

COACHING SKILLS FOR CAREER ADVISORS

.....
THE COMMONWEALTH FUND

COACHING VS. PROBLEM SOLVING

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Coaching and problem solving are two distinct approaches to helping that are complementary and can be used in tandem to support the professional development of a given individual.

In general, problem solving means supporting an individual by giving advice based on your own experience, knowledge, and opinions. Coaching means supporting an individual by asking questions that unlock assumptions, expand possibilities, and assess options.

The table below illustrates some of the key differences between coaching and problem solving.

COACHING	PROBLEM SOLVING
<i>Coachee has the answer</i>	<i>You have the answer</i>
<i>Coach does not “fix” the problem or give advice. Solutions are elicited from the Coachee</i>	<i>You give advice and provide solutions</i>
<i>Facilitative</i>	<i>Directive/Instructional</i>
<i>Relationship is based on the facilitation of an individual’s learning and development</i>	<i>Relationship is based on the transfer of specific knowledge from you to the other person</i>
<i>Parameters of relationship are negotiated between Coach and Coachee</i>	<i>Parameters of relationship are less likely to be discussed or negotiated between you and the other person</i>
<i>Coach champions Coachee to be their own best advocate</i>	<i>You act as an advocate or sponsor on behalf of the other person</i>

When coaching, we assume that the Coachee is capable of finding the solutions with proper guidance and support. The role of the Coach is to ask powerful and insightful questions that help the Coachee view situations in new and helpful ways. With problem solving, we assume that the quickest way to effective solutions is by imparting actual knowledge to the other person, usually based on the your own experience.

COACHING VS. PROBLEM SOLVING – COMPARISON

Below is an example of how coaching and problem-solving approaches would differ in addressing the same issue or challenge.

SITUATION

Frank has been working at the organization for two years. He likes certain aspects of his job but is frustrated with others. He's not as challenged as he would like and finds some of the people hard to work with. He likes being at the organization but is wondering if he's in the right place. He has come to you, a trusted colleague, for guidance.

Problem-Solving Approach

Frank: *To be honest, I'm kind of frustrated. I thought that joining this project would be a big change, but I'm still doing a lot of grunt work. The work is really intense but it's not all that intellectually challenging. Plus, I don't know how to deal with one of the other managers – he barely answers my emails and I don't think he really respects me. I'm thinking of looking for something else – do you think that's a good idea?*

Advisor: *I get what you're saying about the work. There are still days when I feel like I'm doing grunt work – but don't worry, over time it gets better. You'll gradually get more challenging assignments and if you do a good job eventually people notice.*

Frank: *That sounds reasonable.*

Advisor: *And that other person might just be busy – who knows what's on his mind? He's probably not even aware he's not answering your emails. I know that I'm always behind on my emails. I think the key is to take care of yourself – make sure you take little breaks here and there, even if it's just to get a coffee. If you want, I can let you know if I see interesting things but I think the key is just to take days one at a time.*

Frank: *I guess you're right. I'll give that a try.*

Coaching Approach

Frank: *To be honest, I'm kind of frustrated. I thought that joining this project would be a big change, but I'm still doing a lot of grunt work. The work is really intense but it's not all that intellectually challenging. Plus, I don't know how to deal with one of the other managers – he barely answers my emails and I don't think he really respects me. I'm thinking of looking for something else – do you think that's a good idea?*

Coach: *What's most frustrating to you now?*

Frank: *Well, like I said, the work is really intense. And even though I said it's not that challenging, it takes a lot of attention. But I never really know how I'm doing, or where I'm going.*

Coach: *How do you think you're doing?*

Frank: *Maybe I'm doing okay. I got a good performance review. I just wish I knew about my future.*

Coach: *By your future, you mean–*

Frank: *Like what future options I have, and what I have to do to get there.*

Coach: *Who do you know who might be able to give you that kind of information?*

Frank: *You, hopefully.*

Coach: *Sure, I can give you my thoughts – but who else?*

COACHING VS. PROBLEM SOLVING – COMPARISON

Coaching Approach (continued)

Frank: *I could ask my manager. I've never really sat down with him and talked about my career plans. I guess I could ask for time on his calendar to discuss this. Also, a couple of the people who entered the organization the same year I did seem confident about how their careers are rolling out. I could ask them.*

Coach: *What would you ask them?*

Frank: *Where can I expect to be in 1 years or 3 years? What skills should I be learning? That kind of thing. I think I might also like to take some courses, you know, so I could keep developing my skills.*

