

The Co-Active Coaching Relationship

Coaching is not so much a methodology as it is a relationship—a particular kind of relationship. Yes, there are skills to learn and a wide variety of tools available, but the real art of effective coaching comes from the coach’s ability to work within the context of relationship. Every client is unique, with a unique set of circumstances, unique goals and desire for change, unique abilities, interests, even habits of self-sabotage. We can talk in very general terms about focus areas that clients often pursue—career change, life transition, performance improvement, leadership in the workplace, health and wellness issues—but only in the broadest terms. Add to this picture the fact that goals change over time as clients clarify what is important, as they dig deeper into what motivates them, and as they produce results (action and learning). There is no authorized universal reference manual with standardized diagnoses and coaching solutions neatly defined. Coaching is inherently dynamic; that is one of the fundamental qualities of coaching and a reason for its power as a medium for change. Coaching is personal; coaching creates a unique, empowered relationship for change.

In Co-Active coaching, we also emphasize the peer relationship—that coach and client have equal, though different, roles. They are Co-Active in the relationship, so they are cocreators, collaborators, in a way.

We can picture this relationship as a triangle (see Figure 2). The coach grants power to the coaching relationship. The client also grants power to the relationship, not to the coach. Clients are in turn empowered by the relationship—empowered to take charge of their lives and the choices they make. In this figure, all the power of the relationship exists to serve the client.

In fact, the Co-Active coach must make the shift from “I am powerful” to “the coaching relationship is powerful.” Powerful coaching is not about being a powerful coach; it is about the power the client experiences. Imagine that the coaching relationship is a recharging place where clients tap into the source of energy they need to get over the hurdles in their lives. They can’t get the work done if the energy level is low. The power comes not directly from the coach, however, but from the relationship—from the synergy of the energy clients bring in the form of desire and motivation and the energy coaches bring in the form of their commitment, skills, and understanding of human change.

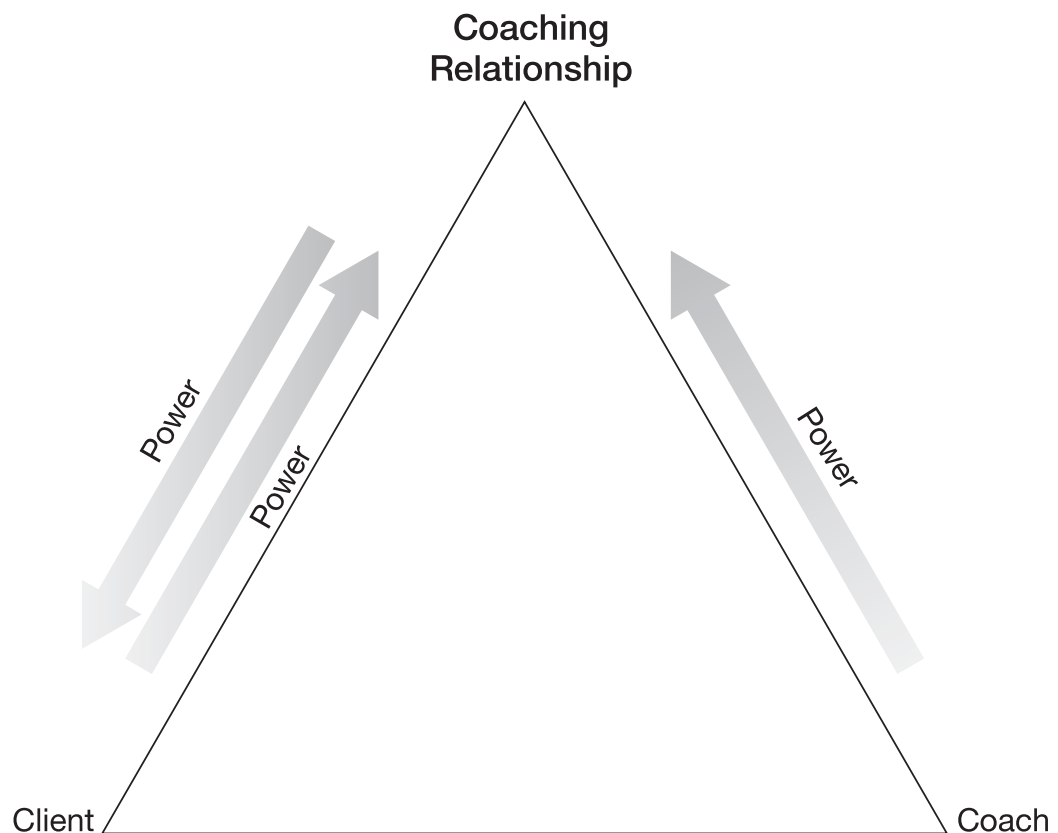


FIGURE 2 The Coaching Power Triangle

The Coaching Environment

At its most fundamental, a coaching session is a conversation between a coach and another person or—in team or relationship coaching—a coach and two or more people. But this is no ordinary, everyday conversation. An effective coaching conversation gets to the heart of what matters. It is a focused, concentrated conversation designed to support the coachee in clarifying choices and making changes. The environment in which the conversation takes place is crucial.

By “environment,” we mean both a physical environment and a relationship environment made up of ground rules, expectations, and agreements. In Co-Active coaching, we talk about two core characteristics of an effective coaching environment: one, it is safe enough for clients to take the risks they need to take, and two, it is a courageous place where clients are able to approach their lives and the choices they make with motivation, curiosity, and creativity. By the way, “safe” does not necessarily mean “comfortable.” Significant change may be highly uncomfortable, and yet there are ways to ensure that the experience is safe. Like rock climbers ascending the cliff face, striving for the summit, clients may find the process exhilarating, exhausting, and scary. But knowing that there is the equivalent of a belay team holding their rope, ensuring their safety, gives them the confidence to keep climbing.

