

What exactly is coaching?

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In the world of management, the term coaching is being used in such an inflationary manner that one could easily get the impression that there very rarely is a conversation between two or more people that would not be considered as a certain type of coaching. The misuse of such a specific term as coaching can unfortunately also change the general understanding of a coach's real role and abilities.

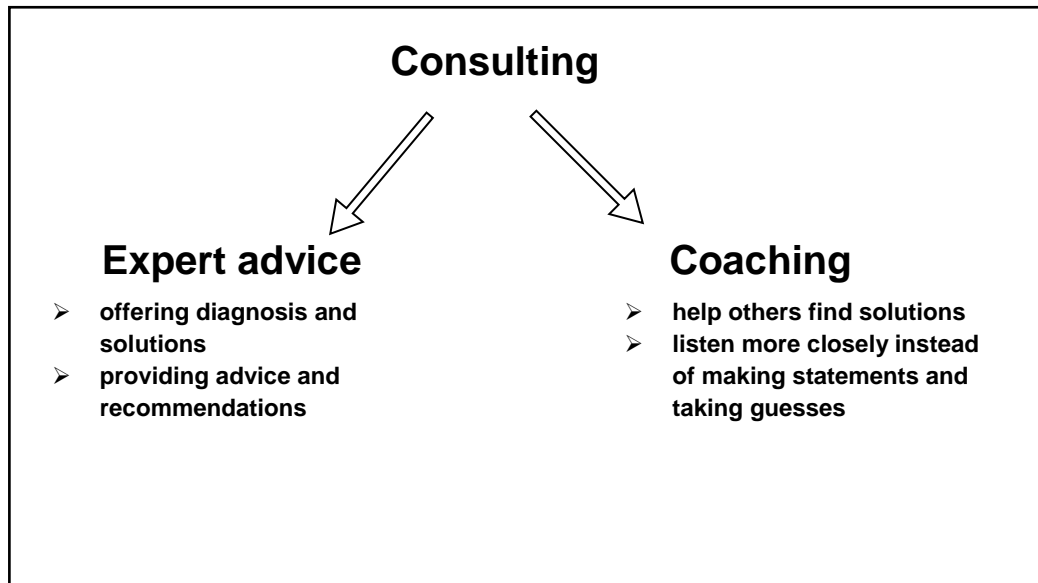
In order to create more awareness in this matter, the current article explains, in a very general manner, what exactly coaching is. At first I would like to explain the particularity of a coaching situation as opposed to any other consulting setting. Secondly, I would like to describe the internal attitudes, stages, activities and competences that are required for any coaching process. And lastly I would like to consider, in a short digression, the setting in which a management executive slips into the role of a coach.

Two types of consulting

The buzzword consulting leads many people to think of the following: A consultant always gives an advice-seeking person hints and recommendations about specific topics on which s/he is an expert. This advice is supposed to help the client come to a good evaluation or even to a solution for his/her questions. Consulting in this case describes an asymmetrical relation: due to a sector-specific advantage in knowledge, the consultant has a clear advantage over the client. And it is this advantage in knowledge that is the basis for a consultant's actions and the weight that his/her evaluations can actually have on the client. Every time we ask our tax advisor to evaluate a tax issue; that we ask a lawyer to assess a legal question or that we ask a property expert for the valuation of a property, as well as in any similar case to these, the term consulting describes this so-called expert model.

Apart from that, there is yet another kind of consultation – coaching –, and this is the one that requires a consultant as a helpful **sparring partner**. In this case, a consultant and his client meet as equal partners. The consultant tries to support his client by starting a type of dialogue and by creating the best possible solution for whatever the client wants. Consultants in this field mainly work by listening closely, asking questions, giving feedback or offering particular points of view and perspectives, which does not exclude that such a consultant might also formulate hints, recommendations, possible solutions and similar conclusions. In general, a coach will always spend more time listening and asking questions than diagnosing and giving advice. While the coach is formulating diagnosis and advice, it is almost always the consuler who decides what amount of importance he would like to give to particular addressed points and whether or not s/he wants to use the given advice.

As opposed to expert consultation - that is about providing a client with all the technical expertise s/he needs to solve his/her problem - the sparring partner consultation model is all about activating the client's abilities to make him/herself achieve his/her respective pre-established objectives in the best possible way. Coaching people in professional and private regards is prototypical for this type of consultation.



Coaching: a definition

Coaching differs from consulting forms in which a person with consolidated knowledge gives another person with less consolidated knowledge much or less subtle advice on what to do or not to do. Plainly said, coaching is a way to make others help themselves. It is even more accurately described by the following sentence:

Coaching another person means to support him/her in a dialogical reflection process with regard to his/her own concern in a way that puts him/her in the position to autonomously develop the best possible and logic solution for his/her problem.

Coaching is a **dialogical process**: both coach and coachee meet **on equal terms**. Coaching is all about the coach's intense and active engagement when it comes to the coachee's concerns, objectives, setting, points of view, abilities and characteristics. Abilities, such as presence, openness towards each other, appreciation, respect, the ability to listen closely to one another and to inquire further, but also the ability to talk about one's impressions and points of view, play an important role when it comes to coaching.

Coaching is a **process of reflection**. Coaching is most likely to take place in **rather difficult or conflicted situations or when people are facing new requirements or challenges**. In all of these situations, people experience their limitations while they are caught up in their usual solution techniques and habits. A coaching session that is supposed to help a coachee to solve a problem in a specific setting by use of his/her own abilities, requires reflection: a reflection of one's original assumptions, values and attitudes, of different points of view and perspectives, of strategies, possible solutions and implementation steps.

Coaching always requires a **coachee's personal concern**. It has to be one that helps the coachee to react (on an inner and outer level) when confronted with certain things, people, settings, etc. (The opposite of such a concern would be the wish that others should finally behave "better" or that the others should just finally see how "bad" one feels or how "right" one is). If you as a colleague, manager, friend, family member, partner or external coach think another person needs coaching, you can of course try to find out if s/he feels the need. But if at the end of the day the person concerned does not acknowledge the need, you will not be able to coach at all. Of course one can talk in many ways to each other, e.g. you can give someone else feedback or make evaluations, you can argue with each other or make recommendations and give orders, etc. - but all of these actions should not be mistaken for coaching (yet). **Coaching requires that the coachee intends to solve, change or develop his/her own way of thinking and his/her own way to act.**

Coaching is a **process of support**. It is all about helping the coachee to overcome his/her own blockades and to best activate his/her abilities in order to make him/her achieve his/her goals. Thus, coaching is a **type of service**. The main instance to evaluate the quality of a coaching session is consequently the coachee him/herself. If the coachee does not evaluate the content as helpful, then it has not been helpful - no matter what the coach thinks.

