

# Coachees in crisis



**Julia Menaul**

Coaching clients who may not have volunteered to be coached.

Coaching within organisations is often used as a means of developing people who may already be performing well but would like to do even better. These highly motivated, intelligent, professional individuals have enough emotional intelligence to jump at the chance of coaching and see it as a great opportunity. They view it as a stamp of approval from senior management, so that – wrongly or rightly – coaching can be seen as a reward.

### Poorly performing coachees

However, there are occasions when internal and external coaches are used to help ‘problem’ individuals lift their performance to an expected standard – what could be called remedial coaching. Usually they are already proceeding down the organisation’s formal disciplinary route or are about to be warned that this will happen. Poor performance is either about the conduct or the capability of the coachee. Performance managing someone on their conduct is often seen as being trickier than

coaching them on capability as the latter may be a straightforward case of learning new knowledge and skills in order to perform a particular task/role better. Conduct, on the other hand, requires a change in behaviour that is underpinned by the individual’s basic personality, values and beliefs. These can be harder, or even impossible, to change.

The difference between coaching someone who wants to be coached and someone who has been told they have to or risk losing their job is often motivation.

### Crystal-clear contracting

Contracting is crucial in all coaching relationships, but even more so when the coachee is less likely to be responsive to coaching.

In Figure 1 we can see that the contract for the coaching may involve three or even four people. A coach may be called in by the HR manager, and then will need to contract with them as well as with

the line manager of the coachee. The coach needs to be much more attuned to hidden agendas in these meetings, especially if it is more of a rectangular contract with the coach, the line manager and an HR manager discussing the coachee. Some of the dangers are these:

- The coach may be used as a scapegoat by both managers, so that they don’t have to handle the difficult coachee.
- The line manager may have failed to handle the coachee in the past and wishes to pass on the problem to the coach to sort out.

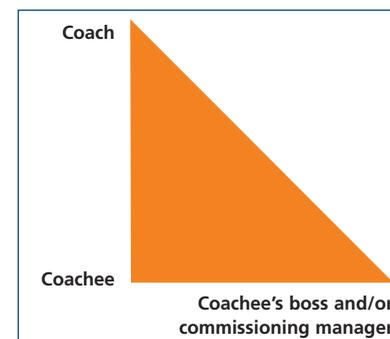


Fig. 1: Triangular contracting

## People and styles

### Towards

Towards people talk about goals and are motivated to achieve them. Know where they are going but may not be able to detect what to avoid along the way. Prioritise.

### Away from

Away from people know what they want. Motivated by what they want to avoid, but may not have a clear direction forwards. Do not prioritise.

### Proactive

Proactive people are very action oriented. Initiate. Jump in and get cracking. Make things happen. Go for it.

### Reflective

Reflective people take everything into consideration. Analyse and then take time to think some more. Wait for others to initiate.

### Internal

Internal people have a good sense of self-worth. Know instinctively when they have done a good job. Have trouble accepting opinions and the direction of others. Potential entrepreneur.

### External

External people need to be told how they’re doing. Vulnerable. Unsure of themselves and need constant praise to bring out their best.

### Big chunk

Big chunk people see the big picture. Good planners and strategists. Not so good on detail, so may encounter unforeseen problems.

### Little chunk

Little chunk people are very detail oriented. Need to know that all the small details have been dealt with properly before they can ‘chunk up’ to look at a bigger piece of the whole.

## Case Study – Bill

Bill was a senior manager who was technically competent and very target oriented. Unfortunately, his focus and drive created a steamroller approach to managing his staff. Anger was displayed via bullying and aggressive communication (either verbally or non-verbally; for example, being overcritical, overbearing, shouting / temper explosions and not listening well). Complaints were made by peers and staff alike.

Management obviously wanted to avoid future repeats, but Bill struggled to see why he needed to change. He was not particularly motivated by the fear of losing his job, and aggressively countered any suggestion of this with a plan of how he would use the complaints procedure to seek revenge.

As a person who was very proud of his achievements in setting and achieving performance targets, his motivational style was more Towards than Away From. Bill resisted the idea of being made to change because management said so.

Analysis of the problems his short temper created enabled him to see a way that allowed him to make the decision to change himself. Consequently, he highlighted for himself the downside of his management style on his health and also the day-to-day hassles he was repeatedly coming across.

His resistance still flared up now and again, and he would often talk in too much detail as a way of deflecting attention from what he knew he needed to do. He was externally oriented, did not take criticism well, and was frustrated by other people’s lack of focus.

*‘Start the relationship building early and help allay their fears’*

### References

1 Peter Block, *Flawless Consulting*, Pfeiffer & Co., 1981.

### Further reading

Di McLanahan, *NLP for Business Excellence*, Fenman Limited, 1999.

Wyn Llewellyn, *Installing the Drivers of Change*, see <http://www.valueflows.com>

**Julia Menaul** is a member of the Association for Coaching and fellow of CIPD and ITOL. She began her career as a psychology graduate in retail management and moved into training within the not-for-profit sector, manufacturing and the public sector. She now runs Spark Coaching & Training, and specialises in executive coaching and management development.

- Telephone: +44 (0) 1204 497221
- E-mail: [julia.menaul@lineone.net](mailto:julia.menaul@lineone.net)
- Website: [www.sparkcoachingandtraining.org](http://www.sparkcoachingandtraining.org)



# Coaching clients

## who may not have volunteered to be coached

- The HR manager may know the reality of the poor relationship between the manager and coachee, but does not want to risk opening a can of worms if it is easier to bring in an external coach. Also neither may have the skills to deal with the coachee.
- They both may feel that the coachee is beyond redemption, and disciplinary procedures may have already started. They may then be using coaching as a way to gain supportive evidence, just in case an employment tribunal looms and they need to be seen to have provided development opportunities for the coachee to improve to the required standard.

