

The creation of a thinking environment allows client and coach to find solutions together. But how can the coach be a catalyst for the client's own ideas without putting words into their mouths?

By Nancy Kline

CATALYTIC CONVERTER

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.

"That if I go into full flight, I win no matter what."

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

Case study

Russell hired an executive coach when his organisation's national rating fell to level one. He had just become director. He was shocked at the rating and thought that the assessment was unfair. But he also knew that he had less than a year to salvage the situation. So he focused on the changes necessary to bring it up to level two by December. Out of five levels, two was still low, but it would restore hope to the governors, re-engage the teams and secure his job for at least a bit.

In his former position he had experienced several coaching approaches. This time he chose the thinking environment. "I want a genuine catalyst for my best thinking," he told his boss. "I want to know that the coach truly wants the solutions to come from me and knows how to make that happen. I am confident that my group and I can turn this ship around. But we need to think like geniuses to do it. I don't want a coach who does "facilitation".

Russell spent on average 70 minutes of each two-hour session thinking without interruption and with catalytic attention from his coach. He explored, analysed, clarified and hypothesised. He strategised. He recognised flaws in the current structure. He faced his own failings. Out of this free exploration came focus and key ideas and action lines. And in all of this the coach had said only two things. 1) At the beginning: "What would you like to think about today, and what are your thoughts?" And 2) each time Russell's thinking stopped: "What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?"

Russell spent the remainder of each session focused on a still unresolved issue. The coach asked him questions to determine:

1. The key untrue assumption stopping his progress.
2. The true liberating assumption.

Using Russell's exact words to construct an incisive question, the coach provided the perfect structure in which Russell could break through to new levels of insight and imaginative, workable ways forward.

Occasionally Russell asked for the coach's ideas. The coach gave them, succinctly.

Out of 120 minutes, the coach spoke for a total of 11. Out of five levels of performance, Russell's organisation rose to four.

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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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AS A COACH TO CREATE A THINKING ENVIRONMENT?

DO	DON'T
1. Recognise that your key expertise is to create the 10 conditions under which your clients can think for themselves.	1. Interrupt your clients.
2. Be more interested in where your clients are going with their thinking than you are determined to share yours.	2. Assume you must, or even can, think for them.
3. Be more interested in what is real and true for your clients than you are frightened of being proved wrong.	3. Define helping as speaking, intervening or “doing for”
4. Recognise that you are simultaneously essential to you clients, and irrelevant.	4. Paraphrase your clients.
5. Consider it a success when your clients conceive ideas better than yours.	5. Simply wait to speak, rather than truly wanting to know what more your clients think.
6. Assure your clients that you will not interrupt them.	6. Regard the listening part of a session as just the beginning. It is the core.
7. Wonder what more they think or feel or want to say. Ask. And keep asking.	7. Feel successful only when your clients do what you think is best.
8. Know that this alone may be enough to result in a successful session.	8. Deflect clients from feelings.
9. Recognise the universal block to thinking and action: untrue assumptions.	9. Assume that their thinking is over the minute they are quiet or say they are finished.
10. Master the building of incisive questions to remove them.	10. Tell clients what they are assuming.
11. Understand the difference between an assumption and a belief.	11. Regard the words “assumption” and “belief” as always interchangeable.
12. Trust the intelligence of your client.	12. Trust your own intelligence more than that of your client.
	13. Take notes (unless your client demands it).

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