1. The Coaching Spectrum

As can be seen from The Coaching Spectrum diagram, the coaching spectrum involves a range of approaches to conversations with a client. At one end of the spectrum we have ‘directive’, which is pushing and solving someone’s problem for them, through the range to ‘non-directive’, which is pulling and helping someone solve their own problem.

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There is no doubt that the most effective end of the spectrum to work at is the non-directive as you are working with the client’s own map of reality and their own understanding of procedures and processes. However, having said that, it is probably the most difficult end to work at, especially if one knows the subject extremely well. It is inherent in each of us to prefer to tell someone what to do, rather than ask questions and let them tell you what they think. The following notes give some understanding as to each of the levels on the spectrum.

2. Telling

This is the end of the spectrum that we are most familiar with. From the instructions that we learnt as a child when we were told by our parents, or from the way that we were educated when we were told in school, this is a habit subject to social conditioning that we find very hard to break out of. One way in which you might contemplate breaking the habit is to consider how you feel when you are told something:
Do you do exactly as you are told?
Do you resent being told?
Do you listen when you are told something?
Do you challenge any misunderstanding when you are told something, or do you just accept it and do your own thing anyway?

Answering some of these questions could give you some insight into how effective the telling really is.

3. **Instructing**

There is no doubt that each of us learn in different ways. We store information differently and the way that we access it once it is stored is also different. Both of these areas need to be considered when we are working with giving instructions. Through life experience people have a general understanding of anything they are going to do anyway and it is this platform that needs to be considered when giving instructions.

Asking questions - for example, ‘What do you know about it already?’ or ‘Have you approached it before?’ - helps to ensure that the instructions are received and understood. Any instructions need to be placed in the context of what needs to be taught and the context of what the learner already knows. If we add to this an understanding of the practical learning styles mentioned above it can make a big difference.

4. **Giving advice**

This is usually a tricky one as giving advice normally masquerades as ‘telling’. We try to soften the telling so it becomes more advisory rather than dogmatic in its approach. Once again consider what advice needs to be received by the person, what context do they need to see this advice in, what are they going to do with the advice once they have received it, and does this advice contradict any advice previously received? All of these areas need to be considered if we are going to give advice effectively.

5. **Offering guidance**

If giving advice is a watered-down telling, then very often offering guidance is a watered-down giving advice. Offering guidance is usually positioned from the coach’s previous experience - once again it is held in a context of past behaviour and conditions. One of the concerns that Sir John Whitmore has about offering guidance is that very often you can be giving yesterday’s solution to tomorrow’s problem.

The way to combat this is to ask how the client is going to use the guidance, not whether they have received it. In addition, asking what the consequences are of using the guidance in such a way can help to ensure that the client feels that they have something of real value once the guidance has been given.

6. **Giving feedback**

Feedback is certainly one of the most useful aspects of coaching, and if given properly it is the one that the client can derive the most benefit from. However, we need to consider what giving feedback properly really means. First and foremost feedback has to be accurate. There are no prizes for second-guessing when giving feedback - it can damage the relationship, the trust and your reputation as a coach. So ensure that the feedback that you are about to give is accurate. Secondly, feedback has to be useful; that is to say,
will the client be able to use the information that you are giving them? Although this seems rather an obvious point, ask yourself the question, ‘If the client gets upset by what you say, or disputes what you say, how likely is it that they are going to use it?’ Considering these two thoughts before we start can help us couch feedback in such a way that it can be received and be beneficial to the client.

7. **Making suggestions**

At this stage we are about half way through the spectrum so when making suggestions we should start to look at how we can actually do so in the client’s map of reality. One of the ways of doing this is to use a suggestion map (see next handout). When someone asks you if you have any suggestions, it is not always clear in what context they are looking for the suggestions to be made.

One way of solving this is to write down all of the possibilities, giving your past experience of suggested ways forward and talking through a little bit of the context as you do it. At this point you can then ask the client which one of those ‘ways forward’ is most in accord with what they are currently thinking. Once they have pointed out which one you can then have a further discussion in that area.

8. **Asking questions that raise awareness**

Asking questions is the key tool that the coach has in the toolbox of coaching skills. The classic - who, what, where, when and how - are all extremely beneficial questions that will generally raise the awareness of the client. Asking the ‘why’ question could also raise the awareness of the client, but it tends to be somewhat confrontational as the client generally responds with an answer that involves some justification on their part and can put them under pressure.

So, while you may have raised awareness, you may also have closed down the conversation slightly. On many of the courses we run we use little dice with Who, What, Where, When, How and the Chinese symbol to listen printed on the six sides. Using the coaching dice can help you break any habits you might have, such as batching questions or asking closed questions.

9. **Summarising**

Moving closer to the non-directive end of the spectrum, summarising has many benefits. Firstly, if we summarise accurately it can indicate to the client that we have been listening. Secondly, summarising is a standard way of reinforcing memory and retention. Summarising is best used at the end of a session as it can indicate closure before moving onto a new area.

10. **Paraphrasing**

Paraphrasing follows similar rules to summarising, except it is generally used in the session just to recap, clarify understanding and challenge any assumptions. Just as the paragraph is the written unit, so the paraphrase is the spoken unit.

11. **Reflecting**

Reflecting is best used by the coach to question past events through conversation with as opposed to questioning the client. Reflections are very often made up of hypothetical questions, for example:
‘I was wondering what would have happened if we had made the deadline?’

‘If the budget was larger, how would that have changed things?’

Reflections are a very useful way of maintaining a non-directive stance.

12. **Listening to understand**

Many people regard listening to understand as the coach listening so that the coach understands. While having some degree of accuracy, this is not the full concept of listening to understand. The idea is that the coach communicates with the client in such a way that the client then responds to the coach.

During this response, the coach should create the right ambience and atmosphere to allow the client to contribute to the conversation in such a way that the client is actually listening to what they are saying themselves and in many cases understanding for the first time the full implication of the content of their response. This can only be done where there is exceptionally high trust, little interference and the right questions have been asked in the first instance.