Coach: *So let's talk about courses for a minute . . .*

TYPES OF COACHING QUESTIONS

QUESTION TYPE & BENEFIT	EXAMPLES
<p>Broad Exploration Opens up the conversation and sets the context.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How have things been going for you?</i> • <i>What do you feel you have achieved in the last few months?</i> • <i>How did the last project go?</i> • <i>What were your key takeaways from the conference?</i> • <i>What did you learn?</i> • <i>What do you want now?</i> • <i>What's possible here?</i> • <i>What does the ideal look like?</i>
<p>Drilling Down to Specifics Gives you more detail from which to work. Helps you to get to the root cause of issues or successes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What are the specific ways in which you would like to gain more experience this year?</i> • <i>So when you say that you enjoyed working on that project, what specifically did you like about it?</i> • <i>That's interesting — tell me more about how you arrived at that conclusion.</i> • <i>What exactly is confusing for you?</i> • <i>What else?... What else?</i>
<p>Prioritizing Helps to uncover critical information and focus people on key issues/areas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>In terms of your performance, what are you most pleased about?</i> • <i>If you could develop in two key areas over the next year, what would make the biggest difference?</i> • <i>What were the best and worst parts of working on that project?</i> • <i>What aspects of this project excite you most?</i>
<p>Emotive Gives people a chance to talk about any emotions that may be blocking their performance or upsetting them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What concerns do you have about talking to your manager?</i> • <i>How are people on the team feeling?</i> • <i>How are you feeling (or doing) right now?</i> • <i>What is the hardest part of what you are going through now?</i> • <i>How did that person's response make you feel?</i>
<p>Hypothetical Gets people to step back and expand their perspective, and think about a possible future state.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What would it be like if you were to take on this challenge?</i> • <i>If you could change one thing about the planning process, what would it be?</i> • <i>What if you let it be easy?</i> • <i>What would it be like to be confident in this situation?</i>

TYPES OF COACHING QUESTIONS

QUESTION TYPE & BENEFIT	EXAMPLES
<p>Generating Options and Alternatives Helps people explore the different ways to approach a problem.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What other ways could you address the team's concerns?</i> • <i>What are some other ways that you could resolve that issue?</i> • <i>What other options might work?</i> • <i>What additional alternatives could you consider?</i> • <i>What's another way of approaching this?</i>
<p>Costs and Consequences Requires people to consider the impact of their behavior.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What's the impact on your effectiveness?</i> • <i>How's that working for you?</i> • <i>What's that costing you?</i> • <i>What will the impact be if you don't do this?</i> • <i>What sacrifices would moving overseas require?</i>
<p>Clarifying This is a closed question but ensures that both parties are clear about what has been communicated.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Are you saying that you would like to take on a bigger role, but aren't sure that you know how?</i> • <i>Are you saying that you haven't had feedback on the last iteration?</i> • <i>To make sure I understand — you're saying this person didn't communicate effectively with the other team?</i>

IMPROVING QUESTIONS

In this section, we will focus on improving the quality of coaching questions.

- Turning complicated questions into simpler, clearer questions
- Turning closed-ended questions into open-ended questions
- Turning leading questions into more open questions

FROM CLOSED TO OPEN

The following are closed-ended questions – each can be answered “yes” or “no.” Turn each closed-ended question into an open-ended question. Open-ended questions usually start with “**what**” or “**how**.” Avoid “why” questions, as they can trigger defensiveness.

1. Do you have any questions?

2. Do you need any help from me?

3. Is there a course you can take to learn this?

4. Do you know how your manager feels about this?

5. Have you talked to anyone on the team to learn what they do?

6. Can you think of any other options?

7. Have you figured this out yet?

8. Is it possible that he’s just busy and that’s why he didn’t respond to your email?

IMPROVING QUESTIONS

**FROM LEADING
TO NEUTRAL**

The following are leading questions – the speakers are giving directions about what they think the answers should be. Turn each leading question into an open-ended question that is more neutral in intention and that invites the recipient or Coachee to share his or her actual thoughts.