Coaching is all about a coachee developing **the most useful and consistent solutions** to his/her concerns. Only when a coachee evaluates a targeted solution as useful and consistent, s/he will seriously and most probably implement it. Finding a consistent and mutually satisfactory solution also implies that a coach always helps his/her coachee to be aware of the practicability **of desired ideas and solutions within the coachee's field of action, of important general circumstances and of the expectations and wishes of relevant third persons**. This context related consistence is a crucial and indispensable prerequisite for practicable and viable coaching solutions.

Helpful attitudes for a coach

Particular inner assumptions are very helpful when a coach wants to support his/her coachee in finding solutions to his/her concerns. These attitudes include:

- **Presence:** that means a coach always has to be aware about his/her coachee and their concern; a coach always has to be completely at the coachee's disposal.
- **Appreciation:** this means that a coach has to appreciate his/her coachee as an individual in his/her particular role and that s/he regards him/her as an equal partner.
- **Respect:** this means that a coach always respects the autonomy and the decision-making authority of his/her coachee. Through his/her questions, impressions, hypotheses, ideas, etc. a coach can make very helpful offers to the coachee. But it is always the coachee that will decide in the end for him-/herself what s/he wants to use (or not to use).
- **Target orientation:** refers to the fact that a coach should always want the coachee to work on very clear targets. It is therefore often necessary to first identify relevant clear targets and to formulate them in a very concrete way. And during the coaching process, further targets can of course also be modified or added to the original ones. It is therefore always very important that the coach and coachee establish a set of mutually satisfactory targets on which they both want to work. They should also decide on what priority they give to them. These targets are actually the key to the whole coaching process itself and its results.
- **The desire to explore:** a coach should always try to best understand the individual situation of their coachee, his/her points of view and his/her strategies and abilities when it comes to handling difficult issues. This attitude should be based on the curiosity to explore another person's characteristics and particularities in a given setting. The inner attitude should not be "I know" but rather "With your help, I would like to take a closer look in order to better understand".
- **Resource orientation:** a coach should always focus on the coachee's abilities and activate them. A coach should explain that so-called weaknesses are just the dark sides of strengths and that a coachee has plenty of potential to solve his/her problems.
- **Constructivism:** a coach should consequently act and think on the basis of the assumption that all reality is perceived, explained and evaluated in a subjective way and that different points of view cause different interpretations of reality. They should point out clearly that the idea of a strictly objective truth is not helpful when it comes to finding a solution for the coachee's concerns.

- **Multiperspectivity:** in a certain sense it provides the basis for constructivism. It means that a coach actively confronts the coachee with different perspectives - e.g. with different situational descriptions, explanations, evaluations or even different points of view of other people involved in a certain situation - in order to assist his/her coachee, to gain more information and to consequently offer more options for action.
- **Commitment and distance:** a coach should always be seriously and completely committed to his/her coachee and his/her concern. At the same time, a coach should also keep a certain distance from his/her coachee to be able to assume different perspectives and position him-/herself on a reflective and meta-communicative level.
- **Trust:** a coach always needs to trust in his/her own competence and perception, in his/her coachee's ability to really solve his/her issues, as well as in their joined coaching process. A coach needs to trust that the coaching process will automatically lead both, coach and coachee, if both openly and intensively take part in it. S/he needs to know that it is not a bad thing if he does not always react perfectly, because nobody is perfect, and because most things that happen can be very fruitful for the solution of the original concern, particularly if one assumes the following attitude:
- **Usefulness:** a coach always accepts whatever may happen and s/he always parts from the assumption that whatever was unexpected does make sense and that it can still be useful. This attitude can be used with regard to anything that happens during coaching: for phenomena that are generally described as "resistant behaviour, arguing, holding back, denying, etc." as well as for the coach's and coachee's spontaneous notions, emotions, associations, impulses and for so-called failure, interferences, mistakes, etc. Anything that happens can at least be used to get important hints on needs, effects, and causal relations or to learn anything else that might turn out to be productive for the coaching process.

Inner attitudes have a very obvious impact on anything that happens. **If you should ever be in doubt: the right inner attitude when meeting another person is much more effective for the type and the quality of the encounter than any applied rhetoric skill or technique.** One's inner orientation has a very strong effect on what others perceive as your ideas and intentions. Criteria like these determine their reaction towards you and your possible relationship. As a coach, particularly if you observe your role from a professional perspective, for example as a coaching manager or as an external coach, it is of crucial importance to be aware of the degree in which you really assume helpful positions in a concrete coaching situation. You should also always be aware of the things that are actually blocking from doing your best as a coach.

If you find anything in a certain setting or in your coachee that makes it difficult to assume one of the positions illustrated above, that does not have to be a bad thing at all. But it is important to be aware of such coaching obstacles and to use them in a productive way during the coaching process. If you, for example, react rather irritated to your coachee (even if you are in a pretty good mood) you can use the knowledge about this phenomenon to better understand what exactly in your coachee's behaviour causes your reaction. The same thing might provoke the same reaction in others as well. And it is also always worth having a closer look at what "irritating" characteristics are interconnected with the strengths your coachee has, so that you can both use the strengths to make better progress on your mutual coaching targets.

Coaching Stages

Coaching definitely is anything but a meticulously planned process, during which you mechanically run through predefined levels. **Coaching is always a highly individual and specific activity, especially if you consider your coachee's individuality, his/her specific concern and all of the applied types of communication and processes:** How often and how long you talk to each other? How many language levels or forms of language are particularly helpful? How much do you or your coachee contribute? How many questions do you generally ask? How much do you actually listen? How often and when do you formulate ideas? How often and intensively do you talk about expectations and objectives? All of these questions and much more will be highly variable from coaching to coaching. But there are, nonetheless, distinct particular stages to any coaching process; at least as far as time, formality and contents are concerned. These stages are:

1. Establishing goals and a contract

Establishing common and clear goals right from the beginning is crucial when it comes to effective coaching. A coach has to find the right answer to the following question with his/her coachee: **What are the coachee's goals and what could and should the coaching process contribute to make the coachee achieve them?** This is exactly what you and your coachee will have to find out together in order to create the basis for working together in a coaching situation. Finding a solution can always take more or less time; it always depends on how transparent, complex, interconnected or ambivalent your coachee's desires and goals are.

