

Three key elements in a coaching contract

Coaching is a working relation aimed at amplifying your effectiveness. There are *three* elements I have found crucial in a coaching agreement:

- Clear and measurable objectives to work against, *within* an agreed upon timeframe
- Clear rules of engagement (“table manners”), as well as *disengagement*
- Unequivocal accountabilities for both parties

Coaching objectives

In a coaching relationship it is immensely important that *prior* to the engagement, the coach and client are in agreement what exactly the objectives are. What should be the result from the coaching relationship? The same pretty much holds in consulting, btw, where objectives need to be focused and crystal clear. This also means clarifying what success will look like, how it can be discerned. How will you recognize it when you see it? Such an agreement provides clarity and focus. It also safeguards against expectations from either side that are impossible to achieve or unlikely to be met.

A coaching engagement has a defined start and end date. Sometimes the end date can be made contingent upon meeting one of several criteria. For instance: either certain skills are mastered as displayed by behaviors XYZ, *or* a fixed calendar date has expired and the coach has delivered on his commitments.

Rules of engagement

You need to agree with your coach on how you interact, and how you get access to each other. We both have agenda’s, commitments and accountabilities. For coaching to be successful, it should not get in the way of primary responsibilities, *nor* can you allow “business as usual” to get in the way of required behavior change. There’s a reason why set ways require a coach to accelerate growth. It is *his* responsibility to

help you break through dysfunctional loops if necessary (this can be painful).

If the sponsor of our engagement is someone else besides you (which is quite common), we need to agree how that 3rd party will be involved. This can be a relation where he is apprised of progress and my findings, or not. Both are absolutely fine and possible, but what is more important is that we all agree about this from the outset.

Mutual accountabilities

We need to be clear what the mutual accountabilities are in order to “lock” progress into the environment, and also to ensure change is sustainable. No one operates in a vacuum, so often some (informal) contracts need to be established that acknowledge how change is affected by, and will affect the social environment.

How will you see to it that your new behavior *stays* your default mode of operating? Does this demand new contingencies? If so, the people who will be holding you accountable for your new skills need to be “in the loop”.

Conclusion

Coaching is a working relation, not a return to the womb, nor a lifelong umbilical cord. The nature of that working relation is embedded in the coaching contract. Note that a contract is not the culmination of a relationship, merely the *beginning* of it.

Just like in marriages, trust is not a valid reason to omit formalizing the agreement. To the contrary, a coaching contract helps both parties focus on objectives and be clear and specific about them. It “sets the stage” by providing boundaries and rules of engagement. This way, we both know what to expect, from whom, and when. The best moment to discuss this is *before* you get started.