples of summarizing below:

Example One

Client: My company just let go of one-quarter of our department, including someone on my team. They gave us no warning, and everyone is running around in a panic. And morale is low. As the team lead, I am suddenly doing 50% more work, putting out fires everywhere. I am staying late and working one weekend day. Yeah, the work is getting done, but it is so hard.

Coach: *You are capable of rising to the occasion, but you want it to be the occasion and not the norm.*

Example Two

Client: *Well, this past week felt a little different than the previous one. I focused exclusively on building my website- - or at least outlining it. I was able to get that done. I do not know what I think of that. On the one hand, it feels like I only did one thing this week. But maybe that is better than doing three half-things, like the week before?*

Coach: *You are wondering if you can execute and complete better when you focus on one task at a time.*

3. Acknowledgment—This is observing and validating a client’s experience. It includes commentary on client strengths, validation of feelings, or noticing of effort. It is terrific to demonstrate active listening and building trust. Examples below:

“It’s clear you have put so much effort into this.”

“That must have been really hard for you.”

“Your creativity is really shining through.”

4. Interruption—this is done:

A) strategically

B) typically with a rationale for doing so offered to the client

C) quickly and then return the turn to speak immediately back to the client.

Christian van Nieuwerburgh suggests that there are empathic and procedural interruptions.

Examples below:

“With an eye on the clock, I’d like to jump in here just to make certain that we have time to review all the learning from today’s session.” (procedural)

“I’m sorry to cut you off—I see that this is an important issue you are beginning to talk about. I just want to clarify, though, because it is straying a little far from the agenda you and I set.” (procedural)

“Wow! Did you hear what you just said?!?” (emphatic)

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but it sounds like this is really important, and I don’t want to lose sight of it as we keep talking.” (emphatic)

5. Permission—Coaching is co-created, meaning there is relative equality between the coach and the client. One technique that helps to ensure this equality is the asking of permission. Coaches ask permission, which is not rhetorical; they are asking, and the client has the right to say no. I cover this with my clients in my intake session (see the recording of my intake session). I tend to ask permission in cases where I really want the client’s permission. For example:

A) when I plan to challenge them particularly strongly (“I’d like to challenge you on that but only if you want to be challenged. Otherwise, I am happy to just move on with what you are discussing.”)

B) when I plan to deviate a bit from the agenda—I rarely do this (“I’d like to ask a question, but I am cognizant that it might make us temporarily stray from the agenda you have set”)

C) when I want to suggest an in-session activity (we will get to this in later lessons)

LET’S LOOK AT ALL OUR SKILLS UP TO THIS POINT:

1. Foundational ways of being that must be the underpinning of all coaching:

A) Integrity/ethical decision-making

B) authenticity/coaching presence

C) coaching mindset (clients are capable, unbroken, and can solve their own problems)

2. Core skills that you will use every session:

A) Agenda-setting

B) Accountability

C) Tracking energy

D) Silence

E) Acknowledgment

3. As-needed skills:

A) Summary

B) Interruption

C) Permission