Very often constellations occur in which a coachee perceives that there is the need to change some things while s/he is at the same time convinced that these necessary changes need to be made by others. In such settings it is best to check first if you are able to find a concern that regards your coachee's own actions and behaviour. Your coachee should be willing to change his/her behaviour in this particular regard. If, for example, a coachee should be of the opinion that third parties behave notoriously incorrectly towards him/her such a concern could be to see how your coachee could best react in such situations in order to achieve adequate results, even if the others keep behaving in an improper manner.

Your common contract shows as soon as you have established your goals: What is coaching supposed to do and in what context would a coaching session take place (time, place, structures...)? What roles and responsibilities exist for all of the involved? **Very frequently, it is also necessary to adjust once established goals and contracting steps, e.g. whenever goals change, further goals are added or subtracted or if general conditions change, etc.**

At any time, it can be useful to establish clear goals and contracting steps during coaching, but it is absolutely indispensable at the beginning of each coaching session.

2. Exploring situation and context

In order to be able to support your coachee in an effective way, it is necessary to get an impression of his/her momentary situation and context. It is therefore always recommendable to ask yourself a few helpful questions: Questions that help you understand are e.g.: How does your coachee evaluate the situation? What problems does s/he see? What solutions has s/he already tried out? What experiences has s/he been able to make? What strategies did work out and which ones did not? How does your coachee evaluate the other's behaviour in this particular situation? What assumptions does s/he make about other people's actions and do other relevant connections exist? What inner attitudes and evaluations does your coachee have with regard to them, etc?

The contracting and the exploring stage often go hand in hand, at least for a bit. That has to do with the fact that a coach has to understand what exactly his/her coachee's concern is and which objectives s/he will consequently need to pursue. It is therefore very important to ask exploring questions. But even if single contracting steps are clear (at first), it is often necessary to ask further questions and to make context evaluations in order to better understand the particularity of the situation and to increase the chance to find proper starting points for good solutions.

3. Developing hypotheses and ideas

This stage does not necessarily have to be strictly separate from the others. Whenever you ask exploring questions, you have already formulated hypotheses and ideas. Developing hypotheses and ideas, however, is always easier once you have come to know more about your coachee's situation and once you are aware of the effects of certain actions or inner attitudes, of the interconnections between actions and the respective people involved in them, of different points of view and evaluations of the above mentioned phenomena and of possible approaches and strategies on how to proceed.

Even if questions are initially the most important and effective coaching instruments, and even if coaching is best described by the term "the art of asking questions", it is not only legitimate but also extremely necessary for a coach to develop hypotheses and ideas. These hypotheses and ideas can help a coachee develop new points of view and find other/better solutions for his/her concerns. **However, it is essential that a coach is always aware of the fact that his/her hypotheses and ideas - just like anything else one does during coaching- are merely offers to his/her coachee.** A coachee actually decides if and to what extent s/he wants to accept one of the coaches' offers and on whether or not s/he wants to implement them.

That means, as a coach, you should be aware of your coachee's verbal and non-verbal reactions whenever you make him/her an offer. And if your coachee shows little interest for a certain offer you have made, you should not insist on implementation. All ideas and hypotheses from both parties are not to be considered as a be-all and end-all.

4. Concentrating on starting points

During coaching, there will not just be *one* single round of exploring questions and *one* single round of forming hypotheses and ideas. Hypotheses and ideas, particularly the ones that are interesting for a coachee, lead to new questions that can result in changed and specified hypotheses and ideas. The exploring and the hypotheses/idea development stage do not only merge with one another, they also run in alternating loops.

A good coaching session will make you concentrate and focus on certain starting points that may turn out to be particularly interesting and relevant. This particular kind of concentration or focussing on possible approaches can be considered another stage of the coaching process; and it brings it closer to concrete options for action.

5. Planing your approach

Concentrating on starting points almost always automatically results in a joined creation and development of plans and approaches: How could the coachee adequately react in settings that are relevant to his/her concerns? What should s/he keep doing like before? What change in behaviour would make sense - at least in an experimental approach? To what facts should a coachee pay particular attention to with regard to him/herself (particular inner attitudes, evaluations, accentuations, etc.) or in others (direct verbal or non-verbal reactions, perceived needs or expectations, different types of reactions in different roles or contexts, etc.). It is very important to talk, plan and utilise the above mentioned types of approaches together with your coachee. While doing that, you must not forget which kinds of experiments would promote the targeted change in your coachee's behaviour and which ones might turn out to be an obstacle to it. Supporting factors, e.g. the coachee him/herself or his/her (social) context, have to be used. Possible internal or external obstacles always should be evaluated realistically, which particularly means that you, as a coach, will have to think about how to successfully eliminate such obstacles.