1. Didn't you think that training was just great?

2. Are you happy about your review?

3. Don't you think he means well?

4. Do you think your time frame is realistic?

5. Don't you think it would look bad to change teams after just six months?

6. What makes you think you'd even like managing people?

IMPROVING QUESTIONS

**FROM COMPLEX
TO CLEAR**

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Turn the following convoluted “questions” into simple, open-ended questions (10 words or fewer):

1. What do you want out of your career? I mean, are you looking for money? Or recognition? Or maybe you’re looking for intellectual stimulation. I guess I’m wondering, what’s important to you? Do you know? Do you have a sense of what that is?
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2. What would you do as a first step? Meaning, where do you see yourself starting off on this project? Are you going to try to tackle the whole thing yourself, or are you going to put together a team, or are you the kind of person who likes to think it all through before starting? I’m really just trying to figure out how you are planning on approaching this.
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3. Does the review seem fair to you? Taking into consideration everything, how are you feeling about this? Good? Bad? Not sure? Is this something you want to talk about now? These things can be complex, so I imagine you have lots of different thoughts right now. Clue me in a bit here. I’m listening.
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Great coaches are great listeners. **Engaged listening** – a type of listening where you are shining the spotlight on the coachee, rather than waiting for your chance to talk – accomplishes several things:

1. It ensures that you actually understand the individual's situation.
2. It allows the Coachee to hear and improve his or her thinking process
3. It makes the Coachee feel heard. This enables the Coachee feel supported and understood, builds trust, and encourages openness.
4. Engaged listening also ensures that you are working from the Coachee's agenda, not your own. It makes you check your own thought processes, and helps you keep the spotlight on the Coachee.

Good listening is tremendously powerful – all the more because it's so rare in many people's day-to-day personal and professional interactions.

ASPECTS OF ENGAGED LISTENING

1. **Focus only on the person** — Drop everything you are doing, even if it's only for five minutes. If you're checking email, you're not listening.
2. **Maintain eye contact/open facial expression** —Make sure your body language sends the right message. Give the person space to express himself or herself.
3. **Reflect back/mirror** — Try repeating back the actual words the individual has used:
"I was exhausted working long hours on the last project..."
"So you were exhausted."
4. **Paraphrase** — Rephrase what the person has said into your own words:
"I wanted to recommend something new to that team but I had hesitations about whether it was a good idea."
"So you had hesitations about approaching that team..."
5. **Empathize** — Put yourself in the person's shoes and acknowledge the effort/emotions they are feeling:
"I worked late to get that presentation done for the meeting... It was a lot of work."
"It sounds like you really put a lot of effort into it. You must have been glad, when it was done!" or *"You must have been exhausted when you finally finished."*
6. **Summarize and test understanding** — At the end of one piece of the discussion, play back the key points covered in the dialogue and ask if your summary is accurate:
"So the key area where you would like my help is letting you know how you are doing in your interactions with that team. Is that right?"
7. **Notice the person's energy, tone of voice, and body language** — Is the Coachee nervous, angry, relaxed? Tired or down? Excited and energized? Uncomfortable or feeling good? These kinds of cues can give you a better understanding of what is going on for the other person. Is he or she telling you what the real issue is?

THE ROLE OF ENGAGED LISTENING IN COACHING

LEVELS OF LISTENING

All listening isn't of the same quality. Truly engaged listening is of a whole different order from what many of us are accustomed to.

Not listening

The "listener" is not hearing and not listening. He or she may or may not be that interested in the conversation or be distracted by something else. This is usually very clear to the other person who is speaking.

Picking up the thread

The listener hears what is being said, but as if from a distance. He or she does just enough to maintain the conversation, but doesn't get involved with, or committed to, the content of what is being said. Conference calls often include people doing this type of half-listening. The listener may then use the other person's conversation as a springboard for his or her own views.

Listening for facts/information

The listener hears what is being said. He or she selects and hears facts and information. The content of what is being said is heard, but the accompanying feelings or the reasons behind the facts are either not sought or are simply ignored.

Listening for facts & feelings/understanding

The listener hears not only the information but also the feelings that accompany the information. He or she actively seeks clarification and understanding of what is being felt and what that means for the person talking.

Listening holistically and seeing the big picture

The listener not only establishes the facts of the matter and how the person feels about it, but also actively explores through questions what is behind the feelings and behavior. The listener is alert to what is NOT being said, picking up on energy, voice tone, and non-verbal behaviors. The listener then helps the individual to come to his or her own conclusions by feeding back the big picture, checking understanding, challenging, and testing out ideas.



STRUCTURING THE COACHING CONVERSATION

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THE GROW MODEL Coaching conversations do have a structure. In general, coaches aim to help coachees identify a question, think more broadly and deeply about it, identify options, and then move toward action.

