

Extract from:

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pp. 156-158

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**Story
from
Practice**

The partnership principles

When learning to become a coach, one of my fears was to be confronted by a coachee who was not willing to be coached. I now find such situations a much richer learning experience for both the coach and the coachee. When reflecting on a challenging coaching conversation, I was able to see how the partnership principles helped to create the right conditions for a successful outcome. The story below is taken from my own learning journal with details changed in order to protect anonymity. The notes in square brackets are my original notes as I reflected on the session.

Journal entry

I had travelled for an hour to get to the coachee's place of work. There was parking nearby, but this was underground and seemed to be designed for very small cars! It was difficult to get from the car park to the city centre office complex and I had to ask for directions. [As a coach, I arrived for the coaching session a bit frazzled. In future, I will allow an extra 15 minutes. A quick coffee somewhere would have settled my own nerves.]

I arrived at the office a few minutes early, but the secretary kept me waiting for another 10 minutes. When I met the coachee I wasn't sure whether I should apologise for lateness. I did anyway, but noted that I *had* arrived on time. [This may have come across as defensive, and was not a good way to start our interaction.]

We both looked very formal and we walked to a small room with comfortable seating and some chairs. The coachee was civil but not friendly. The coachee sat down on one of the sofas, and gestured for me to sit on a chair. He did not offer any drinks. [Another reason it would have been helpful to arrive 15 minutes early for a coffee!] I said I would prefer to sit on the sofa opposite to where he was sitting. There was a low table between us, but this did not seem like a barrier.

Before I had a chance to talk about contracting, the coachee announced: 'Before we start, there's something that I would like to tell you. I don't believe in this coaching bullshit. I am here because my line manager has instructed me to be here. I think it's a waste of my time, and you have one hour, not longer.' [Initially, I felt myself becoming defensive. Some anxiety set in. Even an hour seemed like a very long time!] So, before contracting, we had a brief chat about the situation. I reflected back that he seemed angry about being in the coaching session, and I said that it seemed like we both felt obliged to be in the room – he had been told to attend a coaching session, and I had been paid to deliver it. I asked whether he and I could agree something that would make best use of the time that we both felt we *had* to spend together. We agreed to talk for an hour, rather than the 90–120 minute session that I had been contracted to deliver. I said that we could decide whether or not to continue the coaching sessions at the end of our time together. When he said that his manager would not be happy if he rejected any further sessions, I said that I would be willing to write to the manager myself, saying that I did not see the value in any further sessions.

I could see a change in attitude in the coachee. We re-presented the coaching session as a pre-coaching chat which was simply a two-way conversation about whether there

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would be any benefit from carrying on with the coaching assignment. [If I am honest, there was also a change in me. There was less pressure on both of us, and the worst-case scenario seemed to be that the coachee would want to drop out. At this stage, I would have been quite comfortable with that outcome.] Despite this, I did go through the contracting, especially highlighting confidentiality and the fact that I would not divulge any of the conversation to the line manager. At the end of the entire process (if we did decide to continue), I said that I would have to provide a summary of the topics discussed and my simple assessment of whether the sessions were successful or not. I promised to show this to the coachee and get his approval before sending it to his line manager.

To start the coaching session, I said that he could talk about anything he liked, and that we did not need to talk about the issue for which he had been 'sent' to be coached. Again, there was a positive response. 'What shall we talk about then?' he asked. 'Anything you like,' I replied. I asked him whether he would like to tell me a bit about why he was so set against the idea of coaching.

We could have spent the full two hours talking, but we stopped after an hour, as this was part of our amended agreement. Just before the end of our 60 minutes, I reminded the coachee of our initial conversation. I said that we had agreed that we would make a decision about future sessions. I reiterated that I would be pleased to pursue any of the routes available. We could both report back to the line manager saying that we found no value in the coaching conversations, he could talk to the line manager himself and withdraw from the process, or we could agree to meet again. The only stipulation was that the next conversation would be more of a coaching conversation, and that we would need to work on the coachee's goals (as this one had been almost entirely about how the coachee felt about coaching and what had led to the current situation). Although it was grudging, the coachee said that he now thought there might be some value in coaching, checking that he would be able to set the agenda for the next coaching session.

Reflecting on session

In the face of obvious resistance to coaching, I felt that trying to pursue a traditional coaching conversation would be futile. Rather than focus on the topic (which was implied by the line manager), I chose to focus on seeing if we could build a relationship.

I was genuine in the coaching session by saying that both of us felt compelled to be there, and that neither of us was looking forward to the session. It was a bit of a risk to say that I did not want to be there either, but in the moment it was true. I had arrived a bit frazzled, I did not have a cup of coffee and I was faced by a seemingly aggressive coachee who seemed determined that the coaching session would fail. However, I did not judge the coachee, and importantly, I resisted an early instinct to put up my own defenses and barriers.

That honesty, though, changed the dynamic. It seemed like the barriers came down, and both of us were talking to each other like human beings. I was surprised at

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how quickly we built a relationship, and I was able to empathise genuinely with the coachee who explained why he was angry.

At the end of the conversation, I thought that we had built a relationship but I was not sure whether further coaching sessions would be of value, and was prepared to support either decision from the coachee. At the same time, while I thought we spent our first hour together effectively building a relationship, I was clear that if we chose to pursue the coaching, future sessions would have to focus on the coachee's performance in the workplace (which is what I had been contracted to deliver). So when the coachee said, 'Yeah, I guess we could continue with the sessions,' I asked whether he thought that further sessions would be helpful to him in relation to his performance at work. He replied that he was prepared to give it a go.

As it happens, this series of coaching conversations was very successful despite the rocky start – both for the coachee and for myself as the coach. I learned so much about how people respond to negative pressure and the importance of the relationship in coaching. Even more remarkably, that coaching conversation and the way in which the coachee made decisions about his own future, influenced decisions that I took about my own professional future.