6. Implementing plans

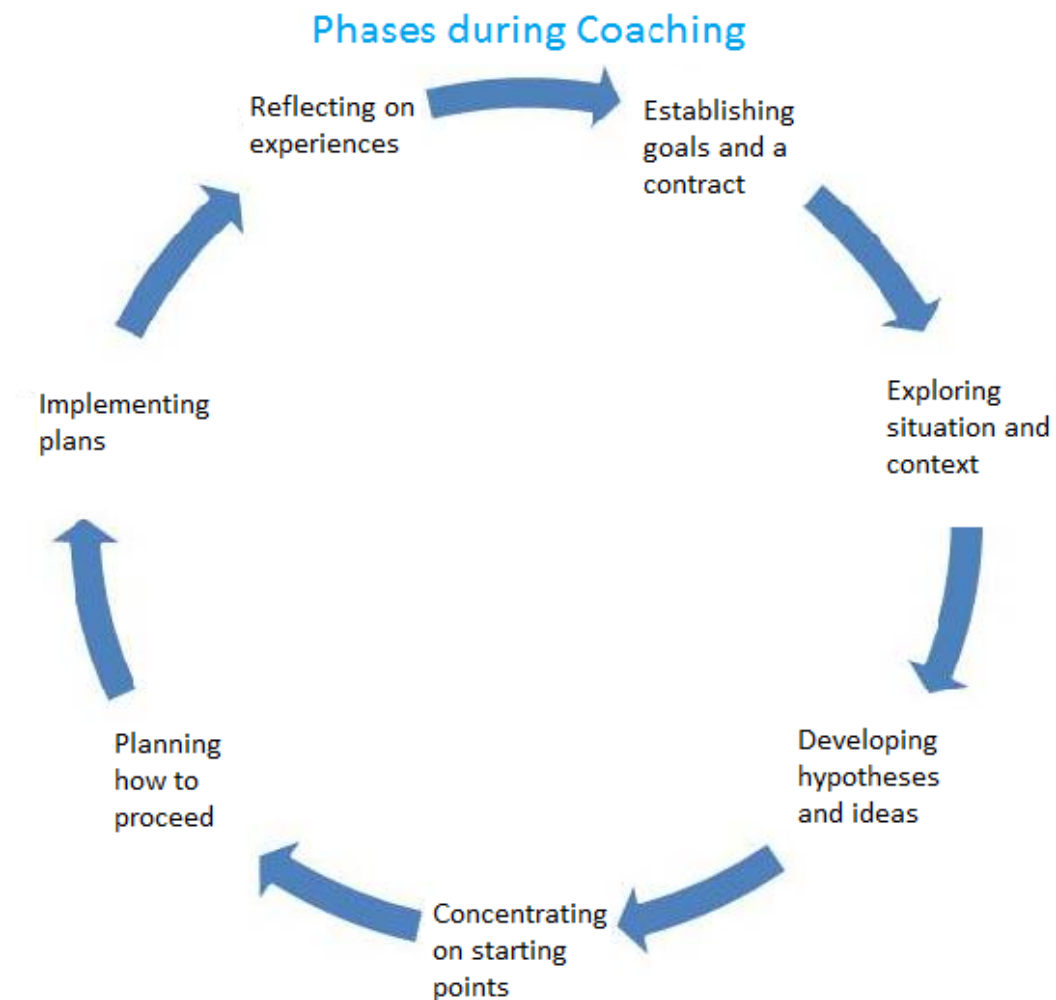
Generally speaking, the implementation stage is part of the coaching process, but not of the coaching session itself. Even if you, as a coach, should be present, either as an observer, as an actively involved colleague or a manager, you have to differentiate between this unique

kind of a situation and a coaching session. **At the same time, the implementation stage is the most significant one. One could even say that it is at the core of it all**, because coaching sessions are able to offer possibilities to reflect and for feedback. They offer impulses for action or even simulations, but a coaching effect and its intensity will never ever show as clearly as in practice. That is why the implementation of targeted plans is a priority of the whole coaching process.

7. Reflecting on your experience

Something that will happen in any case during a coaching session is the reflection on experiences, no matter what type of experiences that might be. Even if the coachee does not even try, or either has not even been able to implement anything yet, a reflection process will always take place. The same goes for the case in which implementation has worked out fine and, of course, for situations in which something has been evaluated as difficult. From all of these cases, one can learn a great deal: How did this happen? What worked out well and what did not? What helped and what did not? What should be repeated, modified or even tried out for the first time, etc. The reflection on once made implementation experiences in a certain period between two coaching sessions, apart from whatever else the coachee might have set as his/her goal, almost automatically leads to a new contract and target orientation and to another circle of stages for the next coaching session.

Of course, such a circle does not incessantly repeat itself. **If the main goals of a coaching session have been achieved, or if either the coach or the coachee think that coaching does not provide a sufficiently big added value any more (considering the coachee's concern), the coaching is ended.** This step, as well as the establishment of a transparent contract, should be a consensual process and happen by means of an open conversation. The most important thing here is to jointly assess the achieved results and to give a forecast on the possible design of future settings.



Activities as a coach

If you bear in mind what significance coaching has, what stages a coaching session consists of and what inner attitudes are particularly important for you as a coach to be able to support your coachee in the best possible way, it is easy to see how you would have to act as a coach. As a coach you will:

➤ Listen closely

Actively listening to your coachee is of crucial importance. Only those who are willing and able to actively listen with sympathy to what another person has to say, have the chance to make a substantial coaching process happen. Conversely, one could say: It is always surprising how intense reflection and conversation can be after really having actively listened to what the other had to say.

➤ **Inquire further**

Questions are the coach's main instrument. Coaching can be interpreted too a great extend as the art of asking reflection-stimulating questions. In general, all kinds of questions can be asked, even apparently simple questions concerning comprehension or feedback ("Did I understand you well when you said, that...?"). The following attitudes can help to find adapt questions: "I don't know much about this, but I can ask to be able to get a better idea of it. There are many important things to discover, it is always worth to inquire further."

Systemic questions can be a particularly helpful instrument for a coach. Such questions inquire about how single people or even groups perceive important aspects in the world surrounding them. They ask about how these people act and interact with others because of their set of beliefs. (Please also see the chapter "Questions" by the same author, in: Hölscher S., Reiber W., Pape, K. & Loehnert-Baldermann, E.: The art of joined action (Die Kunst gemeinsam zu handeln.) How to professionally handle social processes. (Soziale Prozesse professionell steuern.), Springer Verlag, Berlin, as well as the article: Systemic questions (Systemische Fragen.), published as a Metrion Management Consulting Download, Frankfurt a. M.). Classical systemic questions are:

- **Estimation questions (Questions about the subjective construction of reality)**
Inquire about subjective points of view regarding recent general conditions, a coaching process or the causes and context conditions for a specific situation (e.g. "How would you describe product development so far "What developed in a particularly positive/negative way?")
- **Operational questions**
This question type refers to indicators. More specifically they help you find out what can really be perceived and observed in regard to a targeted issue (e.g. "What is Mr. Schulz doing for you to say he is a dishonest?, "What indicators do you see for your assumption that your recent approach will lead to big problems?").
- **Differentiation questions**
Differentiation questions invite your interlocutor to grade and differentiate between their ideas, beliefs, moods, concepts, etc. Exact differentiations can be achieved by using

percentages, scale factors or classification models (e.g. "To what percentage do you currently fulfil your client's expectations to be provided in a quick and reliable way?" "What worked out well while you were trying to achieve your target, what worked out OK and what did not work out at all?").

