

Mindful Work

Mindful coaching

The purpose of this short guide is not to write a complete guide to coaching – there are many great books and many great coaches. Rather, the purpose is to offer another perspective, and to help us realise that we can all be coaches to one another.

Coaching can take many forms in the workplace. It can be the basis for interactions between team members, between employee and employer, or between an individual and an external facilitator. In this sense when I refer to a ‘coachee’, it really means anyone with an issue to resolve, and the ‘coach’ is the person who helps the coachee in this process.

Coaching is a process whereby the coachee gains insight and acts accordingly. In order to gain insight, enough mind-space needs to be created for the coachee to feel their way into the issue, with unconstrained creativity.

The nature of this mind-space, when most effective, is timeless, boundless, accepting and honest. As such, it closely reflects our innate nature of mind, which is simply awareness itself, and underlies our normal cognitive processes. This is the fertile ground in which perceptions, thoughts, feelings and experience materialise; a space of infinite capacity and possibility.

A unique value of coaching is when a coachee’s *thinking* about an issue has reached an impasse. Insight and wisdom will probably not arise by more thinking; it comes from a different place. The suggestion to ‘sleep on it’ when a difficulty arises, is often good advice; by morning the answer may be clear!

So the job of the mindful coach, is to help the coachee to enter this space.

First of all, let’s summarise some of the core principles of good coaching:

- Friendliness – creating a sense of welcome, goodwill, and a safe space to talk
- Selflessness – this is not a two-way chat; it’s about the coachee only
- Insight – the coachee must ‘get it’ for themselves
- Movement - coaching has the sense of a journey, or empowering change
- Challenge – acting as a catalyst, to encourage the coachee to break through any fixed views
- Commitment – encouraging the coachee to resolve to start on the journey

Julie Starr¹ defines 5 stages in a coaching conversation:

1. Establishing the conversation – creating rapport and the right atmosphere for the coaching

¹ The Coaching Manual, Julie Starr 2011, Coaching conversations chapter 6

Mindful Work

2. Identifying the topic and goal – agreeing what the conversation is about and the intended outcome
3. Enabling understanding and insight - the core of the process, whereby knowledge is brought ‘to the surface’ with clarity rather than just detail
4. Shaping agreements – summarising ideas and options for action, and creating a sense of the future
5. Completion – summarising and checking how valid the outcomes are

A ‘mindful coaching’ approach can underpin all of these stages. It’s about:

- holding a safe space for the coachee
- acting non-judgementally
- patiently holding a space of openness and receptiveness
- working from a standpoint of selfless attention and friendliness

“When you really listen to another person from their point of view, and reflect back to them that understanding, it’s like giving them emotional oxygen.” - Stephen Covey

Key principles for mindful coaching

The key principles, for the mindful coach, are as follows:

- **Creating and holding a safe space** – helping the coachee to welcome and face up to strong emotions and challenging experiences. Simply being there, in a compassionate frame of mind; walking beside the coachee in *their* journey. This can only happen fully when trust is established. Our body language, facial expressions and eye contact, are critical. This is worth practising and asking colleagues for honest feedback. How we look is critical to inviting the creative process from the coachee. However, we also need to respect and to some degree mirror what the coachee does, or we can appear pushy or uninterested; as each of use is comfortable with different subtleties of these interactions.
- **Non-judging** – putting aside our own views, responses and ideas. This also means avoiding the temptation to try to solve the issue for the coachee, even when we feel we have the answer. Our ideas may be valid, but our skill is to ask non-directive questions so that the coachee arrives at an understanding for themselves. Non judging does not mean having no sense of right and wrong; discrimination is of course important. However, being non-judging really means accepting that what is here, is here; not fighting with the present. A lot of energy can be freed up if we can stand back and see clearly what is really going on.
- **Patience** - sometimes silence, and waiting patiently, are the most powerful interventions we can make. This can feel unnatural at first, but we absolutely

Mindful Work

have to resist the temptation to step into the space. What can seem like a long time for the coach, may seem like a timeless experience for the coachee. Nancy Kline in her excellent book *Time to Think*, describes this as the 'productive quiet of the busy thinker.'

We may also be tempted to expect the coachee to 'get it' at the same speed or in the same way that we do. We must back off and let the coachee gain their own insights, at their own pace.

- **Selfless attention** - in order for the space to be held effectively, the coach must offer their full and undistracted attention. The quality of this attention is very important. It must embody the sense of welcoming and non-judging, and one must avoid imposing one's own agenda. It is simply a time to drop our own sense of self, giving way to open awareness, in order to offer that sense of spaciousness to the coachee.

If, as a coach, one listens intently with the whole body-mind, our own understanding may arise intuitively rather than as a thinking process.

- **Friendliness** - whilst attention is critical, it must be done in a frame of friendliness. This is communicated mainly through our facial expression and body language. It's important to practice with others and in front of the mirror, to make sure that we are communicating that sense of friendliness to the coachee. If we are too intense, it may appear to be a critical standpoint, yet if we're too loose we could appear to be disengaged.

Friendliness is also about nurturing the approach to the coaching session that whatever arises is interesting and useful. Difficult emotions arise for a reason, and we may have more to learn from these unwanted guests than from our usual thought-pattern suspects.

