A Coaching Blueprint

Coaching is the art and science of facilitating self-directed change. It requires helping a person think through a situation with greater depth and clarity than they could do on their own and assist them in discovering their own solutions.

In previous columns we've presented multiple tools and techniques for achieving this objective. Employing these techniques in a real-time coaching encounter, however, can be very challenging without an overall framework—a blueprint—to serve as a guide.

Let’s take a look at a blueprint to help you navigate the coaching process. Keep in mind, however, that it’s not a linear process; there will be times when you might have to loop back and re-cover ground that you’ve already been over.

To draw a blueprint, you have to have a clear idea of what you’re trying to accomplish. Coaching carries a very different objective than mentoring or teaching. Mentoring is the sharing of your own knowledge or professional experience, while teaching involves providing a framework for understanding based on an objective body of knowledge.

In both of these roles, you function as a knowledgeable and trusted advisor. This is not the role of a coach, however. Keep in mind that your objective as a coach is to facilitate self-discovery, not provide the answer.

A coaching blueprint

The blueprint schematic is shown in Exhibit 1. We begin the coaching process in the upper left-hand quadrant.

Stage 1: Support for Thought

Support for Thought involves creating a climate that encourages openness and builds professional rapport. A coaching relationship must have as its foundation a feeling of genuine interest and positive regard for the person being coached. If you don’t like or can’t find something positive about the person and can’t get past it, you won’t be successful.

Having established a positive working relationship, your next step as a coach is to seek clarity of understanding. You do this in three ways:

1. Invite the person to expand on their comments.
2. Summarize what you hear from time-to-time.
3. Ask questions to retrieve missing information, e.g., “In what way do you want to exercise better leadership as a medical director?”

Remember to avoid providing advice; your intent at this point should be to gain insight and seek clarification that will move you and your client toward a deeper understanding of what he or she really wants.

Stage 2: Support for Action

Support for Action involves building readiness for change through positive reinforcement and an expression of optimism about the person’s ability to change.

A common technique is to build recognition of the disadvantages of the status quo and the advantage of change, e.g., “What will happen if you’re not able to create better teamwork in the OR?” Your questions should focus the person on the downside of what will happen if nothing changes. (In sales this is known as “stirring the hurt.”)

Some people are motivated to action by the prospect of gain, others are more motivated by the pain of their
present situation. Whatever it is that motivates your client, you should still have them—not you—clearly articulate the downside of staying where they are.

**Stage 3: Challenge for Thought**

You’re now ready to help the person define what they want to be different going forward, what success looks like in concrete terms.

Your objective is to have them identify a well-formed outcome. It has to meet three essential requirements:

1. Be stated in the positive.
2. Be under the person’s control.
3. Be demonstrable to self and others.

Most of the time you’ll find that people will start by telling you what they don’t want. Or they will tell you what changes they want someone else to make. If the other person insists on telling you what they don’t want, refocus them by using the word “instead,” e.g., “So what do you want instead of having to constantly arbitrate OR disputes?”

Similarly, if the person says something they want to be different but over which they have no control, reframe them by asking, “So what do you need to do differently to help create a more positive environment in the OR?”

You cannot proceed until the person has identified an outcome or course of action that is both stated in the positive and is under their control.

You will also hear people identify an outcome that can’t be demonstrably observed or measured such that you would know if it’s been achieved, e.g., “I want a more upbeat attitude in the OR.”

You can respond to this by asking, “What specifically would you (or others) see or notice that would be different if there was a more upbeat attitude in the OR?” You can’t make progress toward a goal unless it has a demonstrable outcome.

**Stage 4: Challenge for Action**

By this point in the coaching session, you’ve helped your client realize that they can’t stay where they are, and helped them clarify a well-formed outcome. Your objective now is to create forward momentum by helping them to identify small, manageable steps they can take to begin making progress toward their goal, and then challenging them to actually take action.

Help the person identify one or more manageable first steps but avoid the natural temptation of trying to achieve the goal in a single step. The key to success is breaking down
Final thoughts

Successful coaching is a collaborative process that helps a person transition from an ill-defined, often superficial expression of what they don’t want to a well-defined expression of what they want to be different going forward. It helps determine what positive steps they can take to make progress toward that goal, and what measurable difference is expected to result. While it is a structured process, it is not a linear one.

A coaching encounter will occasionally require looping back to revisit issues you might think had already been put to bed. For example, as you move into the fourth quadrant, Challenge for Action, your client might begin to re-think his goal, or what he wants to be different. Don’t be reluctant to revisit the issue. Circle back to Challenge for Thought to help your client reconsider and refine their goal.

Much of the back-and-forth action is likely to be in the two bottom quadrants, Challenge for Thought and Challenge for Action. This is where the client is identifying the goal, what steps can be taken toward achieving it, and building the self-confidence that he or she can do it. Sometimes it will require the coach to probe for deeper consideration or expression of the goal; sometimes it will require challenging counterproductive feelings and beliefs.

As a coach, don’t let yourself become frustrated; just keep moving forward in a positive and supportive way as you facilitate your client’s journey of self-discovery and self-directed change.