- **Hypothetical questions (questions to construct possibilities)**
Hypothetical questions are questions, such as: What if....?
The sense behind such questions is to focus on new options for action ("If these problems persist during the next few months, what effect will this have on our relationship with this particular client?" "What clients would you most likely risk to lose? And how would the other clients react?").

Very important hypothetical questions are
improving and miracle questions.

- **Improving and miracle questions**
Improving questions are always based on the things that already run smoothly and that have been running smoothly in the past. They aim at the improvement of particular issues and a general positive development of things. By asking these questions you deviate your coachee's attention from deficits to resources and positive experiences. A particularly interesting type of question in this context is the so-called **„miracle question‘, which aims at the best possible case:** („How would the best possible case look like to you? Suppose, everything ran like clockwork, meaning as well as you could possibly imagine: what would the situation look like? What concrete actions would you take? What would the other people involved do? What would others say about this, what would they perceive and experience?").
- **Worsening and suicide questions**
Worsening questions aim at theoretically dramatizing a situation that is already perceived as difficult. The main point is: whatever you can worsen, you can also obviously control, and that means, one could also generally improve it. A particular variant of worsening questions is the question type "systematic suicide strategies". This kind of question aims at getting the worst possible case out of any situation (e.g. the new job, the project, client relations, etc.). **Such questions may seem odd at first glance. The intention behind them is not, as it may seem, to**

produce the worst possible case and a possibly disastrous end of it all, but to actually take the indispensable conditions for a successful continuation of the coaching process into consideration ("What do you have to do to escalate the situation with this particular client so that he would never talk to you again?").

- **Circular Questions**

Circular questions invite you to change perspective. A asks B about C's desires, thoughts or actions; during this process, C can be either present or absent. In any case A learns something about B's hypotheses (his mental models) regarding C's behaviour ("What do you think Mr. Müller expects from you?").

- **Solution Questions**

Such questions aim at finding out what strategies and solutions have been tried out in current or past problem settings and what experiences have been had. ("What possible solutions have you tried out already? What did you experience while doing it? In your eyes, what did work out? What turned out to be difficult or even harmful?").

Systemic questions are in general an excellent instrument to start and to intensify a reflection process, to introduce different points of view and to generate new options for action.

- **Giving feedback**

Feedback is an important part of coaching. **When it comes to giving feedback about his/her target-relevant behavioural patterns, a coach will not only use his/her impressions from the encounter with his/her coachee but also the mental picture, that s/he has gained from his/her coachee's statements about his/her coachee's actions in an everyday context.** A coach does both, s/he gives positive, as well as critical feedback. As a coach, you should generally focus on positive aspects: on abilities, strengths, committed efforts, clear positions and expressions of needs, etc. There are certainly many interesting facts to discover about your coachee that are worth focussing on. Many important and productive resources, that the coachee could access to solve his concerns, might still be undiscovered.

If a coach should address critical issues while giving feedback, s/he nearly always refers to any of her/his coachee's activities or behaviour that in the coach's perception may lead to unfavourable consequences regarding the pre-established coaching goals. In this case, the following inner attitudes might be particularly helpful to a coach:

- **“Too much of a good thing is not good at all”**; that means that good abilities, when overstretched, generally have a bad effect.
- **Often, people with good intentions produce bad effects.** This goes for both, for the coachee, as well as for other people from his social context.
- **By making use of his/her own strengths, a coachee is always able to actually develop behavioural patterns that had been in part underdeveloped before.**

Thanks to these reflections, a coach is also able to address potentially critical and worrisome issues concerning his/her coachee's behaviour in an explicitly clear and at the same time respectful way.

➤ **Confrontation**

Here, the term to confront someone with something does not imply that one should massively attack someone else in a probably disrespectful and bold way. Here, the term should be understood as increasing the level of explicitness of feedback, an evaluation of a certain setting or a particular action. **Such explicitness sometimes does make sense, and it is frequently very useful in situations in which your coachee has a hard time to really concentrate on certain effects of his/her actions or in which he does not realize the consequences of his/her behaviour at all, so that a 'common' feedback would not even be understood by him/her.** Efficient ways to stress explicitness are:

- **Exaggerating in a funny way.** During which the respective impressions are ridiculed by use of absurdity or jokes, so that they could have a similar effect as the words of a court jester presenting in front of the king.
- **Metaphors, images and stories.** These methods can, if they are well-applied, provoke great urgency and sincerity, even if they may seem rather indirect at first glance.
- **Direct intensification,** during which respective contents are expressed in an even clearer, more direct and blunt way. One could also refer to this process as "facing reality".

It is unimportant what method you choose to stress clarity: in any case, respecting your coachee, as well as the general optimistic idea that everything will work out and that your coachee can solve the targeted critical issues in a better way than before are prerequisites for a constructive coaching effect.

➤ **Create hypotheses**

In order to share different points of view and to promote a helpful and target-oriented (exploratory) movement, a coach offers his coachee numerous different hypotheses. Such hypotheses often concern:

- **Effects of inner assumptions** (hypotheses, evaluations) on external behaviour
- **Possible links between inner attitudes and interaction courses** (e.g. the thought "this will not end well" and its effect on the respective situation)
- **Possible cross-effects considering the actions of the various parties involved.**
- **Possible behavioural and interactive patterns** and their effects

All of the coaches' hypotheses always have to be mere offers. If the coachee shows an energetic reaction when confronted with a hypothesis, you can continue with it. If there is none, you should drop it and keep looking for another one together, e.g. by asking new questions.

➤ **Developing ideas for action**

During coaching, you will focus on supporting you coachee by actively listening, asking questions, giving feedback, formulating hypotheses, etc. to make him/her autonomously and continuously develop new or even already practised ideas for action. But that does not exclude that you, as a coach, can also share ideas for action yourself, e.g. based on your own experience or as a continuation of (earlier) ideas introduced by your coachee.

