

Consultant or Coach?

One of my recent consulting projects has been to help a client introduce a coaching programme into their organisation. This has raised an interesting dilemma for me. My brief is to act as a consultant, but I am helping them to instil a coaching culture, so should I not be coaching them to do this?

A definition or two might help at this point. There is little debate about the role of consultants. They are paid for their expertise, and often for their time. The client therefore sees maximum expertise delivered in minimum time as the best deal. This expertise can simply be thrown straight at the problem, in the case of software, for example, when the consultant comes in, installs or fixes it, and leaves. Or the expertise can be offered to clients, so that they are advised, or taught how to implement something new, or to solve the problem for themselves.

So far so straightforward. Now we come to coaching, which annoyingly, has a number of definitions. Only one makes sense in this context, which is that a coach enables the client to discover the solution or way forward for themselves. Coaching is about asking, not telling. The last thing you do is to offer a solution on a plate, which is exactly the role you would occupy as a consultant.

As an aside, the definition above is applied by some to the word mentoring. I dispute this definition on the simple basis that the term "life coach" is now widely used and accepted. The essence of life coaching is precisely to help the individual work out their own life plan, not to tell them what to do. I would argue that a true life coach always does the former; a bad life coach might well do the latter. Of course, we all do a mixture of asking and telling, so these tight definitions might seem unnecessary, but it does matter when you are being paid for your expertise.

This was brought home to me recently when I led a training session with a manager and her team on pricing structure. I planned it carefully, knowing that the group had all the answers, and I simply needed to facilitate a structured discussion to enable them to come up with a plan that I could have presented to them in about ten minutes.

The session went exactly as I had planned it, and in an hour and a half the group had produced the plan with no input from me other than a set of open questions. I was delighted with the outcome, but I later discovered that their manager was not. When I approached her to plan the next session, she asked me if I would give a presentation, so that everyone could benefit from my knowledge and expertise. On closer questioning it became very clear indeed that she had no idea about facilitation skills, or how I had led the group to reach their conclusion. She had seen my presence as superfluous, and by implication felt that I had not earned my fee, although she was too nice to say so.

I outlined to her exactly the process I had followed, first in preparing:

1. Identifying the outcome and a range of solutions
2. Thinking through the obstacles they might face
3. Preparing a structure for questions

Then at the session itself, through facilitation I enabled the team to:

1. Identify the goal
2. Discuss issues
3. Define their plan
4. Produce a solution

Throughout I ensured that contributions were balanced, and came from the whole team, who were then all committed to the result.

After I had outlined all this, and demonstrated to her the benefits of team ownership of the solution, and how the learning took place, she readily agreed that a lecture would not be the best way to handle the next session. Had I not followed up this initial request very carefully, I would not have discovered how she perceived my role, and might eventually have lost a client. What I should have done was to check my methodology with her in advance, which I thought had covered by saying that I would lead a discussion on the subject. This was not enough, and she did not recognise what I did as a skilled technique.

This experience makes it easy to understand why so many consultants tell and don't ask. It is so much safer. "Here is my expert opinion – it's what you are paying for." By doing this they may not be giving the client the best service, which brings me back to the coaching programme.

It seemed wrong for me to be telling when they were trying to instil a culture of asking. I solved the problem by discussing it with my clients. I work with them on a one to one basis, so we talked about when I might coach them and when I would shower them with expertise. The solution is not perfect, because there are occasions when I would prefer to coach, but recognise that this would take up a great deal more time, and money, and so I do a combination of the two.

It is interesting that when you ask someone whether they want to be coached or not, they will generally say that they prefer the answer on a plate. This is partly because it is easy, but also because coaching is an exposing process, revealing how much or how little they really know, and how they feel and think about a situation. It is important to recognise that saying no is as much about saving face as saving time, and therefore offering a choice may not be the best route.

Better to judge the situation, and if you feel it is right, just start coaching, but do be sure that your client knows what you are doing, otherwise they may get the impression, to quote the old saying, "that you are just borrowing their watch for you to tell them the time", and are not earning your money as a consultant.