Certain qualities characterize an environment that is safe yet promotes courage in clients. These qualities give shape to what might be called the “container” for the coaching relationship.

Confidentiality

Making change means disturbing the familiar and well-established order of things. It may be deeply satisfying, maybe exciting, to embark on that change and yet still feel risky. Even if the client and the client’s world are completely committed to and supportive of the change, change by its nature is an unknown. If clients are going to risk making significant change, they must be able to risk talking freely with their coach. Disclosure is crucial because it leads to the discovery that is necessary for action. Without the safety and reassurance that confidentiality provides,

the coaching will be tentative, and there will always be an undercurrent of wonder about what is possibly being withheld.

Coaches who work with clients inside organizations have to deal with a more complex environment. Confidentiality between coach and client is still a key condition for safe and courageous conversation, but because the organization has a vested interest in the result, it usually requires some form of reporting on the coaching. Often, clients are the ones who take responsibility for reporting the nature of the coaching work, which allows them to disclose what is most relevant to the organization while preserving confidentiality between themselves and their coach.

Trust

An agreement to hold the coaching conversation confidential is one key component in building trust. Trust is also built over time as client and coach learn that each can be counted on and the client learns that the relationship delivers results. Trust is built from small things like being punctual for coaching sessions and from a pattern of reliability. Because trust works both ways, it is as important for the coach as it is for the client. The coach must be trustworthy in her action.

Relationship is also built and trust expanded by coaches simply believing in their clients. We live in a culture that, for the most part, demands that people prove themselves, demonstrate their worthiness by performing to some standard, before they are accepted into the circle. The culture creates relationships in which the emphasis is on proving, explaining, justifying. A coaching relationship built on the premise that clients are naturally creative, resourceful, and whole and are capable of making the best choices is a relationship founded on basic trust in the client's capacity and integrity. Clients see that they have a person in their lives who believes they can do what they say they can do, who believes they can be the people they say they want to be.

It is a paradox that coaches believe completely in their clients and, at the same time, hold them accountable. But by "accountable" we do not mean a context of judgment, as in "prove it to me," but simply accounting for their promise of action and the insight of learning. Clients see that the coach is really on their side, respecting their vision and their action plans but also willing to be honest and direct for their sake.

Speaking the Truth

We could also call this attribute of a coaching environment “getting real.” A safe and courageous space for change must be, by definition, a place where the truth can be told. It is a place where clients can tell the whole truth about what they have done, and not done, without worrying about what the coach will say. This is an environment without judgment, and it is a place where the coach expects the truth from the client because truth carries no consequence other than learning, discovery, and new insight. Clients expect the truth from the coach because that is precisely the perspective for which the coach has been hired. Clients are often so close to their own situations, so wrapped up in their own histories and habitual patterns, that they are sometimes unable to see the truth accurately. This may be one of their reasons for seeking out coaching. They rely on the coach for the acuity that sees through the chaos and fog. This should be one relationship in which clients can count on straightforward and honest interactions.

Truth telling doesn't have to be confrontational, although it may confront. It can be handled with sharpness or softness, but it confronts the usual tacit acceptance of the client's explanations. Truth telling refuses to sidestep or overlook: it boldly points out when the emperor is not wearing clothes. There is no inherent judgment in telling the truth. The coach is merely stating what he or she sees. Withholding the truth serves neither the client nor the coaching relationship. A real relationship is not built on being nice; it's built on being real. When the coach has the courage to tell the truth, the client gets a model for the art of being straight. And in the process, more trust is built between coach and client.

Openness and Spaciousness

One of the qualities that makes the coaching relationship work is spaciousness. This is a place where clients can breathe, experiment, fantasize, and strategize without limitation. It is another world, a place of wide-eyed dreams. It is a space in which they can vent their anger, troubles, spite, perceptions of injustice. It is a place where failure is acknowledged as a means for learning, where there are no absolutes and few rules.

For the coach, spaciousness also means complete detachment from any particular course of action or any results clients achieve. The coach

continues to care about her clients, their agendas, their health and growth, but not the road they take to get there, the speed of travel, or the detours they might make along the way—as long as they continue to move toward the results they want. Ultimately, coaching is not about what the coach delivers but about what clients create. A coach may propose a course of action to get the results a client desires. That is fine. Brainstorming is part of coaching and can make a valuable contribution to the client's process. But in order to preserve openness in the relationship, the coach must not be attached to whether clients take her suggestions. The spaciousness of the relationship requires that clients have many channels open to creative inspiration and not be restricted to the coach's good ideas, no matter how sound or grounded in experience. In this way, clients are able to explore the widest range of possibilities.

The Designed Alliance

So far we've been talking about this relationship between client and coach as if it were conceptual. Actually, we believe it is important for client and coach to consciously and deliberately design their working relationship and continue to redesign it as necessary up through and including its completion. The designed alliance surrounds the coach and client in the Co-Active coaching model (see Figure 1, p. 8) and represents the container within which coach and client do their work.

The form of the design will be different for different coaches and unique to each coach–client relationship. The conversation that creates the design focuses on the assumptions and expectations of coach and client. The purpose of this intentional conversation is to clarify the process and expected outcomes and provide a forum for negotiating the design of a relationship that is as powerful as possible for both client and coach.

In simplest terms, the design of the alliance looks at questions such as, *What are the conditions that need to be in place for the two of us to work together effectively? What are the obstacles or potential obstacles? What fundamental questions need to be answered in order to get the most out of this process?* And as the coaching continues, there will be ongoing questions: *What is working and what is not? What do we need to change in order to make the coaching relationship more effective or have more impact?*