

# INTRODUCTION TO ESSENTIAL COACHING SKILLS FOR LEADERS

## WHAT MAKES A CONVERSATION PRODUCTIVE

One element of any truly productive conversation – the kind of conversation that leads to lasting change – is **purpose**. The interaction must have an objective AND that objective needs to be clearly stated **and agreed to** by all parties involved so everyone in the conversation is aligned in **focus**.

This key element of coaching, **purposeful focus**, is a big part of what distinguishes coaching from a nice chat with a friend or a correction by a manager.

Arriving at the focus and staying on purpose throughout the conversation requires the use of a structure or format that will flex as needed to support the objective of the interaction.

### Format, Flow and Focus

A coaching interaction has a beginning, middle and end, and each serves a purpose:

- The beginning of the conversation serves to:
  - Open the conversation and foster connection, trust and safety.
  - Clarify and confirm the focus for the interaction.
  - Identify and confirm the desired outcomes from the interaction.
- The middle portion is devoted to exploration and discovery, and is where learning occurs. However, exploration and discovery can also be part of the beginning and ending of any coaching interaction. More on this later.
- The closing portion of a coaching conversation allows for:
  - Confirming any growth that has occurred in the session,
  - Discussion of how the coachee will apply any learning, if this has not already taken place,
  - Discussion of next steps if this has not already taken place,
  - Exploration and confirmation of accountability if this has not already taken place.
  - Identification of any support needs the coachee may have in order to move forward.

**We separate the coaching session into beginning, middle and end for the sake of clarifying the purpose and essential flow of each, not to create a cookie-cutter checklist you must follow in a specific order.**

You already know that in any truly engaging conversation, the flow of the conversation is flexible, not rigid, right? The same is true for a coaching interaction. Yes, you have an overall structure, but it is a loose structure. Structure in this case supports flow rather than limiting it.

Just as exploration and discovery are not limited to the central portion of the interaction, you don't have to wait until the end of the session to explore commitment and accountability, or next steps. If the natural flow of the conversation allows that to occur earlier in the interaction, by all means, do so at that time.

## **Flow is at least as important as format, and both need to serve focus.**

Use the components of format (expanded below) to help you remember essential elements of the interaction. They are not meant to lock you or your coachee into a rigid formulaic approach.

In masterful coaching - again - flow is supported rather than limited by format. Here's how this begins:

### **Creating a Cohesive, Productive Coaching Interaction**

The need to establish a primary focus or objective for any coaching interaction is evident in the International Coach Federation's (ICF) Core Coaching Competency, **Establishing the Coaching Agreement**. (See your Resource page for a copy of the Competencies.)

The word "agreement" has two meanings in the ICF context:

- 1) The overarching agreement for the coaching **engagement**, which is a series of coaching sessions/interactions across a specified amount of time, and
- 2) The agreed-upon agenda or focus for any given interaction.

You might frame the first as the contract to enter into a coaching process (several conversations across time), and the second as the objective for a specific coaching conversation. For the purposes of this group coaching experience, we will focus on the process of establishing and confirming the agenda for a coaching interaction.

**Note:** Some of your coaching interactions may occur spontaneously within a larger conversation and some of them may take place as a formally scheduled coaching session. You will see the words **interaction, conversation and session** used interchangeably throughout this text; please apply them for your purposes as needed.

### **How format supports focus:**

Consider the agreement, or focus for the interaction as a central anchoring thread weaving throughout the session. Just as a specific thread may run throughout a tapestry and be more visible at some places in the tapestry than at others, it is still there, very much a part of the overall fabric.

The coach, as co-weaver of this tapestry with the coachee, tracks and holds threads, pulling them forward as needed, in support of the coachee's self discovery and movement toward desired outcomes.

If you've ever seen a loose thread in a piece of fabric, and pulled that thread out of the fabric only to have the fabric begin to unravel, you have an idea of how the confirmed focus for the session helps hold the coaching session together.

Said another way: Imagine the coaching session is a suspension bridge, held aloft and together by cables. The confirmed agenda for any given coaching session is the central cable running the length of the session to tie it together.

**To recap:**

What is the agreement? Essentially, it is the **stated – and confirmed (and often reconfirmed) - focus** based on the coachee’s agenda for any coaching interaction.

