

# Unlearning to coach

Mentor coach **Clare Norman** argues that changing our mindset first is paramount when building our skillset as coaches

**A**s a coach, you would probably agree that the best outcome we can hope to co-create in coaching is for the thinker\* to be clear and connected with who they are. It's less about doing things better or differently, though that will naturally come as a result – it's more about changing their mindset.

The same is true of us as coaches as we develop into being the best coach we can be. It's less about doing coaching better or differently, though that will naturally come as a result – it's more about us changing our mindsets, beliefs and paradigms.

If we wish to breakthrough to coaching mastery, we need to free our thinking from mindsets that are more constraining than liberating. This leads me to recommend that trained coaches invest in coaching, supervision and mentor coaching rather than more training. This triumvirate is more likely to support our very personalised exploration of who we are and what we believe.

\*I propose we move away from calling the people we work with 'clients' – which assumes some kind of service. Let's also not call them 'coachees', as this assumes that they'll be having coaching done to them rather than being in partnership.<sup>1</sup>

I refer to the people I work with in coaching as 'thinkers', a term coined by Nancy Kline<sup>2</sup> when she wrote about the 'thinking environment' that gives people time to think. In coaching, we want to encourage the thinker to do just that – to think – to build that thinking muscle so they can be independent, critical decision makers when we're not there with them, just as much as when we are.

As a mentor coach, I've observed over 250 coaches, and listened to close to 1,000 hours of coaching. My role is to give my mentee coaches objective feedback on their coaching, with a set of competences as the benchmark. (I use the International Coach Federation (ICF) competences, but any set of competences can be used.)

When I first started mentoring coaches, we discussed their skills and how they demonstrated the competences (or not). But over time, I noticed that this didn't create sustainable habit change for them, because we had not spent time understanding the mindsets that underpinned their application (or not) of the required skills. They might demonstrate the skills in the short term, and for their ICF-credentialed application, but then they might slip back into old patterns because they still held onto beliefs that lead to less than masterful coaching behaviours.

### Familiar mindsets

You are no doubt familiar with some mindsets that you know you need to possess to be a great coach, such as believing that:

- the thinker is 'resourceful, creative and whole'<sup>3</sup>
- everyone is responsible for their life choices
- empowerment comes from within
- we coach the person, not the problem.

You might believe these things, but do you always follow through on them in the way you coach?

For example, if you really believe that the thinker is resourceful, creative and whole, you wouldn't be tempted to offer even a smidgen of advice. You wouldn't be drawn to ask leading questions. These actions suggest that you don't really believe what you say you believe.

If you really believe that everyone is responsible for their own life choices, you wouldn't feel inclined to point out that they have got something so obviously (to you) wrong. You might not say this out loud, but this belief will taint your coaching.

If you really believe that empowerment comes from within, you wouldn't be acting as a service provider with all the power that infers.

If you really believe that our work is to coach the person, you wouldn't drive them to a solution.

### It's hard to change

It's likely that you have other deeply held and entrenched mindsets that get in the way of you truly embracing more coach-like mindsets.

There is a reason it's so hard to let go of those old mindsets and replace them with the ones you know you 'should' be adopting. They have been programmed into you by your parents, teachers, peers, managers and even your coach training.

My research (gleaned both from watching coaches coach and interviewing a number of coaches across cultures) has uncovered 83 scripts that we have learned in our pre-coaching lives that can get in the way of us being the best coach we can be.<sup>4</sup> In transactional analysis (TA), a script message or introjection is '...a verbal or non-verbal message from the parents [or carers] on the basis of which the child forms conclusions about self, others and the world during the process of script making'.<sup>3</sup> We continue to receive verbal and non-verbal messages from other adults in our lives that

shape what we believe, and so how we behave. We also receive strokes ('a unit of recognition', according to transactional analysts Stewart and Joines<sup>5</sup>) that encourage us to repeat those behaviours and embed the beliefs or scripts.

### A parental and a coach training introjection

For example, our parents or carers might have taught us that it's rude to interrupt. That's true in normal conversation. Butting in or talking over someone (in my culture at least) is discourteous. And in our coach training, we were taught to listen well. Put these two beliefs together and you get a formidable blend that prevents us from interrupting the thinker. Yes, our job as their coach is to listen to them more exquisitely than they have ever been listened to before, but not at the expense of new thinking. If they are filling us in on all of the context, the story, the chronology, because they think we need it in order to help them, then they are not using their precious coaching time to get to new thinking. We are colluding with them in the belief that our job is to diagnose their situation and provide a solution.

We need to recognise our limiting beliefs here and shift to more useful beliefs, such as 'my job as their coach is to:

- support and challenge them to access new thinking
- empower them to diagnose their own situation
- enable them to develop vertically (raising awareness about their beliefs, mindsets, scripts, emotions, because this is where transformation is most likely to occur) rather than horizontally (action-oriented questions that skim the surface and are more likely transactional than habit-changing).

