It has often been said that there is no greater crime than the waste of a single human mind. Every coach would agree. Most coaches would say that their greatest satisfaction, their reason for coaching, in fact, lies in the moments when their client’s mind is not only saved, but soaring. Coaches’ conversations with each other teem with this commitment.

But how many coaches know how to set free the human mind in front of them? How many are driven to find out how far clients can think on their own before they need input from the coach? How comfortable are most coaches if the client never needs input? How many coaches can track the proportion of the client’s talk to the coach’s at about 12:1?

It seems not enough coaches listen deeply for an adequate period before they speak, and many are not truly comfortable with silence. Many do not know how to set the mind free of untrue, limiting assumptions - cleanly, elegantly, and in record time. And how many coaches provide the quality of attention possible by never taking notes?

Some. But not nearly enough.

Most of us accumulate knowledge, skills, models, maps, theories and inventories. We are qualified and "armed for bear". However, we often don’t know how to help clients think for themselves. We don’t know how to provide the conditions for them to break through to insights, perspectives and strategies essential to their optimum progress, but unavailable to us.

It is just possible that the most fundamental coaching expertise - and the most advanced - the skill without which no coach should make a move, and from which all other skills and tools should spring, is the creation of a “thinking environment”. The client’s thinking should come
Nancy Kline: 'The client's thinking should come first'
first. Often this is all that’s needed. As coaches we are paradoxically essential and irrelevant. This process is both simple and complex and there are many variants.

**Ashley’s dilemma**

For example, Ashley had her eye on a promotion. She talked for 10 minutes about the position. Then she said, “I want this job. But you should see the competition.” She paused. I focused my attention and my interest on where she might go with her thinking. I said nothing. About 30 seconds passed. She looked up. “Going for it is going to be scary.”

Again she was quiet. Many more seconds passed. “I think that is it,” she said. “I am frightened.”

I thought of questions to gain information, to guide her, insights to offer, history to explore. But instead I asked, “What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?”

Ashley, in the presence of that question, had new, clearer thoughts. She talked for 10 more minutes. Clarity increased. She looked up. “What I want most from this session now is to prepare for the interviews, frightening as that seems.”

Every coaching theory would have an approach for this moment. But I chose one to keep her thinking for herself. I asked, “What are you assuming that is keeping you from preparing for the interviews?”

She knew immediately. “I am assuming that I might not get the job. Because even if I pass the interview process, they still might not choose me.”

“Yes,” I said, “it is possible that you might not get the job. But what are you assuming that makes that stop you from preparing for the interviews?”

She thought about that. “I am assuming that if I hold back, I can blame the failure on not going full out. I am assuming that if I do my best and then am rejected, I will be lost.”

“Do you think it is true,” I asked, using her words exactly, “that if you do your best and then are rejected, you will be lost?”

Ashley was quiet. I stayed interested in where her thinking was going.

“Objectively true?” I said nothing. “No,” she said. “The opposite is true. If I hold back, I will have let myself down. Then I would really feel lost.”

“So what is the true, liberating assumption?” I asked.

“Ah, the unpredictability and eloquence of the client’s own words. And now, the most elegant thing of all (linking the liberating assumption with the session goal), the incisive question – again entirely her words.

“If you knew that if you go into full flight you win no matter what, how would you prepare for the interview?”

“Oh,” she said, without hesitation her voice energetic and the fear gone. “I would...”

Ideas tumbled from her and she aced the interviews.

“I am glad I got the job,” she said six months later. “But more important than getting the job was seeing for myself...”
“How many coaches actually know how to set free the human mind in front of them?”
that full flight is winning. It opened a new world to me. I still use that question. It works in many places.”

Ashley produced that result by thinking for herself. My ideas, questions and tools paled beside the power of giving her uninterrupted attention and helping her construct the incisive question. It was she who found the answers. She needed me in order to do it, yes, but she needed me to be the expert in creating a thinking environment for her. She needed my attention and my few, accurately crafted, questions. She needed me to have the courage to trust her intelligence.

**THE COACH’S RIGHT**

“If we have any right as coaches,” I once heard a speaker at a conference say, “it is the right to give input. That is what clients expect and what they buy. A coach is not merely a sounding board.”

This speaker missed the point. Certainly, a coach is not “just a sounding board”. But more crucially, a sounding board is not this kind of listener. The kind of listening that frees the human mind, the incisive questions that allow the mind to soar and generate exceptional answers, is catalytic, not inert.

A catalyst in biochemistry is an amazing thing. It is a substance that increases the rate of a change without being consumed or changed itself. The catalyst also lowers the activation energy required for this change, allowing the change to proceed more quickly or at a lower temperature.

Similarly, your attention accelerates connections and leaps in the client’s thinking. And, like a catalyst, your attention is not changed by the client’s thinking. You as a human being may be changed. Such is the wonderful bonus of being a coach. But your attention is not changed. The client can count on your attention to be intelligent, unconfused, compassionate. Their thinking can proceed more quickly and with far less energy than it can if you offer ideas and direction, de-railing them, back-tracking, trying to regain ground and mourning the loss of insights and ideas that can never be retrieved.

Too many coaches fail to be catalytic listeners. They think that listening is linear. That it is lined up waiting to speak. Too many coaches watch for the holes, the pause, the intake of breath, the looking off into space, the slightest indication that their client is finished so that they can speak. They miss the catalyst. They miss the ignition that is inside the listening.

They need to know that it is not the central right of the coach to have input. It is the central right, privilege and responsibility of the coach to know how to free the human mind in front of them.

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