

What is Coaching?

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The level and quality of thinking he was able to do with the support of his coach helped him to grow into his new role fairly quickly

David – The First Time MD

David is a first time MD of a heavy manufacturing company that is part of one of the largest groups in their industry. He had stepped into this position after a successful stint as a director responsible for one of the divisions of the same company. Prior to him taking over this role, the company had embarked on an expansion drive that increased their production capacity many times over. They were, however, struggling to implement the production systems required to utilise the new capacity and had not yet managed to land much new business. The company was in some trouble, and David faced the challenge of learning to fulfil his new role as well as leading a turnaround for the company.

Over the period of a year, David worked with a coach at least once a month. In the coaching conversations David was able to close the door on the normal demands of the day for a few hours and engage in some structured thinking. In this space he was able to reflect, stretch, clarify a vision for his role and the company and gain insights on how to get there. Early on in the coaching series he was able to develop a strategy that targeted the silo thinking and blame shifting that was prevalent in the company and, within his first year, he had provided leadership that created a significant shift toward a collaborative culture.

By the end of the year David had grown into a fairly confident MD. He had identified and implemented the core changes required to move the company into an efficient production cycle. He had also transformed the relationships the company has with its key stakeholders and had launched a new marketing strategy that was beginning to deliver some results.

The company is not out of the woods yet, but it is well positioned to take advantage of some significant new opportunities. Not all of this happened simply because David had a coach and he deserves all the credit for the outstanding work he did over the year. Here, however, is a paraphrase of his own take on the role coaching played.

In David's opinion, the level and quality of thinking he was able to do with the support of his coach helped him to grow into his new role fairly quickly. One of the keys elements in that, which the coaching clarified and supported, has been to ensure that his leadership team and the senior management are all on board and are each doing their part.

Coaching helped him to clarify key strategies in a short space of time and with greater accuracy and it helped him to take focused action to change what needed changing. After the close out of the first year of coaching

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David decided to speak with his seniors within the group about approval for extending the coaching series.

Process, Content and Attitude

What this story helps to illustrate is that the value of coaching does not lie as much in what a coach does but in what the coach and coachee achieve by partnering in a coaching engagement. Coaching is in essence a conversation, or a series of conversations, that result in measurable and sustainable change for a coachee.

Coaching engagements are, however, made distinct from other conversations by a clear definition of who owns what in the conversation. This distinctness has important implications for where a coaching conversation focuses and the manner in which it is conducted. It is also what enables coaching to produce an outcome that is different to other conversations, and often do so far quicker.

The power of coaching lies in its ability to produce a particular kind of synergy. The skill that a coach brings into this partnership enables a coachee to achieve more than she or he would on their own. That skill, as I will discuss in this article, has to do with a process and attitude that makes coaching what it is. Content is still vitally important in a coaching conversation. In fact, these conversations are content rich without being cluttered or stuck in detail. This is in part due to the clear distinction in ownership mentioned earlier.

In a coaching conversation neither process nor content dominate – both are essential. Primary ownership of each element is critical in a coaching relationship but is set up very differently to the way we normally do when we engage with each other. In coaching, the coachee has primary (not exclusive) ownership of the content in the conversation. This requires commitment and ‘coachability’ from the coachee, and respect and ‘faith’ from the coach. On the other hand, the coach has primary (not exclusive) ownership of the process in a coaching conversation. This requires skill, commitment and a true coaching attitude from the coach, and trust and wholehearted engagement in the coaching process from the coachee.

If we follow the process then, it would look something like this:

By mutual agreement, the coach establishes the coaching relationship so that the coachee is clear on what to expect, how to engage and is ready to do so. The coach first works with the coachee to help them create a clearly defined outcome on which the coaching will focus. The very specific structure of a coaching conversation ensures that the coachee has complete ownership of this outcome. At the core of the ‘attitude’ that the coach adopts is a deep respect for the coachee and a belief (faith) in their ability to think beyond

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their current perspective. The coach's commitment is thus to remain agenda-free and preferably 'invisible' in the process.

