



“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 3

OLD MINDSET: You should always try your hardest

NEW MINDSET: This should be hard work for the thinker, not for the coach

For many of us, our parents taught us about the importance of trying hard (and if we didn't learn this from them, perhaps we learned it from school). Some also encouraged perfection and top marks. While that was important at school and then at work, trying hard as a coach can get in the way of our partnership with the thinker.

The key word here is partnership. Coaching is a *joint endeavour* to move beyond known thinking to discover new thinking that energises the thinker to change.

Within that joint endeavour, the coach has responsibility for holding the process that enables new thinking to happen. The thinker for whom we're holding that process has responsibility for thinking for themselves and moving forward. Too often, I notice the coach taking too much responsibility on their shoulders for pushing the thinker forwards: they're trying too hard.

Perhaps they're:

- ➔ looking for the 'perfect' question (hint: there is no such thing)
- ➔ feeling pressure to drive to a solution by the end of the session (see also Shifts 15 and 45)
- ➔ leading where the session goes
- ➔ taking the burden of thinking that should be firmly the thinker's (the clue is in the title – 'thinker').

The harder the coach works, the less hard the thinker will think.

The mindset needed is vastly different to trying hard yourself: encouraging the thinker to work hard instead. Nobody ever promised that being coached was easy – it isn't. Claire Pedrick (2020) says 'there is discomfort in discovery', and that's absolutely right: it can be scary to find out new things about ourselves and to change

who we are, what we believe and what we want from life.

Coaching requires effort on the part of the thinker. It requires their full participation. It requires them to take responsibility for the demanding work of thinking, delving underneath the surface, going beyond the obvious. Like Thomas Edison (1932) once said about 'genius', it's 99 per cent perspiration, 1 per cent inspiration – so as a coach, help them to help themselves by making them do the work!

There may be something else wrapped up in this. Maybe you have the idea that the coach should be a service provider rather than a partner (see also Shift 38 to understand the connection). But in essence, the coach needs the mindset of partner, not service provider.

What does this look and sound like, encouraging them to do the work? First, asking 'contracting' questions that get them to think hard about exactly what they want from this coaching session, and not letting them off the hook with something woolly or a request that you decide for them, based on what others have brought to coaching in the past.

I use the acronym CONTRACT to integrate these contracting questions, which are mapped to the ICF competencies '3: Establishes and Maintains Agreements' and '5: Maintains Presence':

Check-in: 'What would be most useful to think about today?'

Objective: 'What would you like to be different by the time we finish today?'

Necessity: 'What is it about this that's important to you right now?'

Time: 'What is your specific question for today's X minutes?'

Realisation: 'How will you know you've got what you need by the time we wrap up today?'

Agenda: 'What is your sense of what we need to cover today to get to your outcome?'

Co-creation: 'How would you like us to work together today?' 'How much challenge are you up for?' 'May I have permission to interrupt in service of new thinking?'

Their agenda: 'Where shall we start?'

As you can see, right from the start, these questions aren't always easy for the thinker to answer. But they are necessary. We spend time

getting the question for the session clear before moving on, just like Albert Einstein or an unnamed Yale academic purportedly said, 'If I had an hour to solve a problem... I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask... for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes' (Quote Investigator 2014).

Let's dissect each of the elements of CONTRACT for a moment to understand why they're important.

Check-in: 'What would be most useful to think about today?'

'The coach partners with the client to identify or reconfirm what the client wants to accomplish in this session' (PCC Marker 3.1; ICF 2020).

- ➔ This is the thinker's thinking time, so they need to decide what they wish to think about.
- ➔ 'Useful' – also could be replaced by 'important' or 'meaningful' – is leaning into thinking about concerns or opportunities that are significant for the thinker.
- ➔ 'Think about' – we signal that this is a thinking time and space, a place to go deeper.

Objective: 'What would you like to be different by the time we finish today?'

'The coach partners with the client to identify or reconfirm what the client wants to accomplish in this session' (PCC Marker 3.1; ICF 2020).

- ➔ This takes the answer to the first question deeper.
- ➔ 'Different' – signifies that something will change or shift within the session. This is not about going around in circles, as we often do in non-coaching conversations.
- ➔ 'Today' – focuses on where the thinker wishes to be by the end of the session, not by the time they've taken action outside of the session, although this could be a great additional question: 'If you could resolve this, what would be different for you in your life/work/relationship?'
- ➔ You may wish to turbo-charge this question by asking: 'If this coaching were to be transformational for you today, what would be a great outcome?'

Necessity: 'What is it about this that's important to you right now?'
'Coach enquires or explores what is important or meaningful to the client about what they want to accomplish in this session' (PCC Marker 3.3; ICF 2020).

- ➔ This question peels the onion even further and gets to more new thinking for the thinker.
- ➔ It aims to check that this really is important to the thinker, and may lead them to something that is more important to them.
- ➔ In my experience, this question can often be a trigger for any emotion that's attached to their concern or opportunity. This is when we know that this is truly important for them: it enables us to work at an emotional, 'being' level, which is more transformational than working at a 'doing' level.
- ➔ I've also started to ask: 'What is it about this that's important to who you are?', as this supports the thinker to articulate their values and get beyond the transactional.
- ➔ Notice that this doesn't start with 'Why...!' because this can suggest judgement and invite defensiveness to justify their reason.