The coach’s role in this process is to:

- 1) Assist the coachee as needed with clarifying how they want to use the session (**focus**) and what they will take away from the session (**outcomes**). *This approach allows you to remain in partnership even when the purpose of the coaching interaction is to explore a needed performance turn-around. More on this later.*
- 2) Honor the coachee’s agenda and desired outcomes rather than injecting the coach’s agenda into the coaching interaction. *Yes, as a manager coaching direct reports, there will be times you bring an agenda into a coaching interaction because you have required outcomes to meet. Just hold onto these two words for now: Co-creation and Partnership. Or...add a third word: Accountability. This will make more sense when we get into the demos; this very transparent weaving in of accountability through partnering is a big part of what makes coaching so effective.*
- 3) Hold focus on the coachee’s stated agenda, eliciting coachee discovery throughout in support of the coachee’s desired outcomes. *Again, in the coaching demos, you will see how the invitation to accountability is woven transparently through a conversation when you first clearly establish the focus of the conversation and then track that focus throughout the interaction.*

Using the metaphor of the cable holding the session together, as the coach you are responsible for ensuring the cable is anchored at the beginning **and** end of the session, and for tracking the cable throughout the session.

Imagine yourself “walking” beside the coachee throughout the coaching session, running your hand lightly along this cable – as opposed to grasping it with clenched hands. You, Coach, simply remain “in touch with” the agreement or coachee’s agenda.

This allows everything that takes place in the session to occur against the backdrop of the agreement. It all begins with anchoring the cable:

- 1) The coach **asks the coachee what they want to work on**/address/focus on in the session. This invites the “cable” to be identified, **but merely asking about it does not anchor it.**
- 2) Using **reflection** based in **active listening**, the coach **confirms** and begins to ground the agreement, which is the process of anchoring the cable at the beginning of the session.
- 3) The coach **explores** desired outcomes, measures of success for these outcomes and underlying issues related to agenda and outcomes in order to closer to the anchoring of the cable.

- a. The coach's **confirming** of what s/he hears, through **reflection, observation and inquiry**, assists the coachee with hearing themselves.
  - b. The coach often **distills** or **bottom-lines** what s/he hears, making it clear to both coach and coachee what the objective is for any given coaching interaction.
- 4) After this initial exploration, clarification, distillation and confirmation, then the grounding or anchoring of the cable can be completed.

**Here's an example of how the conversation can flow:**

**Coach:** How would you like to use your session today?

**Coachee:** I'm at a crossroad in my life and want some assistance getting clarity on which direction to go. As a side effect of being in this crossroad, I'm stuck on making a major decision regarding my business. I'd like resolution on this decision.

**Coach:** *(Invites exploration to clarify issues underlying the stated agenda)* How do the crossroad and the decision relate to each other?

**Coachee:** The crossroad has to do with where I am in my life, and the decision has to do with whether or not to move ahead with a major expansion in my business.

**Coach:** What are the questions you're asking yourself about this?

**Coachee:** There are several: The first question is this - Do I sell a business that is poised to double in the next few years, or do I take it through this expansion myself? The second question is - What's going on that I no longer "have it" to give to my business, in the way I always have? And if I don't have it, what is the responsible choice here?

**Coach:** What do you want to do?

**Coachee:** Have it all. I want to honor all parties involved.

**Coach:** What does this mean, to have it all, to honor all parties?

**Coachee:** *(pauses to reflect)* I guess it means to honor my commitments.

**Coach:** What commitments?

**Coachee:** This company has been my "3<sup>rd</sup> child," so to speak. I feel as if I gestated it, birthed it and have nurtured it to co-create something very special with my employees. You see, when I started this business 7 years ago, I set out to do the opposite of everything I never liked about working for others. We have an amazing environment, with onsite daycare, truly open door communication across and up and down the organization. Of the 200 employees, several have been with me

since the beginning, and we have more than one family with more than one member of the household working here. Our turnover is less than one percent per year.

**Coach:** It sounds as if there are some things you hold very dearly about this company.

**Coachee:** Exactly! And if I sell the company to someone else, I truly do not trust they will honor the vision and culture we've established. Frankly, I'm not willing to abandon people I care about in this way.