As the conversations unfold they will focus on the coachee's thinking and facilitate insights and solutions that leverage the coachee's own creativity and energy. The coach's role is then to help the coachee translate that into specific actions. These actions may at times be stretching; an element that a coach helps the coachee to build into the process, knowing that it creates momentum and inspires extraordinary achievement. In this way the coachee moves, step by step, toward their desired outcomes.

It is clear then that what the coachee does in-between each coaching conversation is critical. A coaching conversation supports this in a unique manner by empowering the coachee to take full ownership and responsibility for follow through on each action.

This 'transactional' journey (the one that relates to our 'doing') is fairly obvious from the description of the process that has been provided so far. What is not always as obvious is the 'transformational' journey (the one that relates to our 'being') that is intertwined with the 'doing' part of the process. The following story highlights the transformational aspects of James' journey.

A Life Changing Process

James holds a senior technical role with a major player in the mining industry and is responsible for a budget that runs into many millions. As a technical person, James is exceptionally well qualified and has vast experience. He is already a high achiever in his own sphere and respected for what he has to offer in this regard. Besides his technical qualifications, James has also completed an MBA.

The next level for James is a full directorship and is very keen for this promotion. This was one of the first goals that he put on the table as he embarked on a coaching series. He also wanted to work on relationships with his direct reports and other key stakeholders. Over a period of six months he worked with his coach twice a month.

Through the coaching conversations James was able to develop strategies regarding the relationships he wanted to work on that were somewhat stretching but still particularly suited to him. In conversation with his coach James established that he had no direct control over an appointment as a director and that it was not even certain that it was in the offering. He was also able to clarify, however, that he did want this role in the future and decided to explore what it would take to be a director and then craft a self-

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development pathway. In doing so he gained an awareness of himself that had a far deeper impact than he first envisaged.

As the coaching progressed James came to realise how much he had been relying on his technical expertise to create a platform for promotion. In the past this had always been sufficient but for the next level something more would be essential. Through the coaching conversations James confronted the vital importance of being able to lead and work with people in a way that he had never done before. He uncovered patterns of thinking and habits in this regard that were holding him back and began to develop new ones.

The first feedback on the fundamental shift that this caused for James came, surprisingly, from his family rather than from the workplace. He changed his approach regarding the way he handled various situations to such an extent that his family began to comment on how different he was.

During the close out of the coaching series after six months, James' comment was that his whole life had changed. This is how he feels about what he has gained through the coaching series. He is giving attention to different things now and he is giving a different kind of attention to many of the things he felt he needed to control before. The result is that he delegates far more effectively and is learning to do so in a way that is empowering rather than controlling. One of the benefits is that he is experiencing far less stress in every area of his life.

Many of the internal shifts that surfaced in the coaching conversations are already embedded and are finding their way into his day-to-day behaviours. The change in the way he relates to peers and his seniors is taking a bit more time, partly because he has found that he has to rebrand himself. These are some of his next steps.

James requested an extension of the coaching series as he feels that he wants the same support he has had so far as he completes the medium-term transformation he has embarked on.

Once again, the story is intended to illustrate that the value that the coaching produced does not lie as much in what the coach does but in what the coach and coachee achieve by partnering in a coaching engagement. Understanding this is central to understanding what coaching is. One of the reasons it is often so difficult to describe what coaching is, is because the answer that most people want to hear is about what a coach does that is so special.

The truth is that there is much that is a normal part of other types of conversations that coaches do not do. Coaches do not tell their coachees what to do, they do not rely on their own knowledge or understanding, they do not analyse problems and create solutions or develop plans for anyone.

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A coaching engagement may result in some of this happening, but the coachee does this work rather than the coach.

In Conclusion

When we look to answer the question of what coaching is then, we need to start with the understanding that the power of coaching is not to be found specifically in what the coach does. The power really lies in the specific kind of partnering that takes place when a coach and coachee engage in coaching conversations. To be a coach requires both the skill and the attitude that will ensure that both participants are able to fully and freely own their part of the engagement. As each does so, a synergy is released that produces extraordinary results.

Note: Names and certain elements of the stories in this article have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

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