Time: 'What is your specific question for today's X minutes?'
'The coach partners with the client to identify or reconfirm what the client wants to accomplish in this session' (PCC Marker 3.1; ICF 2020).

- ➔ Framing what they want as a one-sentence question gives focus for the session.
- ➔ If the thinker has been wordy up until now, you could precede this question with: '*In one sentence*, what is your specific question for today's X minutes?'
- ➔ Naming the time frame supports the thinker to choose the element of the bigger piece of work that's most important to think about today. We can adapt this question by asking: 'If one element were most important for us to focus on in our X minutes, what would it be?'
- ➔ Yes, this might feel repetitive, but together you're getting clearer on what you're there to work on. (In my experience, the thinker doesn't receive the question as a repeat, but as a crystallisation of what they wish to think about.)
- ➔ Note that we mention time *after* the thinker has articulated what

is most important to them to work on, so they don't limit what they bring to coaching. Think of this like a funnel, where they start big and get increasingly channelled. Starting at the top of the funnel means that they see the whole picture before deciding which element is most important. If you state the time you have together at the very start of the session, you risk limiting them to something less impactful, as they might choose something that they perceive to be easier, less risky or smaller, rather than the most important concern or opportunity.

Realisation: 'How will you know you've got what you need by the time we wrap up today?'

'Coach partners with the client to define or reconfirm measure(s) of success for what the client wants to accomplish in this session' (PCC Marker 3.2; ICF 2020).

- ➔ This question gives us even more focus on exactly what success looks, feels and sounds like. Every robust outcome has a measure of success, so that we recognise it when we see it or feel it or sense it.
- ➔ You might wish to ask additional questions that get at the feeling, as many thinkers go straight to a list, steps or ideas when the feelings associated with those are just as important. 'How will you feel as a result of having [that measure]?' or 'What will you feel in your body that tells you that [that measure] will be useful?'
- ➔ 'What will that give you?' or 'How will that be useful to you?' might be useful follow-up questions.
- ➔ If they say they want a plan, don't assume that you know what a plan is for them. Follow up with another question, such as: 'What does a plan look like for you?' The same may be said for other measures of success: check in as to exactly what that is for the thinker with whom you're working.
- ➔ This layer gives both coach and thinker a measure that you can check back on at the end of the session. For example: 'You said that you wanted X; where are you now?'

Agenda: 'What is your sense of what we need to cover today to get to your outcome?'

'Coach partners with the client to define what the client believes they

need to address to achieve what they want to accomplish in this session' (PCC Marker 3.4; ICF 2020).

- ➔ This is like an agenda question, giving the thinker an outline of where they might take the session.
- ➔ An alternative question might be 'What's in scope today and what is out of scope?'
- ➔ This is useful when you recontract part-way through a session and say: 'What are you aware of now that you weren't aware of at the start of our session?' Give them space to answer, then: 'Where would be most useful to explore now?' The original agenda answers may guide them as to where to go next – or they may have discovered a different route to get to what's most important to them.

Co-creation: 'How would you like us to work together today?'

'Coach partners with the client by supporting the client to choose what happens in this session' (PCC Marker 5.3; ICF 2020).

- ➔ This is about the partnership. Note that you're asking: 'How would you like *us* to work together?', not: 'How would you like *me* to work with you?'
- ➔ If the thinker answers in terms of what they want from you as their coach, you might wish to follow this question up with: 'And how do *you* wish to be today to get the most from the time we have together?' You might also wish to ask: 'What might get in the way of your best thinking today, that we may need to attend to right now?'
- ➔ You could also follow up with: 'How much challenge are you up for?' so you can gauge how tender or robust they are, and so how receptive they are to challenge. If they say: 'Lots of challenge,' follow up with something along the lines of: 'How will we know that we're challenging enough for you?' or 'Please say at any point if you want more challenge or less,' as this demonstrates: 'Coach partners with the client by inviting the client to respond in any way to the coach's contributions and accepts the client's response' (PCC Marker 4.4; ICF 2020).
- ➔ 'May I have permission to interrupt in service of new thinking?' The answer to this question can help you as coach to feel freer

to interrupt (see also Shift 4). It alerts the thinker to expect interruption, rather than being perturbed by it. It also alerts them to the fact that, as mentioned previously, coaching is about new thinking, not known thinking.

Their Agenda: 'Where shall we start?'

'Coach partners with the client by supporting the client to choose what happens in this session' (PCC Marker 5.3; ICF 2020).

- ➔ You're handing the reins to the thinker to go wherever their thinking is already taking them.
- ➔ If you ask a question at this time, it's likely to be one that takes them in a different direction from where their head is already taking them. Inadvertently, you'll be taking them away from their train of thought. Their train of thought is paramount.
- ➔ If they're hesitant in reaction to this question, you may wish to ask: 'Where else might we start? And where else?' so they have some options to choose from. Don't presume that you should jump in with a question to rescue them from not knowing: ask them to think for themselves.