**Coach:** You sound really clear about that. Given how deeply you seem to feel about your business and the people there, what is it you no longer "have to give?"

After continued exploration for a few more minutes, the coach and coachee unearth a conflict central to the coachee's dilemma: Her "get up and go has got up and gone," making it difficult and unappealing to envision walking through the pending expansion process. She has desire but not the energy to support the fulfillment of that desire.

In the space of 5-10 minutes, the coach explored:

- ⇒ Where the coachee is at the opening of the session,
- ⇒ What's "up" for the coachee and –
- ⇒ What lies underneath this.

Using the power of distillation and clarification, the coach can proceed to confirming the agreement (anchoring the cable).

To confirm the agreement, the coach can use questions such as the following (but they are by no means your only choices for this part of the process):

- It sounds as if you don't want to leave the company, yet you don't feel the energy to move you into the expansion process. Does that sum it up?
- If we pull forward something you said a few minutes ago, what would resolution look or sound like?
- Do you want to explore what's going on with your energy?

Here is an example of how the confirmation of the agreement can sound in conversation:

**Coach:** It sounds as if you have the desire and commitment to take your company forward, but you don't at present have the energy to carry you through the expansion process. Am I hearing you correctly?

**Coachee:** Yes, that's it exactly.

**Coach:** So, would it make sense to begin with looking at what's going on with your energy?

**Coachee:** (pauses to consider) Okay.

**Coach:** Just to be sure, as you consider your situation, is there anything else that catches your attention or seems like a more compelling place for us to focus?

**Coachee:** (thinks for a few moments) My busy mind tells me I should make a list of pros and cons, but the truth is I don't want to turn my company over to someone else.

**Coach:** Is that a decision?

**Coachee:** (laughs) I guess it is. I just can't seem to muster up the "oomph" to get started.

**Coach:** What do you mean when you say "oomph?"

**Coachee:** Oomph means .....(pauses and laughs again) energy. Okay, okay. It *is* about energy, isn't it? I guess we'd best begin there.

**Coach:** Hmmmm.....so, if we use our time today to explore what's going on with your energy or oomph, what will tell you at the end of this conversation that it has been a productive one for you?

**Coachee:** Maybe some clarity on what's going on or how to get my energy back.

**Coach:** (repeats what s/he just heard the Coachee say) What's going on or how to get your energy back. Does that mean you want to walk away from this conversation with a better understanding of something, and/or with a plan for restoring energy,....or is there something else?

**Coachee:** I think that's it: I want to understand why I'm not my usual peppy self and I want some action steps for getting back to my usual level of energy.

**Coach:** Okay, so if I understand you, our focus is exploring what's going on with your energy and as a result of that exploration, at the end of this discussion you want to have a better understanding of what's going on for you regarding your energy, and you want some specific actions you can take to restore your energy. Is that it?

**Coachee:** Yup.

**Coach:** Is there anything else?

**Coachee:** No, that's it.

Having read this dialogue, notice the difference between asking about the focus for the interaction and remaining present to confirm it.

Another thing to notice from the preceding example: It demonstrates how a coachee may not always enter the coaching conversation with a clearly articulated focus for the session. As the coach, you may need to assist your coachee to achieve that clarity through the process of exploration.

On the other hand, your coachee may come into the coaching interaction very clear and succinct about what s/he wants from the session. But, this does not always occur so you need to be prepared as the coach to facilitate the process of articulating a clearly defined focus and outcome for the conversation.

Sometimes, even if your coachee is certain (and maybe even determined) about the focus for the session, you may find during exploration and discovery that another focus will serve the coachee better. In that case, check in with the coachee to see if the focus/agreement needs to be reestablished.

Bottom line:

- Remain present to this process of identifying and confirming the agreement for the session.
- Take the time up front and it will make the remainder of the session more productive.

**Clarifying and grounding the focus for the interaction distinguishes a coaching conversation from other kinds of conversations including a chat between friends or correction by a manager.**

From the coaching dialogue in the previous pages:

Give one example of how the coach anchored the cable at the beginning of the coaching session.

What did the coach say to confirm the focus?

What opportunities for assumptions do you now notice in the coaching dialogue from the previous pages?

State 3 reasons the agreement or central cable is essential in a coaching session.