Top tips for….. establishing a quality coach/client relationship

Top tips for…..

establishing a quality coach/client relationship

1. Be prepared for mixed feelings

Coaches would do well to remember that a new client will almost always have some mixed feelings about meeting them and starting the coaching process. However keen the new client is to start work, the situation will often arouse some degree of anxiety (perhaps about being judged or criticised) and often a sense of discomfort at being in a 'dependent' position or a learning role. Sometimes there will be a feeling of shame or humiliation at needing the help of a coach. In cases where the client has been 'sent' for coaching by their boss or the HR department, they may well feel some anger towards the coach as well as towards their organisation.

While these feelings may not be realistic or fair, the psychologically-aware coach will nevertheless be expecting them and will be on the look-out for signs (often indirect) that are present in the client. This enables the coach to take them into account when trying to understand the client's communications and tactfully to surface them if appropriate.

2. Be prepared to be tested

The coach should also be prepared, in the early stages of a coaching relationship in particular, for the client to be engaged in a covert *testing* process. Some clients test the coach's intellectual abilities to see if this is someone they can respect as an equal. Others may test to see whether the coach is emotionally resilient enough to cope with hearing about their problems; still others may test to see if the coach is fully trustworthy and will respect their feelings and treat the sessions as truly confidential.

Understanding this enables the coach to resist being hooked into a competitive or over-reassuring dynamic but to say calm, grounded and quietly confident in the capacities that they are bringing to the work.

3. Set boundaries

Moreover, it is important that the coach carefully sets and holds the boundaries around the coaching process. This includes all the practical aspects of coaching, such as session times, venue, fees and payment procedures, diary arrangements, cancellation policies and so on. It also includes professional aspects such as confidentiality policy (and exceptions to it), ethical codes, the nature of contact with the client's line-manager or HR partner and any expectations that the coach has of the client for work between sessions.

The coach needs not only to be clear and specific in communicating these different points, and willing to discuss or explain them, but must also be alert to the fact that some clients will push boundaries – for a variety of reasons. This awareness enables the coach to take thoughtful and well-grounded decisions about when to hold firm to a boundary and when to be flexible.

4. Get stuck in

Finally, the coach-client relationship will be most successfully established once the duo gets 'stuck in' to exploring and addressing a current work issue that is of real importance to the client. At the start of the coaching process, it is inevitable that some time must be spent on discussing arrangements, mutual expectations and emerging coaching objectives. Yet the sooner that coach and client engage in the work itself, the sooner the client will feel less anxious or resentful, will move beyond testing the coach and will accept and work with the boundaries around the process. The client's first-hand experience of how the coach works in practice – and how helpful this can be – is the most rapid and powerful path to a quality relationship.

By Catherine Sandler and Kate Lanz

Sandler Lanz

Share this