I hope this answers any questions or objections you might have about those CONTRACTing questions. You're building the thinking muscles in the thinker, enabling them to think harder than they may ever have thought before. Thinking is a necessity in coaching, not a nicety. Continue to enable the thinker to think and try hard, rather than trying hard yourself.

When you don't know where you are in the middle of the conversation (a good thing, by the way – the best coaches are OK with not knowing), recontract rather than take responsibility for deciding the direction that you both take. Recontracting might sound like:

- ➔ 'What do you sense now that you didn't sense at the beginning?'
- ➔ 'What's explicit now that wasn't explicit before?'
- ➔ 'What's evident now that wasn't evident when we started?'

Then follow up with:

- ➔ 'With that in mind, where do we need to explore next?'
- ➔ Or find your own alternatives that are authentic for you.

This recontracting keeps the responsibility for the direction of the conversation firmly with the thinker. This is *their* coaching and *their* life, so you need to give them the choice about which direction would be most useful to them. If you're unsure, you might ask: 'Is this useful to you?' If not: 'What do we need to think about next?' or 'What *would* be more useful to think about?'

Don't guess whether a direction is useful to them – ask.

These kinds of questions will keep you out of both the content and driving to a solution. You might think this is the role of the coach – to get to a solution to the problem or opportunity that the thinker has brought. But oftentimes, driving too hard and fast can lead to transactional actions that simply don't address the person's underlying needs. We'll come back to that in Shifts 15 and 45. We'll also come back to why you don't ask them about their progress since last time as your first question unless it's been contracted for (see also Shift 70) and how you conduct the 'Big C Contract' (see also Shift 2) and three-way contracting (see also Shift 75).

Shift 27

OLD MINDSET: Always try your hardest

NEW MINDSET: Being easeful leads to better coaching

This one might sound familiar. Our parents or carers may well have taught us to try our hardest (see also Shift 3). Our teachers encouraged the same trait, urging us to give our utmost in all situations, to persist in difficult situations. This has its benefits, of course, otherwise we wouldn't be invited to try so hard. But there are significant downsides when we take all the responsibility, and we could eventually burn out.

In Shift 3, I wrote about getting thinkers to do the hard work of thinking. Here, I focus on you, the coach, being easeful.

As Kim Morgan (2019) wrote in *The Coach's Survival Guide*:

If you are in a hurry to see transformation in your clients, you will unconsciously or perhaps even consciously, communicate this to them. This will put pressure on them and may make them feel that they are letting you down by not changing quickly enough. Alternatively, it may cause them to become resistant to you and therefore to changing. Working with ease, not urgency is essential in building the coaching relationship and creating the right conditions for your client to feel safe enough to explore new thoughts and behaviours.

Wilfred Bion (1967) suggests going into a session without memory or desire (see also Shift 40): this is what I mean by easeful. Letting go of the need to remember, know, achieve or understand. If you approach coaching in this way, you will feel less pressure to be perfect and complete (see also Shifts 15, 23 and 61). Less pressure to find the 'right' answers (see also Shifts 19 and 24).

Why is this better than trying hard? Because this is the thinker's life, not yours. But also because you can support and challenge them better from this place of ease, than you can from a place of pressure that you place on yourself when you try hard.

Let's take a moment to step back and reflect on drivers, as defined

by Kahler (1975). Alongside 'Try hard', there are 'Be Perfect', 'Hurry Up', 'Please People' and 'Be Strong'. As Julie Hay (2009) states:

[These drivers or working styles] are subconscious attempts by us to behave in ways that will gain us the recognition we need from others; they are also programmed responses to the messages we carry in our heads from important people in the past.

How do we let go of the need to try hard when it's so ingrained in us? Klein (1992) suggested it stems from fear of both failure and success. If you recognise that you try hard, the counter-encouragement is to tell yourself that it's OK to be yourself, and to just be.

Approach a session believing that there's no need to know, understand, have the answers, get to a rounded-out solution or achieve.

Get comfortable with:

- ➔ not knowing the/an answer, where the session is going or the perfect question
- ➔ progress that isn't necessarily the full solution
- ➔ the thinker with whom you're partnering taking the lead and doing the hard graft.

But how do you create ease before you enter a session? And how do you decompress afterwards, to let go of any residual unease?

What are your sources of ease? Meditation, centring, reflection, walking, music that slows your heartbeat? These are all slowing-down mechanisms. Some of you may want to rev up to find ease in your body through dancing, loud music, running or other movement. You'll know what works best for you, and only you can build it into your coaching entry and exit time.

These are transition times and we know as coaches, from the work of William Bridges (2004), that we need to treat transitions wisely.

If you are wearing a different hat before the coaching, be sure to consciously change it. For example, from mum (otherwise you might show up as a parent to the thinker), from consultant, mentor, teacher or any other role (so that you don't inadvertently play those roles rather than coach). Imagine that you are disrobing at the coaching door, and putting on a different cloak.

Make this a conscious, easeful transition: making a good ending, so you can begin the coaching well.

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?

To create a more sustainable transformation in the people you coach, you need to start with your own mindset. As a coach, you know you can't change what you do unless you alter what you believe first.

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