

Cultivating coaching readiness in clients:

a practical guide



Is coaching being used in the right way, with the right people? **Clare Norman** and **Dr Sam Humphrey** offer a guide for therapeutic coaches working in organisations

The growth of coaching in organisations for a broad range of developmental and performance purposes illustrates the positive progress that coaching has made in a relatively short space of time. We suggest that there is, however, a dark side to this, which involves coaching potentially being used for the wrong reasons, in the wrong scenarios and with the wrong people. This may have come about due to a general lack of understanding of what coaching is and is not, the 'respectability' and desirability of coaching compared to other options, or the increased availability and subsequent ease of finding coaches. Either way, we argue, these can all lead to coaching potentially being 'wrongly' used.

The impact of this is that what is labelled as 'coaching' does not always create a return on investment/expectations for the organisations that commission it, nor a 'return on humanity',¹ meaning enabling the individual to flourish and thrive in the context in which they choose to live and work. That flourishing will naturally lead to better results for all, including the ripple effect on society as a whole.

For coaches who work in the therapeutic as well as the coaching space, there are some systemic 'watch-points' that we would encourage you to consider, should you choose to work within organisations, that you may not typically manage in the delivery of your therapeutic work. We suggest that it is ethical practice for coaches to use our influence with coaching custodians within organisations to pay more attention as to whether coaching is the optimal intervention at the right time with the appropriate support.

To start, we'll focus on the sorts of actions we would hope and expect a coaching custodian would take before introducing a coach to a potential client. We'll start with what can be considered at the 'macro level' coaching set-up and then work towards what can be done to increase/improve individual coaching readiness. Finally, we'll look at how to build coachability over time.

The coaching custodian

First, a word about the term 'coaching custodian'. We consider these to be the people who are responsible for the success of coaching in their organisation. This may be a full-time role or part of a broader remit. You might know them variously as heads of coaching, human resources (HR) leads, talent development leads, learning and development (L&D) managers, or organisational development (OD) leads. Whatever their formal role, the organisation will expect this person to understand (though not necessarily offer them training in) how to manage coaching in their organisation.

In reality, this may involve a whole spectrum that ranges from 'squeezing the most juice' out of coaching to simply managing the spreadsheet of coaches' names. We know, from conversations with coaching custodians, that they do not always know what the full extent of their role could be, let alone how to do this, and this can provide an opportunity for you as coach to influence how coaching, and in particular coaching readiness, can be set up for success.

Macro set-up of organisational coaching

At a macro level, we would expect a coaching custodian to have:

- articulated the business rationale for coaching in their organisation;
- outlined the purpose of coaching specific to their organisation, and the types of coaching that will be used;
- established overarching measures of success;
- got 'buy-in' from relevant stakeholders to the investment, based on the above;
- decided whether and when to use internal and/or external coaches;
- secured the technology to support the coaching programmes.

You won't necessarily be involved at this stage, but any briefing that the coaching custodian will give you will be reliant on these having been carried out. We know from our recent research, to be published in 2025, that these business briefings to coaches are rare (at least from the coaches' perspective).² It may be possible to conduct coaching within an organisation without understanding the overall business strategy, but wouldn't the coaching be more fertile if you and your client were aligned with the expectations of the business?

Therefore, we encourage you to ask about the first three items above, at the very least. If the answers are vague and woolly, keep asking. After all, as a coach, you are trained in asking good questions, so ask – politely, supportively – and explain how this is ultimately for the organisation's benefit.

As coaching is a means to an end, not an end in itself, success will be measured differently, depending on the organisation. Success is certainly not a tick-box to say that coaching has been delivered. As an experienced coach, you have the opportunity to give the coaching custodian the benefit of your knowledge about what makes coaching most successful. You have more experience of what a successful coaching set-up looks like. To not do this, we suggest, is somehow out of integrity, as you would be colluding with the organisation to sell a service that isn't fit for the business purpose (if indeed the business purpose is clear) and not provide a valuable return.