Try using the following model (The GROW Model, originally developed by John Whitmore and others) in your conversations with each other and with your teams back at work.

1. Set **G**oals for the conversation.
“What would you like to get out of this conversation today?”
2. Help the coachee explore the current **R**eality by exploring perspectives, background, tradeoffs and feelings.
“What’s going on with ...?”
“How do you feel about ...?”
“What other factors are you considering?”
3. Define **O**ptions and alternative courses of action.
“What options are available to you?”
“What might be another option?”
“What are the pluses and minuses of those options?”
4. Assess **W**ill by choosing actions to commit to an accountability structure.
“What would you like to commit to?”
“What have you decided? What are you still thinking about?”
“How can I help keep you on track?”

SAMPLE COACHING QUESTIONS – CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Coaching can be helpful on nearly every topic in professional life. Here are some examples of questions that can deepen the dialogue about a person’s career goals:

QUESTION TYPE	EXAMPLES
Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Where do you want to be in 5 years?</i> • <i>Where do you want to be in 1 year?</i> • <i>Whose job do you aspire to have?</i> • <i>How do you see your career/life evolving over the next few years?</i>
Learning Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What do you want to learn?</i> • <i>What do you want to get better at?</i> • <i>What new challenges do you want to take on?</i> • <i>What would you like to experiment with?</i>
Digging Deeper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Tell me more about _____.</i> • <i>Can you give me an example of what you mean by _____?</i> • <i>What do you want to be doing more of? Less of?</i> • <i>What do you want to change? What do you want to keep the same?</i>
Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What feedback did you receive in your last review?</i> • <i>How did you feel about it?</i> • <i>What was true about it?</i> • <i>What are you going to do about the feedback?</i>
Obstacles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What obstacles do you anticipate?</i> • <i>How have other people addressed these?</i> • <i>What are your options?</i> • <i>What’s in your control?</i> • <i>What’s not in your control?</i>
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What resources could help you do this?</i> • <i>What can I do to keep you on track?</i> • <i>What other support would be helpful?</i> • <i>When would be a good time to reconnect on this?</i>

WHEN THE COACH GETS STUCK

Coaching usually leads to richer conversations than ordinary business conversations. But that doesn't mean that you won't occasionally have difficult or awkward moments.

FEELING STUCK

A variety of situations can make you feel stuck:

- The coachee seems resistant to looking at the issue honestly, or in depth
- The coachee seems to question your credibility
- You feel you aren't connecting with the coachee, either intellectually or personally
- You can't think of anything to say
- You don't feel you are saying anything useful; your powerful questions don't seem powerful
- You are distracted by something else and finding it hard to focus
- You feel you are out of your depth, in terms of the specifics of the subject matter

Here are some methods of dealing with those situations.

Dealing with Resistance or Negativity

When the coachee seems resistant, whiny or passive:

- What do you predict is going to happen here?
- How are you going to feel if you find yourself in the same situation six months from now?
- What's going to change?
- Who is going to solve this problem?
- How's that working for you?

Dealing with Lack of Connection

When you aren't sure you're making a connection, feel inadequate, or wonder if the person values your coaching:

- I'm wondering how effective our conversations are for you.
- Give me some feedback on how this process is going for you.
- On a 1-10 scale, how well do you think this conversation is going?
- I want to be helpful to you. But I can't tell if our conversations are making a difference.
- I'm feeling a bit stuck. What would be helpful to you right now?

Feeling Inadequate

When you are drawing a blank, the conversation seems to be circling around, or you are running into domains where you lack specialized knowledge:

- Where are we in this conversation?
- Is it useful to keep discussing this, or should we come back to it another time?
- I'm not sure what to say here. What's most important to you here?
- I'm not familiar with the specifics of your area and it seems we're talking about technical things. What can we focus on that would be useful to you?
- What would you like to get out of this conversation?

WHEN THE COACH GETS STUCK

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FEELING STUCK **Feeling Distracted**

When you are distracted

- Could you repeat what you just said? I want to make sure I'm following you.
- I want to be helpful to you, but I have something else is going on that is distracting me. Can we reschedule this conversation for another time?
- I want to hear what you have to say, but I just got an urgent message. Can we take a ten-minute break and then return to this? I want to be able to give you my full attention.
- We had scheduled 45 minutes but now it turns out I can only spend 10 minutes with you. What can we talk about it that time that would be of value to you? We can also reschedule if that won't work for you.