

Client Engagement: The Untapped Power of Coaching

by

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Forget about your employees (for a moment)

When I ask you to bring a typical workplace coaching conversation to mind, what do you conjure up? For most of us, it's someone more senior coaching someone less senior to progress faster, better or differently on a challenge they're facing. That's all well and good – but it's not the only way coaching can support your organisation's goals.

Turn your focus away from internal coaching interactions for a moment, and consider clients – a particularly precious group of people for anyone working in the “b-2-b” world. If it's important for you and those in your organisation to maintain and strengthen relationships with people outside your organisation, then having a number of simple but powerful coaching skills and approaches can make a real difference.

In this short article, we'll share two coaching approaches that were part of the *Coaching for Great Work* programme we ran with a global consulting firm. These approaches helped their consultants strengthen the relationships with the clients that mattered (and got them to renew their contracts), and not over-serve the clients that were less important to the firm.

1. Talk about the secret contract

You already know the not-so-secret contract you have with your clients. It's the list of deliverables. I'll do this, this and this, and you'll pay me that. So far, so straight-forward. So far, so transactional.

But there's a secret contract that is rarely spoken about. It talks not about the “what” but about the “how”. It addresses the relationship between client and provider, and considers how both sides might best work together for mutual satisfaction. Make no mistake, bringing this up is something of a courageous act. The temptation is to rush into the “doing” of it all, or continually try to impress and reassure with our persuasive promises. Leading management thinker Peter Block sums it up when he says that people “..know when we are trying to manoeuvre them, and when it happens they trust us a little less. Lower trust leads to lower leverage and lower client commitment.”

Sure, this is a personal and perhaps vulnerable conversation; and it can feel like it's never quite the right time to ask. *But a willingness to step back and ask about how you want to work together can be transformational.*

There are two moments when this can be particularly powerful. First, before you start a project or a phase of a project. Rather than jump to the details ask, “Before we jump into the details, can we just talk for a moment about how we'd best like to work together?”

Then, try out some of these questions (listed here in increasing levels of getting to the heart of the relationship):

When you've worked with someone in this type of relationship before, what worked best?
What didn't work so well? (And then, answer the questions yourself.)

When things start to go wrong – and they probably will somewhere along the line – how do you react? What's the unilateral action you take? (And then, answer the question yourself.)

How do you feel about the amount of power you have in this relationship and over the project? (And yes, answer the questions yourself.)

The other powerful place to talk about the secret contract is at the end of a conversation or meeting. "Before we finish up here, let me ask you..."

How was this for you?

What was most useful?

What should we do differently next time?"

(And yes, share your answers too.)

When handled sensitively, these discussions will help deepen the relationship and move you away from being just another transactional "solution provider".

2. Stop leaping to solutions

Albert Einstein once said: "If I had an hour to save the world, I would spend 59 minutes defining the problem and one minute finding solutions." With a bias towards action and busyness in most organisations, a lot of time gets spent on problems or projects that don't matter. Stopping our clients from rushing in, by encouraging them to step back and figure out what the real challenge is, saves time, money and resources. Here are three tactics you can use right away and 'in the moment' with clients:

i. Make them choose. When the client reels off a whole string of issues and problems, it can be tempting to go with the one we feel we can solve best. Resist the urge to impress and instead put the onus on them and ask: "Which of these issues is most important?"

ii. Own the challenge. Likewise, a client can become vague and too general in talking about a concern – as if it is really someone else's. Pin them down, and uncover their agenda by asking: "What's the challenge here for you?" The last two words here help ensure you hit on something nearer to home.

iii. Don't be seduced by the story. When you are 'actively' listening to a story that seems to meander forever without hitting you with the relevant points, you need to step in – no matter how interesting it might be. Time is of the essence, and you need to allow space for your input and the next part of the discussion. Interject with a polite but firm "Before you go further..." or "Let me stop you for a moment..."

Get coaching out of the ghetto

Coaching runs the danger of being pigeonholed as an occasional event between two colleagues within an organisation. That's the truth, but not the whole truth. In fact, coaching can have a powerful effect in strengthening and deepening your relationships with your external clients. At a time when client engagement and retention is critical, blending in a coaching approach can make a significant difference that can show up on the bottom line.

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