As an experienced coach, you have the opportunity to give the coaching custodian the benefit of your knowledge about what makes coaching most successful

Micro set-up of coaching: improving coaching readiness

Clearly, the individual client must be coaching ready, and this readiness includes the whole system of which they are part. Ascertaining coaching readiness also involves determining whether coaching is even the 'right' intervention before establishing if the client is in a good place to be coached. 'Coachability' here relates to how engaged, open and willing the client is to work with their coach to deliver value after coaching readiness has been determined; and it can be strengthened over time in partnership with the coach.

We know from our experience that not every topic is coachable and not every client is coaching ready. How, then, can a coaching custodian ascertain coaching readiness?

Here, we would expect a coaching custodian to be robust in determining the following:

What is the best fit development for the needs of this individual?

As we stated earlier, coaching within organisations has become *de rigueur*, but perhaps other interventions might be a better fit – or a concurrent fit. This might be, for example, training (according to a recent report by the Chartered Management Institute, 82% of leaders have received little to no training in how to manage and lead³); on-the-job stretch assignments with feedback; more frequent one-to-one conversations with their manager; therapy (which you may also be positioned to deliver, but does the organisation want to pay for this?); or it may be something more systemic that the organisation could provide for more employees. This requires an assessment of the individual's needs in the first place, to be able to match intervention to need.

How has the line manager contributed to the issue?

Sometimes, it's the line manager who needs development in people management skills, not the individual themselves; or it may be both.

Is this the right timing for the individual and the organisation?

Timing can be tricky to gauge because coaching can really help people in times of major change to navigate their own transition through that change; but sometimes the change can be such a distraction as to fragment the individual's focus and their ability to engage in the coaching.

Is the individual willing and motivated to do the hard work of thinking and changing?

This is a significant time and energy investment on the part of the individual, and it will only work if they have not been coerced (well meant or not) into coaching when they don't want it or see a need for it.

If you coach within an organisation (as an internal or external coach), these aspects need to be screened by the coaching custodian, such that when you agree to a compatibility call, coaching is already deemed to be the right intervention at the right time for the right person. You should also expect the coaching custodian to have explained to the individual how coaching works and how to make the most of it.

This means that your compatibility meeting has a clear purpose rather than a meeting to explore 'everything but what really matters'. If you have been identified as the best coach to fit the brief, then the compatibility meeting can focus on exploring how well you can work together and on identifying any reasons you can't work together. This is very different from a biased 'beauty parade' that uses first impressions of rapport as its gauge of potential, with an overloaded agenda covering all the items that should have been addressed beforehand. There are two main reasons we suggest that matching be carried out in this way:

- 1) According to research by coach psychologists Scouler and Linley, when coach and coachee differed on temperament, outcome scores were higher, and this was statistically significant.⁴
- 2) Being too alike can lead to collusion (or what executive coaches Wycherley and Cox describe as 'an echo chamber'⁵) with a dearth of challenge, and therefore coach and client remain stuck in comfortable places that don't stretch the individual to grow as much as they might.⁶

Collectively, we can take a stand in influencing coaching custodians to take all of these measures *before* we get to the compatibility meeting. This represents a step change for us as a profession to expect effective (as opposed to efficient) coaching set up from the coaching custodian. It will ensure that every party extracts value from the coaching assignment – the individual, their line manager, the organisation as a whole, and the coach.



You might think that you should be able to just show up to a coaching assignment, without having to cajole the coaching custodian to fulfil their part of the bargain. It might feel like free consultancy, but coaches are generally attempting (and probably only skimming the surface) to do all this anyway in what is currently called the chemistry or discovery meeting! Asking for this to be in place upfront means that the coaching assignment will be well set up to deliver real value for all – including you as coach. Offering a conversation that walks the coaching custodian through best practices that they can take responsibility for will almost certainly lead to you being seen as knowledgeable about coaching and how best to get the most from it for all parties. Differentiating yourself in this way could be a form of business development, building awareness and relationship as you go.