### A school introjection

At school, you may have learned to finish what you started. But this can get in the way of great coaching, as we drive to get to a 'good' ending, whatever that means. If we could let go of this need to complete, we could explore the territory more thoroughly – going deeper, not further (though that depth might take the thinker further, anyway). Get to wherever you get to, and be OK with that. As business professor Teresa Amabile and developmental psychologist Steve Kramer outline in *The Progress Principle*, any progress is good progress because it begets motivation towards more progress.<sup>6</sup> If you picture a beaver dam made up of many sticks and debris, and imagine that your joint endeavour with your thinker is to remove just one stick, that in and of itself is progress. As you remove that one stick, the water will start pushing through the hole and will push out another stick and a little debris, which in turn will allow more water through and so on. Your job is not to remove the whole dam, but to remove one or two sticks that will allow the water to flow and take more sticks with it in between sessions.

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### A peer introjection

With our peers, we learned to be likeable (at least to those peers, the in-crowd, if not to the out-crowd). This can affect us as coaches when we think about challenging the thinkers with whom we work. Some coaches erroneously conflate challenge and confrontation. Challenge to them sounds as though they will be doing something that will make them unlikeable. Does that sound like you? If it does, this is another mindset switch to pay attention to. Thinkers want more challenge than we give them, not less.<sup>7</sup> They will respect us more (maybe not synonymous with liking us, but close) if we challenge them. You are likely very supportive already – but how challenging are you, and what mindset helps or hinders you here?

### A work introjection

At work, you were probably encouraged to bring solutions, not problems; to fix things; to offer your best thinking. This likely runs through you like a stick of rock. It's as hard to change mindset around this as it would be to extract that embedded writing from the rock.

But as the American businessman and educator Stephen Covey wrote: 'If you want small changes, work on your behaviour; if you want quantum-leap changes, work on your paradigms.'<sup>8</sup> He goes on to say that when you change the way you see things (your paradigms, mindsets, beliefs, scripts), it influences what you *do* (your habits, your behaviours, your coaching) and the results you *get*.

So change the way you think about fixing problems in coaching. It's not your coaching job.

### Applying what you know about script change to yourself and your coaching

Pulling that embedded writing out from your metaphorical stick of rock is hard, but you work with others all the time on changing mindsets, so let's see how you might transpose what you do with others onto your own development as a coach.



**Some guiding principles:**

- Don't try to change everything at once – focus on one script at a time.
- Work with someone else, such as a mentor coach, who can help you to see and hear what you cannot see and hear yourself.
- Listen back together to recordings of your coaching, as you will mis-remember exactly what you said or did if you don't get real-life data (as Bachkirova found, coaches are often self-deceiving<sup>9</sup>).

**You could also ask yourself the following questions:\*\***

- What is your belief?
- Where does this belief come from (parental, school, peer, workplace, coach training introjects)?
- What concrete, factual evidence do you have to support that belief?
- What assumptions are you making that come from your imagination and perceptions?
- What assumptions are you making based on others' opinions?
- What have been the benefits to you of holding this belief/thought?
- What have been the costs to the thinkers with whom you work in holding this belief/thought?

**And then this second set of questions:**

- What is your new belief that you now choose to believe? Write it using positive language in the current tense.
- Why do you choose to believe this?
- What are the benefits to the thinkers with whom you work of choosing this belief?
- What are the costs to you and the thinkers of choosing this belief?
- What evidence do you already have to support your new belief? Gather as much evidence as you can.
- Now say 'I give myself permission to believe....'
- Repeat your new belief as often as you can to yourself to reinforce it and replace your old one.

\*\* (adapted from Gil Schwenk's unpublished reframing beliefs model, based on neuro-linguistic programming)

- Find an accountability buddy to challenge you to stick to this new mindset and the skillsets that will follow.
- James Clear, author of *Atomic Habits*,<sup>10</sup> would encourage you to give yourself some kind of trigger or cue to remind yourself in the moment to practise whatever it is you wish to try out. For example, it might be a sticky note or a photo or an object that represents the different mindset right in front of you as you're coaching.
- Experiment. Play. Fail and learn. As ex-media CEO-turned-author Margaret Heffernan writes: 'The great advantage of experiments is that they stop you being stuck; they're one way to prototype the future.'<sup>11</sup>

- Hard is good when trying out new ways of being and doing things. I encourage you not to give up, but to put in the emotional investment to make changes.
- Reward yourself! That immediate reward will entice you to repeat the experiment. I can't tell you what to reward yourself with – that's entirely up to you – but James Clear<sup>10</sup> would advise you to make it immediate, so that you connect your reward to the new habit and then have the anticipation of reward next time, making it more likely to happen again.

I realise that this reminder to apply to ourselves what we do for others may come across as teaching you to suck eggs. But as the saying goes, 'Cobblers' children have no shoes', so we can always take some of our own medicine to change the mindsets that get in the way of us being masterful coaches. I know this myself as I have been on my own journey of unlearning, to become a Master Certified Coach with the ICF. Of the 83 mindsets I outline in the book, I have had to let go of all 83 at some point in my coaching career; some early on, some more recently and some I am still working on. I don't claim that this is easy work, but it is rich and rewarding as I see the thinkers with whom I work really flourish in ways that they would not have done had I held on to those old mindsets.

Change mindset first, skillset will follow. ■

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Clare Norman** has over 20 years of coaching experience, and works with other expert coaches, as well as successful coach training companies, as a master mentor coach.

With an international following, Clare's work aims to continually sharpen individuals' coaching edge and upskill mentor coaches so they can deliver high-quality feedback to their coaches-in-development. She is the author of *The Transformational Coach: free your thinking and break through to coaching mastery* (2022).

**clare@clarenormancoachingassociates.com**

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