Hypothetical questions are a good instrument if you decide to take a closer look at action models together with your coachee. They make it possible to dive into various scenes, while it is absolutely clear that all of this happens in a strictly hypothetical setting. (As a coach and in this context, you should always be aware of not using hypothetical questions to manipulate your coachee into a certain direction.) A coach's inner attitude is extremely important: a scenario is always only a thinkable

possibility. We want to have a look at it, but even if it seems very plausible to me at the moment, other scenarios might work even better. And in the end, it does not have to work for myself but for the person I am currently talking to.")

➤ **Planning your approach**

A coach always tries to help his/her coachee find the best possible plan of action for his/her daily practical experience. One of the most important tasks of a coach is to jointly keep the whole process for the coachee as close to reality as possible. By continuously asking his/her coachee what consequences targeted strategies and approaches might have for both, the coachee and relevant third persons, a coach always tries to support his coachee to **plan in the best context-adapted way**. Beyond that, a coach always pays attention to a good level of concreteness; so that plans can be achievable and realizable ("What do you do, when you do that? What would be the first step for you? What would you do in a second step...?") And last but not least, a coach will also pay attention to the fact that once targeted strategies **have the right degree of challenge** to them. They should neither ask too much nor too little of the coachee. Plans on actions are allowed to be exciting and challenging, but they should neither frustrate the coachee nor bore him/her.

➤ **Meta-communication**

Meta-communication describes the process of assuming a higher level of observation while checking what is happening. Its significance for coaching should not be underestimated. A coach can always use meta-communication to start a conversation with his/her coachee and to explore his/her coachee's reactions and behaviour in an appreciating and transparent way. A coach will always use it when addressing a certain issue turns out to be useful for finding solutions to central coaching questions and targets. At the same time, a coach can also always assume a meta-perspective when it comes to discussing some of the coachee's real-life issues, when s/he wants to take a look at what is happening from a more reflective standpoint and when s/he wants to come up with new concepts and ideas. In doing so, a coach also helps his/her coachee to implement inner level changes in a much more favourable and easier way.

It is often characteristic for coaching themes, that they concern issues that bear the risk for the coachee to lose the distance between them and what is happening. This loss of distance often makes a coachee react in

a monotonous, impulsive/reflexive or paralysed way. The better you, as a coach and observer, learn to build up an inner meta-perspective in such situations, the better your chances that you will be able to handle the respective situation in an appropriately differential and target-oriented way. **A coach will also always actively support his/her coachee and teach him/her to create a (very) good meta-perspective for any concern-related situation.** On the one hand, as a coach, you can always be a model for your coachee by showing him/her how to proceed through your own behaviour; on the other hand you can also give your coachee concrete hints as to how to build up his/her own meta-perspective (e.g. by making him/her ask him/herself what the respective situation is about, by differentiating between single components of his/her inner team and by coordinating it from a higher level or even by forgiving him-/herself for certain kinds of emotions and impulses for actions and thus, by accepting them, without necessarily having to give in to them).

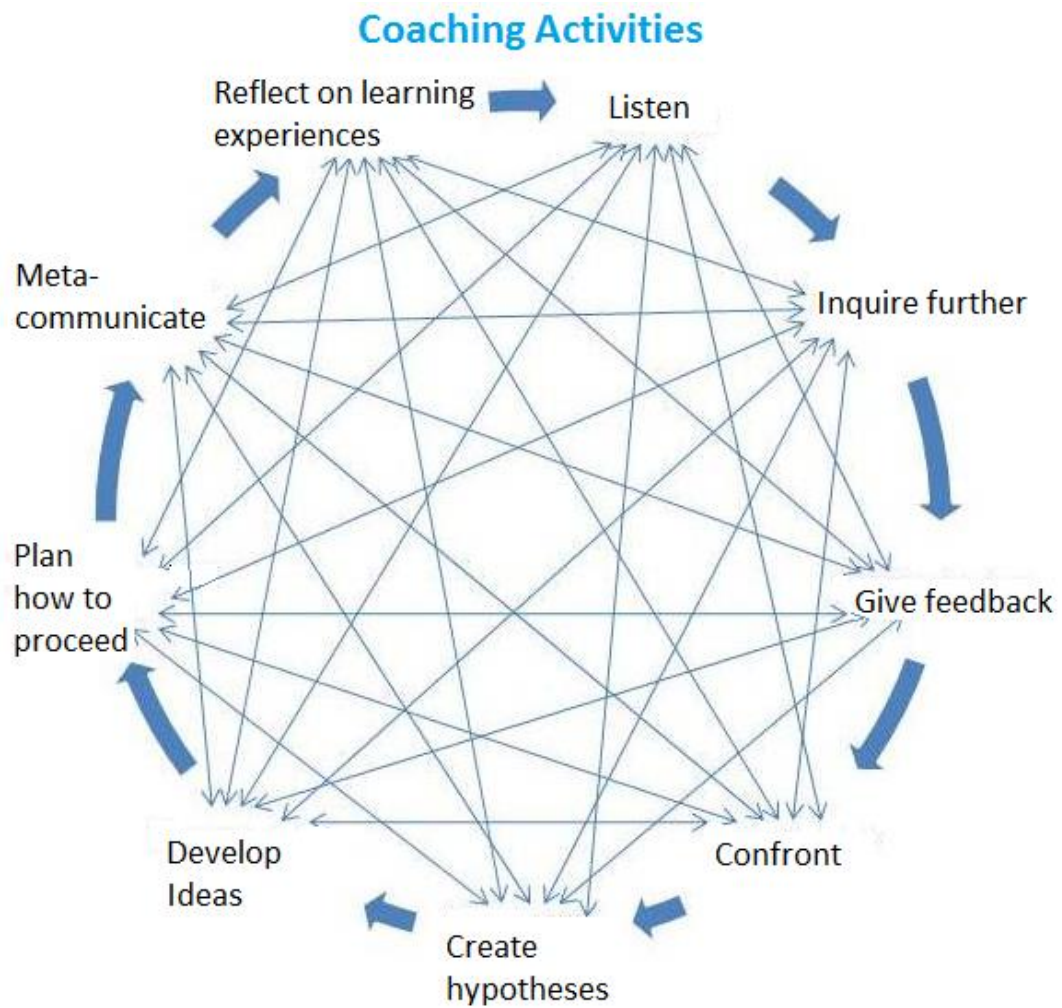
Last but not least, a coach will also make use of meta-communication to reflect with his/her coachee on the previous coaching process, the way of cooperation and the effects achieved to date.