Now to the aspects that you can influence more directly once you agree to work with the individual – and this is a two-way agreement. Both of you have a say in whether you want to work with each other, so ensuring you have clarity on what criteria will enable you to make this judgment will ensure you approach this decision clearly and without biased judgment. Whatever criteria you pay attention to, don't be driven to proceed, purely by a need for more hours of coaching towards a credential, as working with a person who is not coaching ready will likely undermine your belief in yourself.

Building coachability over time

Once coaching readiness has been addressed, you can focus attention on building coachability – one email, one conversation, one session at a time. Use every step as an opportunity to increase coachability.

Many dictionary definitions define 'coachability' as being receptive to feedback and instruction, being malleable, responsive, obliging, conformable – all of which are reactive responses. These descriptions are almost the polar opposite of this coachability as we see it, which is much more proactive and comes from within the client: a willingness to think for themselves, having or being willing to build a sense of agency, of self-efficacy, taking the initiative, leaning in.⁷

Your role as coach is to pull coachability out of the client, rather than attempting to pour something in through teaching and telling. Coachability and agency can wax and wane, so you need to bring it into your own and the client's awareness, and discuss how to nurture it at any given time in the coaching process.

Final thoughts

Now that we have defined coaching readiness and coachability, we invite you to look at your whole coaching process through a coaching readiness and coachability lens. This is an end-to-end experience you are co-creating, with these two elements at the core, building agency and self-efficacy one stimulus at a time. What more could you do to prompt that growth – both directly with your clients but also through the coaching custodians with whom you contract?

Our invitation to you at the start of this article was to reflect on your own work, to assess how you screen for coaching readiness. How does this translate for you? ■

© Clare Norman and Sam Humphrey, 2025

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Clare Norman is the author of *Cultivating Coachability* (2024) and the founder of Clare Norman Coaching Associates. A master certified coach with the International Coaching Federation, she's also a master mentor coach and certified coach supervisor. With over 25 years focused on maximising effectiveness at individual, team and organisational levels, Clare helps people express their needs to create a more caring world. Her previous books include *The Transformational Coach* (2022) and *Mentor Coaching: A Practical Guide* (2020).

Dr Sam Humphrey is the founder and CEO of Grit Limited, a coaching business devoted to developing capabilities in leaders and teams that enable them to deliver real business results. Sam is a master practitioner coach with the EMCC and holds Chartered coach status with the Worldwide Association of Business Coaches (WABC). She has over 20 years' coaching experience, a master's in executive coaching and a doctorate in coaching supervision, and was formerly global head of coaching at Unilever. An award-winning author, Sam published her co-authored book *Coaching Stories* (2019) which went on to achieve international success and has borne an equally successful podcast.

REFERENCES

- 1 Norman CE. Coaching: return on humanity. 12 April 2017 [Online.] <https://tinyurl.com/yzrn98x6> (accessed 5 February 2025).
- 2 Norman CE, Humphrey S. Unpublished research [in press]
- 3 Francke A. Better management report: taking responsibility – why UK PLC needs better management. Chartered Management Institute 2023. [Online.] <https://tinyurl.com/4xdzf82y> (accessed 5 February 2025).
- 4 Scoular A, Linley PA. Coaching, goal-setting and personality type: what matters? *The Coaching Psychologist* 2006; 2(1): 9–11.
- 5 Wycherley IM, Cox E. Factors in the selection and matching of executive coaches in organizations. *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice* 2008; 1(1): 39–53.
- 6 De Haan E, Duckworth A, Birch D, Jones C. Executive coaching outcome research: the predictive value of common factors such as relationship, personality match, and self-efficacy. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research* 2013; 65(1): 40–57.
- 7 Norman CE. *Cultivating coachability: how to leverage coaching readiness so thinkers can optimise value*. Bristol: Right Book Company; 2024.

