



“Keep this book at your side
at all times! It’s everything
a great coach should be.”

Kim Morgan,
MCC and Director of Barefoot Coaching

The **Transformational Coach**

Free your thinking and
break through to coaching mastery

CLARE NORMAN

Shift 4

OLD MINDSET: It's rude to interrupt

NEW MINDSET: It's useful to interrupt if it enables the thinker to move away from known thinking towards new thinking

I have a vivid memory of being told off by my dad for interrupting an adult conversation when I was young: it was mortifying in front of these other adults. Of all the times that my parents urged me not to interrupt, this is the one that is the loudest in my head.

I heard similar stories from the coaches I interviewed. Does this sound familiar to you, your parents teaching you that it's rude to interrupt others when they're speaking? This had merit, as we needed to learn that not everything centred around us and our universe. When others are in conversation, we should learn to listen and bide our time before adding our thoughts. Children are often not actually part of the conversation, and their interruptions tend to be about something completely different.

This is an important lesson to learn: don't interrupt other people's flow with something completely different.

When we become coaches, we learn to listen and pay attention to what the thinker says. This is a good habit to learn – in the main. This is perhaps the first time in their lives that a thinker has been so exquisitely listened to. This helps them to feel valued and valuable. They know they have someone on their side who fully supports them. The trouble is, sometimes we can over-listen. If a thinker is telling us things they already know – the story, chronology, context, the way they've already explained it to their friend or family – then they're gaining nothing new from this time with us. They know it already.

Our job as coach is to *get them to new thinking, not to go over old ground*.

We don't need them to fill us in on all the context if they already know it themselves. They (and we) may think we need to know the detail to be able to support them, but we don't. We're not in the

business of diagnosing and supplying solutions (see also Shift 63). These are the times when it *is* important to be able to interrupt: when we think that the thinker might be in the midst of telling the story.

To make this possible, adopt a different mindset. Instead of it being rude to interrupt, you need to believe that this could be useful to enable a thinker to get to new thinking. If you can enable them to cut to the chase, to 'bottom line' (Whitworth et al. 1998), you could give them more time to get to new thinking.

But how do we do that? I know of one coach who asks: 'Why are you paying me huge sums of money to talk about something you could talk to your friends about for nothing?' That might feel highly challenging for you, so here are some alternatives. First, ask during the session contracting phase: 'May I have your permission to interrupt you in service of new thinking?'

I sometimes also say, especially if I know the thinker is a storyteller: 'Please don't feel you need to fill me in on all the detail. Our job in coaching is to get you to new thinking, rather than going over old ground.' This early contracting also serves to stop them telling us about the history in the first place, so preventing the need for interruption. Once you have permission, you know that it won't be such a jolt to them if and when you do interrupt. It also gives you more courage in the moment to make that interruption because you have gained the thinker's express permission.

At the point when you suspect that the thinker might be going over old ground, or when they appear to be going round in circles, saying the same thing multiple times, interrupt. You might be thinking that they seem to be almost at the end of their story, so interrupting would take longer than letting the story take its course. However, in my experience, the story always goes on for longer than you think it will. There are peaks and troughs, highs and lows, and it's more likely they have reached the end of one of those cycles rather than the end of the whole story.

I suggest you look out for signs that the thinker is in the story. They are likely to be:

- ➔ talking quite fast, because they've told the story before and don't need to think about what they're saying
- ➔ looking at you rather than up, down or to the sides (which as

mentioned previously, usually indicates they're thinking new thoughts).

You might not feel there's a long enough pause to interrupt, so you may need to assert yourself more than you might like – remembering all the time that this is in service of their new thinking, and they have given you permission: 'May I interrupt you?' or: 'If I might interrupt you for a moment...'

Then follow that up with something like:

- ➔ 'It sounds as though you might know this already?' Pause for them to reflect. 'If so, please don't feel you need to fill me in on the detail. Is this useful to you to say this out loud?' If they say yes, great, that's now their conscious choice.
- ➔ 'If you know this already, how do we get you from known thinking to new thinking?'
- ➔ 'Is this giving you new insights?' Pause to allow them to answer. If no: 'Where do we need to go to get new insights?' If yes, keep going.
- ➔ 'What is the essence of this story?'
- ➔ 'What is the learning for you from this story?'
- ➔ 'What is the bottom line here?'

Or find words that feel natural to you. Know that interrupting will feel uncomfortable to begin with, and don't stop doing it just because you hear your parents' or other carer's voice saying: 'It's rude to interrupt.' It will become easier over time, particularly when you start to see how much further the thinker can get in a session if you use the time for new rather than known thinking.

If you're still worried that you might miss something by short-cutting to the essence of the story versus the detail, bear in mind that you have a whole session ahead of you to pay attention to their body language, tone, terminology, metaphors, emotions, beliefs and assumptions.

Shift 34

OLD MINDSET: Silence is awkward

NEW MINDSET: Silence is golden thinking time

With our peers we learn to fill the silence. Maybe that's so another person can't fill it (linked to Shift 35, on being the loudest). We learn that silence is negative. I don't honestly get that, but for some people, silence feels awkward and needs to be filled. You may feel compelled to jump in and take the awkwardness away.

Unlike some of the habits I'm encouraging you to change, this one – filling the silence – just doesn't seem to serve any positive purpose. Why would you fill the silence, just for the sake of it? If you don't have something useful to say, don't say it – because if you do, that stops the thinker from using that silence to think, to work up something new and possibly insightful. Taking the air out of the room means you take away their thinking space.

In coaching, silence is golden thinking time. We need to get comfortable with it to allow for thinking space. New thinking doesn't trip off the tongue like known thinking does. New thinking needs time and space to percolate, form and be brought to the fore.

In conjunction with a set of coaches I was mentor-coaching, I've noticed that there is live silence and dead silence: they are hugely different. Live silence is when the thinker is obviously thinking. They'll be looking up, down, away into the distance, anywhere but at you. Their pace of talking will have slowed down. It will be more halting, as they join dots, one at a time. They may be more hesitant with this new thinking, making sense of it as they go.

They need the silence.

Dead silence is equally obvious to spot. The thinker will be looking straight at you, willing you to ask another question or make another observation. Usually, this is not a silence to extend, because they've stopped thinking at this point and need or want a nudge towards some more thinking. That nudge might be as simple as a recontract-

Mindsets we learned from our peers that we need to discard...

ing question: 'Where do we need to go next to get to new thinking?'





If you're not a lover of silence, live silence is something to practise. Don't take the wind out of their thinking by talking over the live silence. Allow the silence to extend; allow them to continue their slower pace and meaning-making.

Do you ever doubt your coaching style is achieving the best results for your clients? Have you ever felt there's room for growth, but you're not sure how to achieve it?

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“Thought-provoking! This is a must-read for anyone who wants to get out of their own way and move further toward becoming a great coach.”

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course tutor at the University of Cambridge

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