➤ **Reflecting on learning experiences**

Together, coach and coachee will reflect on what coaching-relevant experiences the coachee has had between single coaching sessions. **The main target at this stage will always be to see how to best make use of these experiences and what to learn from them.** Any type of experience can be useful for this learning process: that includes the type in which a coachee succeeded in something by perceiving something, as well as difficult experiences or either interesting observations and discoveries. Such learning experiences often result in important solution possibilities for the issues that have been targeted during coaching sessions.

The activities outlined above are the coach's main activities. That obviously does not exclude that, in certain kinds of situations, there are also other types of activities that can be useful to achieve once established coaching targets. Professional coaching is a skill that requires a high degree of flexibility. It always depends on a particular setting and it always has to be oriented to your coachee's needs. This also means that the targeted activities do not follow a previously planned process scheme. Even if, as illustrated above, there are some typical stages to the coaching process: **The art of coaching is to have a feeling for what would be best and most helpful at the moment. That is**

why the described activities may be all together adapted for a specific setting. All of them can be interconnected. All of them can follow any of them and each of them can be important in any part of the coaching process.



Coaching competences

What competences are indispensable for a good coach? The key to the answer to this question are all of the activities described above. One could even say that a coach would have to have all of these skills to be really competent. **That means that abilities, such as actively listening, inquiring further, giving feedback, confronting (in the way described above), creating hypotheses, developing ideas for action, planning how to proceed, meta-communicating and reflecting on learning experiences are indispensable coaching abilities.**

In addition to that, a good coach also needs **very good perception skills**, such as a good self-perception and a good and sensitive perception when it comes to third persons and interactive situations.

And on top of all that, a good coach needs a particularly good feeling for dramaturgy, rhythm and timing - in other words, he needs the ability to create a coachee-focused process design: What measure might when and how be particularly successful? When and in what regard do we need to be quick, where can we relax? Where should we insist on details, what can be done in a summary form? What needs reflection, what do you both need to try or to practice? Where should you be direct, what requires another way of communication (images, metaphors, stories, etc.)? What do you need now, what later? What balance are you trying to establish and how do you best do that? Where can the necessary energy be found and how can you best help to make use of it? The art of coaching equals understanding the art of a process. And that has, of course, everything to do with perception, as well as with training, experience, trust and presence.

A coach should have **good self-management and reflection skills**. To be able to productively reflect and manage your own emotions, conflicts, difficulties, blockades and crises make it much easier on you to be able to support other people in difficult situations by providing them with the help they need.

General competences in psychology, that means knowledge in the field of personality psychology, perceptual psychology and group or organisational psychology, can also be helpful if you want to be a good coach.

Some other **specific competences can be helpful as well when it comes to some of the established coaching approaches**, e.g.: Roger's approach of the person-centered therapy, cognitive behaviour therapy, approaches, Gestalt- or

hypnotherapy approaches, transactional analysis, provocative therapy, NLP, etc. - A professional coach should always be trained in one or the other of these approaches. A coach's **competence in systemic coaching approaches** is particularly relevant when it comes to observing individual actions and their effect on others, because systemic coaching approaches offer a very vast range of possibilities to evaluate and productively moderate challenging situations.

A good coach does not have to be an expert in what his/her coachee does. Knowing too much about the coachee's profession might even be an obstacle to you as a coach, because it often makes you want to give you coachee expert advice, which can turn out to be a trap for your coaching process. However, to some degree, it is always helpful to have some kind of **practical experience**: If you have your own management experiences, if you do have expert knowledge in a certain sector or organisation or if you are culturally experienced for example, it will be easier for you to create a good connection with your coachee and to understand and to classify particular phenomena and contexts.

Coaching: is it art or is it craft?

So is coaching either one or the other? As in most cases, when a question like this is asked, the answer to it is: it is both. **Coaching is a craft that one can always improve by means of methodical and practical training and experience. And at the same time coaching can be considered an art. But even if you, as a coach, reach a level on which you perceive coaching to be an art it will always stay a type of craft as well.**

To learn coaching skills, you do not need to be a genius at all. However, it is very helpful to have the necessary emotional and social intelligence, the ability to (self-)reflect, the willingness to assume the basic assumptions illustrated above (such as presence, appreciation, respect, target-orientation, etc.), the willingness to methodically study the craft of coaching and to be interested in acting as other people's committed sparring partner in personally challenging situations. The rest comes almost automatically...

Digression: The manager as a coach

Assuming very different roles is part of any manager's every day life. Managers act as a strategist, framework providers, coordinators, moderators, instructors, evaluators, supporters, sparring partners, controlling instances, etc. It is very clear, that from a structural standpoint, all of these roles create a non-symmetrical relationship between you as a manager and your employees. The actions of an instructing, controlling and framework providing manager are, from an employee-perspective, generally perceived within the frame of an asymmetrical role model. This **structural asymmetry** is the actual core of the manager-employee-relationship. So it is plain to see that the structural basic situation between manager and employee will never be one of a completely equal level. This hierarchy is never completely forgotten by anyone, neither the manager nor his/her employee, but one could also add that this, for the sake of establishing clear competences, is in fact a good thing.

With regard to a coaching manager this has double significance: **On the one hand, a manager and his employee will never succeed to be 100% on an equal level within the given professional frame. Only an approximative form of being on the same level is possible.** But this, however, might on the one hand be already enough for effective coaching; at least, if the possibility for a necessary collaborative dialogue and reflection process is given. **On the other hand, it means that a manager has to create the basis for a possibly equal relationship between him/her as a coaching manager and his/her employee as a coachee.**

The measures for this are of general nature. They particularly regard the given general managing and team culture. **All that promotes a proper partnership culture is also an advantage for coaching**, e.g.: if you, as a manager, give and receive positive and critical feedback in everyday life; if the manager, as well as team members, are able to honestly express where their limits are and what they do not know how to do, what they cannot do. If a manager and his team members are able to consult with other team members in this situation; if they can actually count on open ears and support when it comes to their concerns; if there is an open communication culture, in which you can really explore things together without always establishing who is right and who is wrong; if everyone treats the other in a fair and constructive way, even in conflictual situations, etc. The more often a team meets these requirements, the better are the possibilities for productive coaching sessions. Coaching then is not a special instrument at all any more, because there already is a given partnership culture in which on the one hand everybody is able to jointly explore particular issues and in which on the other hand it is easy to start the solution-

relevant reflection process. It is secondary how you then decide to name this process. You could call that "coaching", name it differently or even not even name it at all. **It is, however, very important to a well-functioning and proper partner culture that a manager is aware of his/her particular role whenever s/he wants to assume the coach's role.**