The implications of the above for the coach are these:

- Make sure the contract is clear about responsibilities. If a manager wants to pass their problem staff member on to the coach, they may not provide the briefing and debriefing within a supportive

environment that the coachee will need in order to change their behaviour.

- Precision questioning and listening at the initial contracting meeting are crucial. Ensure they focus on specific scenarios rather than making general woolly statements.

In his excellent book *Flawless Consulting*,<sup>1</sup> Peter Block highlights the key elements to discover with all parties:

- The boundaries of the piece of work.
- Objectives of all concerned.
- The information that you as the coach will require.
- What you will and will not do (or cannot do because it's impossible).
- What support you will need from all parties and who is responsible for what.
- Time schedule.
- Confidentiality acknowledgement.
- Provision for feedback later to all concerned.

It is also useful to add in information about any sensitive issues – for example, coachee health issues, ongoing disciplinary procedures, personal and line relationships. These may impact on results. For example, coaching a line manager and their direct report at the same time is not always a good idea due to overlapping agendas and clash of interest.

### Build evaluation into the contract

Clarity about evaluating the success of the coaching is crucial in these situations. The coach often has to push the commissioning manager to be very specific about what changes

they expect to see from the coaching. It is helpful to get them to think about what behavioural changes they will see – that is, what will the coachee be doing/saying differently – as well as the broad-brush aims of the coaching. For example, 'I'd like to see them controlling their temper in meetings so that others start to notice and give feedback on it', rather than 'I want them to be better with people.'

Asking managers to rate on a scale of 1–10 how big an issue this is for them and the organisation, and logging this, gets them to focus on where they would like the score to move to by the end of the coaching. This gives a qualitative measure to compare with at the end. The information, when documented and copied to all parties, creates much greater clarity. The coach is able to show the impact they have made and the manager can see what they were saying at the beginning of the contract when the situation was at its worst. The document is an excellent reference

guide for monitoring meetings with the commissioning client during and after the coaching.

### Contracting with the coachee

*So if motivation is the key, how do you motivate the reluctant coachee?*

At the first coaching session emotions can get in the way of the coach's Number 1 priority, which is to build trust and rapport. Creating awareness and responsibility in the coachee is going to be difficult if they are feeling hurt, tearful, angry, suspicious, defensive, apprehensive, nervous and so on.

Speaking to them over the phone before the first session will start the relationship building early on and help allay their fears. It gives the coach the opportunity to gain an impression of the coachee that may be completely different from the one painted by the commissioning manager.

At the first session, the following stages are useful to begin with:

- Introduce the concept of coaching – what it does and doesn't do. Use the stages used at the initial contracting meeting with the commissioning manager.
- Introduce yourself as the coach, professionally and personally.
- Find out about them at work and home.
- Discuss the pre-session work you will have sent them beforehand:
  - a) Achievements over the past three years.
  - b) Disappointments.

- c) Concerns and challenges now.
- d) Possible goals for the next one, three, five and ten years.
- e) Strengths (if they do a SWOT analysis, focus more on the strengths as instinctively people concentrate on their weaknesses).

Coachees in similar situations react completely differently to the idea of being coached, depending on their perception of why they are doing it. In Neuro Linguistic Programming terms, some coachees in these 'make or break' situations respond differently, depending also on whether they are Away From motivated or Towards motivated.

The emphasis at this first session is on what they are good at, rather than focusing on their perceived weaknesses. This helps to allay fears and prevent defensiveness. The coach can use good questions to help them to think about how they can use strengths they take for granted and use them in the difficult situation in which they find themselves. This is much more motivational, and many coachees leave the session with a spring in their step that they didn't have when they arrived.

However, if the coachee highlights the same areas of underperformance as have been raised in the contract and wants to improve

these areas, then working through some objectives and putting rating scales next to them is an ideal way of focusing attention, as well as of getting quantitative measures to work with throughout the coaching.

For example, ability to control negative thoughts:  
Current = level 4  
Aim = 9

If in other sessions they struggle with the change and go through the classic managing change cycle (especially denial and resistance), then showing them the equation in Figure 2 may help them to work out where they are and what steps they need to take.

Finally, the coachee may want to think about whether they want to change a 'weakness' as perceived by their employer. Many coachees raise their self-awareness to a level where they appreciate their strengths and want to use them in a fulfilling role. This may mean that they discover that they are actually in the wrong job. As a coach make the client aware that the outcome of the coaching programme may mean that the 'coachee in crisis' declines to change aspects of themselves to suit their employer. This may result in coachee and employer parting company.

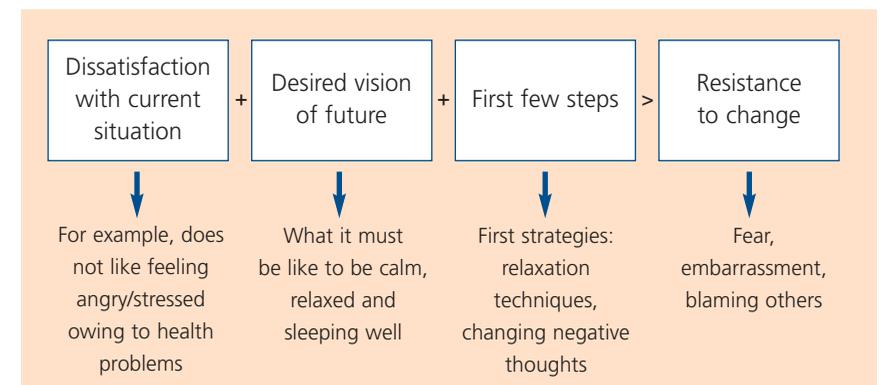


Fig. 2: Change equation