Exercise 1: Checking our facial expression and body language

First, practice different expressions in the mirror, and take selfies or use a video, to try to refine your pose and expression.

With a trusted colleague or friend playing the role of coachee, spend at least 10 minutes listening and asking some non-directional questions about an issue they choose to talk about.

Ask them for honest reflections on your facial expression and body language; did they feel you were totally present for them, not too close and pushy, nor too laid back or losing attention. How did they feel about the eye contact, smile and other facial appearances, nodding, looking away, etc? Ask them how they suggest you could create the right non-verbal tone.

Repeat with at least 3 different people.

Mindful Work

Non-directive questions

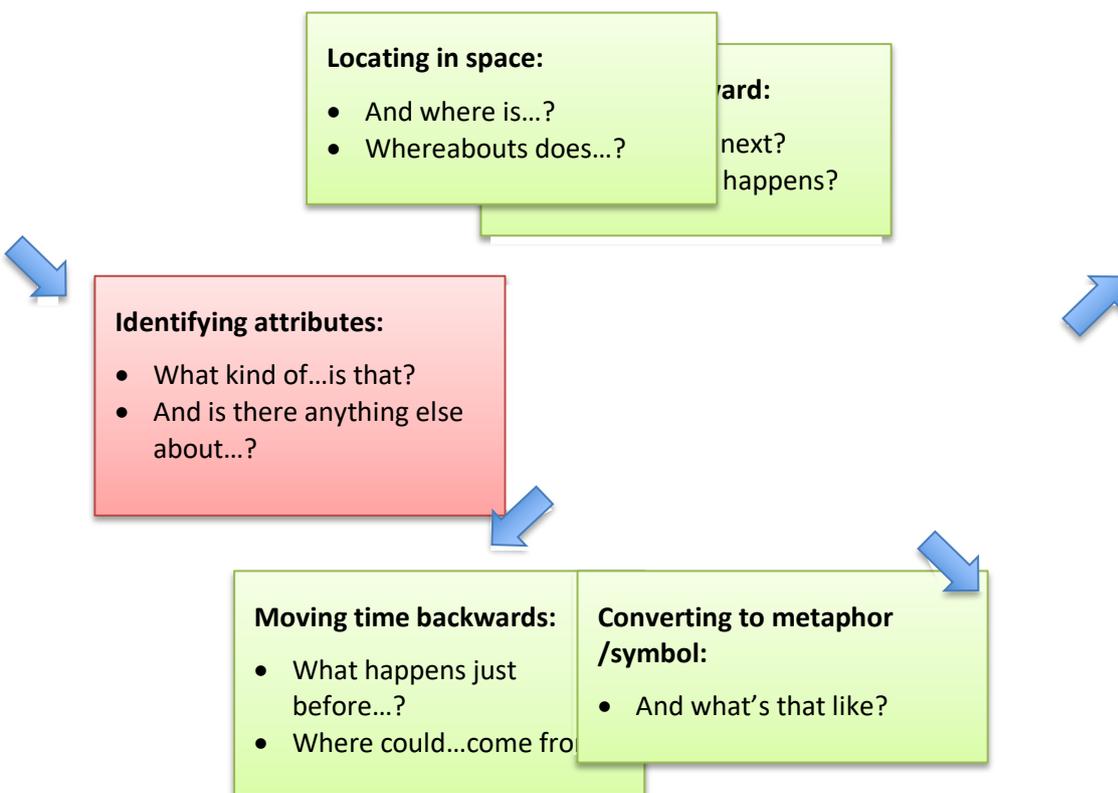
Non-directive questions are open-ended; they do not try to prompt the coachee to give a yes or no answer, but rather they encourage him/her to explain their position, state their thinking, or make their own choices.

The objective is to allow the coachee follow their own understanding and draw their own conclusions. The skill of the coach is to guide them through this exploration.

The coach must take a non-judgemental stance, and use active listening skills to help the coachee to explore their own attitudes and feelings.

Studies have been carried out which indicate that if a manager tells an employee to do something, 10% can recall what they said 3 months later, whereas with a nondirective questioning approach, whereby the employee arrives at the same conclusion for themselves, recall capacity is 95% (Lauren Buys).

Tomkins and Lawley in 'Less is More .. The Art of Clean Language', define a compass of questions to explore an issue, as follows:



Mindful Work

Exercise 2: Formal coaching session

This exercise is designed for coaches or HR professionals, who are regularly using coaching in a formal context.

*The exercise is very straightforward, which is to **apply the principles we have described above**, within a coaching session. However, we suggest that you ask the coachee for their permission to take a different approach in your coaching, so that you are then able to ask them for feedback.*

Reflect on what went well, and what not so well, and ask the coachee to offer their own reflections.

Exercise 3: Mindful workplace conversations

Informal coaching refers to the kinds of conversations that can happen over a desk, over coffee, or in other unplanned interactions.

Applying the principles described above, in particular mindful listening and selfless attention, remain open and attentive, with a non-judging manner.

Reflect on what went well, and what not so well, and whether taking this approach even in an informal situation, generates useful outcomes.