Being extremely aware of your role as a coach is of crucial importance. The same especially goes for a coaching manager, because s/he could commit even more mistakes. If a coaching manager is professionally very competent in what his/her coachee is doing, it is very likely that the manager, because of this expertise, will quickly be convinced that s/he already knows what has to be done. This situation produces two traps: one is, that the coaching manager will miss out on exploring enough and thus s/he will risk to not properly understand his/her employee's situation; the other one is, that the employee, even if there is an established partner-culture-relationship between a manager and an employee, might come to the conclusion that s/he would have to do whatever the manager says, even if that would not make much sense to him/her.

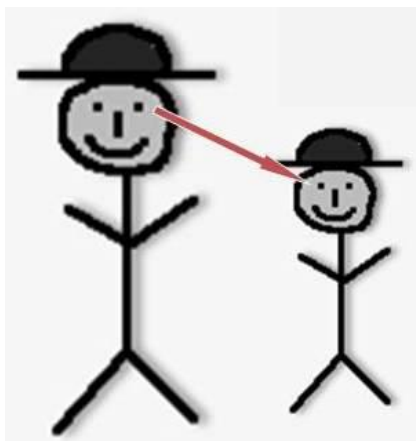
A coaching manager should never fail to intensively explore and always inquire further into and to what degree his/her ideas are suited to his/her coachee's needs. There will of course always be situations in which a manager is of the opinion that a process has to go like this or that, even if his/her employees disagree with him/her. Unless a manager does not start to make announcements or either strong recommendations in such a case, s/he should be very well aware of the fact that s/he is currently acting in a different role than the one of a coach, which is not illegitimate at all. Since a coaching manager will always coach his employee with regard to his/her respective targets (unless s/he considers his coachee a private person), s/he can more quickly get trapped into a situation of asymmetric roles than a coaching colleague, friend, partner or even an external coach. That is why it is most important that a coaching manager is always acting in a self-conscious way. Acting self-consciously means that a coach always has to think about the advantages and disadvantages of each and every little step during a coaching session. (Because if the employees perceives an imposed coaching session as a series of announcements, a manager will sooner or later have to pay a price for that: Your employees might show you a level of rather limited openness and a more tactical behaviour for example). **Consciously changing from the coach's role into another management role also means that a manager should also never fail to explain the reason why he has chosen to change roles in a certain setting at this particular time.** If a manager acts in a transparent and fair way in these cases, s/he can still remain a good and effective coach for his/her employees.

A manager should also be very confident when it comes to the question as to in which situations s/he would want to act as a coach for his/her employees. And this implies two things: first, a manager can demonstrate that s/he knows what typical coaching issues and situations in his management area are. Secondly s/he can demonstrate that s/he knows when to assume the role of a coach, as opposed to delegating coaching to someone else, e.g. to a direct colleague of the employee in question, another co-worker from the same organisation or even an external coach. Being conscious about this decision is very important, not only because of the implications for the role of a coaching manager, but also with regard to the most adapt interlocutor and issue-related available resources, e.g. how much time can you as a manager dedicate to this issue and how much do you want to dedicate it.

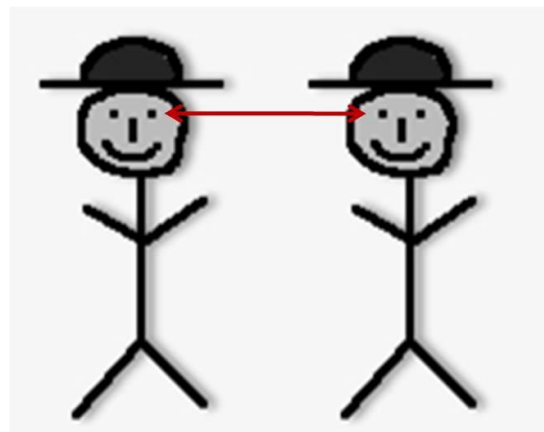
If on the one hand, a coaching manager decides to coach an employee with regard to a particular issue, it is of course an advantage if the employee perceives this the same way. The ideal would be that an employee is aware of the fact that s/he needs coaching because of a particular issue and that his/her boss is exactly the right person to talk to. In a perfect setting an employee would even approach their boss in such a situation. But if on the other hand, a manager thinks that an employee needs coaching (e.g. the manager is of the opinion that his employee needs to improve his relationship with clients, his structure, his management or cooperation), but the employee does not agree with this, a very different starting position is given. In this case, the manager would first have to have one or several conversations with his employee. S/he would have to try to explain his/her evaluation of the current situation and underline the need to change it. At this stage, general coaching attitudes and methods may be of some help for a productive conversation, e.g. listening, inquiring, feedback, possible confrontation, developing hypotheses; but such a conversation is actually not a coaching session itself. It is only an attempt to create the conditions for a successful coaching

Coaching always requires a specific concern, such as the question "how do I handle this?" If such a concern affects both, the manager as well as his/her employee, the coaching is ready to be started. But if none of the manager's strenuous efforts produces such a concern in his employee, the boss always has many possibilities left to decide how s/he would want to handle the issue in question; and at least some of these possibilities will have to do with talking to one or the other employee; in such cases, however, no coaching has taken place.

So, what is the conclusion to all of this? **Managers are very well able to coach their employees. And good manager-employee-coaching can turn out to be an advantage for everyone. And again, a coaching manager should always be very conscious and transparent about his/her role in different coaching situations. Because danger does not lurk in a particular individual coaching situation with a specific employee, but in other possible negative effects, such as unclear roles and the mixing up of competences.** Particularly since coaching managers have the most diverse roles to play, they need very good role awareness. This does not have to come along with any type of tension or artificiality. If an amicable team-culture exists, coaching between manager and employee is always very well possible. The best thing a manager can do to create a good coaching culture is therefore anything that reinforces cooperative and fair teamwork.



Structural asymmetric manager-employee relationship



An approximate cooperative and fair relationship during coaching

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