Creating A Powerful Coach-Coachee Partnership
by Howard J. Morgan

Organizations are demanding a high return for their coaching investment dollar. Accordingly, best practice coaches must deliver levels of productivity, effectiveness, innovation and impact which could not otherwise have been obtained. Selecting the right coach for the organization's specific needs is the basis for producing those superior results. But, the power of that coaching engagement flows from:

- The structure of the relationship
- The coach's skill in moving the coachee towards high impact goals
- The coachee's commitment and willingness to change

The coach-coachee relationship is best described as a partnership, one in which both sides work together to reach an agreed-upon destination. Obviously, neither coach nor coachee could get there alone. From such mutual reliance confidence, trust, and even friendship develops along the way.

The relationship is not one of equals, however. The coach, not the coachee, is in control of the pace and direction of the journey. It is within the coach's realm of responsibility to set the ground rules, collect the necessary information, assess, analyze and judge the situation, define the right action plan, push or prod accordingly, monitor progress, adjust approach as required, and deliver the goods. All of this needs to be done openly and with the full cooperation of the coachee – but the coach's skill, experience, and adaptability is driving the process.

The coachee has his or her own responsibilities. As in any form of counseling that is oriented around change, the coachee must commit to the hard work, risk and awkwardness that are part of real, sustained impact. In other words, the coachee must take ownership over his or her own progress, working at it consistently and with commitment, while trusting the coach to be there with all necessary support and expertise. Further, it is important for everyone to understand the risk of a person taking on change and the subsequent fear of failure that can result. If the coachee is not willing to make that level of commitment, or, as sometimes happens, if the organization is not truly willing to be supportive, then it's up to the coach to identify that problem, clarify expectations and continue or abandon the project as need be.

The coaching journey, especially for a top leader or executive, does not take place in a vacuum or during a time-out from other responsibilities, pressures and interpersonal demands. It is not surprising, therefore, that the regimen of change can become lost within the context of the day-to-day. The coach is there to watch over and track the small steps in what can be described as the micro-plan. It is, after all, only through small steps that we achieve larger aims. As Hesiod, one of the earliest Greek philosopher-poets, stated 2600 years ago: "If you add little to little, and do it often, soon the little will grow, and become big."

But the coach must also link the micro-plan to the larger vision, otherwise the coachee will not be reinforced by his or her steady accomplishments. As anyone who has ever driven a change process will recognize, the steps leading towards that change are lost to many people in the details of the daily grind. By deliberately and frequently linking the coachee's efforts to the overall objective, the coach creates the sense of forward momentum and purpose valued by action and goal-oriented organizations.

This chapter will describe the coach-coachee partnership from two vantage points. First, in Part I, we will look at how the coach designs and structures the engagement's system in order to create the conditions for a true partnership. Without this structure, both sides are liable to seek paths of least resistance whenever they encounter pressures or roadblocks, reducing the power potential of the change. Next, in Part II, we will look at the human dynamic of the relationship and the means by which the coach leads the coachee to the depth of understanding necessary for creating sustainable results. Separating the process of coaching into two distinct aspects is a purer approach than would be encountered in the messy dynamics of real life, nevertheless, that division will help coach, coachee and organization communicate expectations with more clarity and purpose.

Part I: Structuring the Coaching Engagement

Establishing The Ground Rules

The results-driven nature of the coach-coachee relationship requires clear ground rules to operate effectively. One purpose of the first meeting is to establish exactly what those ground rules are.

Setting the ground rules is not a process of negotiation but one of clarification. The coach is in charge and up-front. Ground rules cover most of the following key areas:

- Confidentiality, expectations and commitments
- Reporting relationships
- Methods of information gathering
- The way objectives will be agreed upon and measured
- How progress will be monitored
- Frequency of contact
- How, why and when the engagement will come to an end

The coachee will have concerns and anxieties, some which are bound to be self-serving or protective and with the potential to limit the coach's effectiveness. An experienced coach has encountered these before and knows how to provide assurances or sound reasons to overcome any reluctance. One of the key issues raised in the last chapter comes to the forefront at this very stage – who exactly is the client? If the coach and coachee understand the client to be the organization footing the bill, then the ground rules become much easier to accept. Acceptance won't automatically generate the trust and openness required for success, but establishing ground rules that are clear, and clearly followed, is one of the steps necessary for trust to grow.

Once ground rules have been set, they cannot be bent along the way. The relationship needs the discipline and boundaries of that structure for the coachee to experience the creativity and energy of real change.

Confidentiality, Expectations & Commitments

While trust is a feeling and a bond, confidentiality is more of a contractual agreement. Over time, it can serve as one of the pillars of trust. But, in the beginning of the relationship, confidentiality is about establishing expectations and the lines or boundaries of communication.

Confidentiality between coach and coachee is inviolable, no matter who is paying the bill. For the relationship to be effective, the coachee must be able to honestly discuss personal feelings, concerns and attitudes that can encompass a broad range of subjects, including the coachee's superiors, peers, reports and even family, as well as the organization and its strategy.

As much as possible, the coach should keep such discussion within the realm of the predetermined objectives, but the floor is essentially open. Without confidentiality, the relationship cannot progress to trust, nor can the coach understand the coachee's challenges with sufficient complexity.

The protocol of confidentiality runs both ways. The coachee does not reveal the coach's confidences any more than the coach would. Commitment to the process must also be mutual. The coach is willing to do everything for the coachee as long as the coachee demonstrates commitment with consistent effort. The coachee should expect the same from the coach. A coach's rules are simple: "You can fire me. I can fire you. The organization can fire both of us."

Reporting Relationships

Strict confidentiality does not mean that the coachee's progress is never discussed outside of that relationship – but it does mean that what gets discussed, when and with who is clearly determined and consistently followed.

The goal of the engagement is not to make the coachee happy but to provide value to the organization. Whoever is paying the coach is the client. While confidentiality needs to be respected, the line of command and the flow of communication must be clear. There should be one point of contact in that information flow, ideally the coachee's boss or someone even higher in the same line of command. Once this contact is decided upon, the coachee's progress should not be discussed or broadcast beyond that person.

The initial Human Resources point of contact, for example, may not be the best choice for the reporting relationship. That person set up the engagement and the conditions, and can help keep things on track, but should not be an active participant in the process. The client's interest in the business objectives can adequately serve as the compass pointing the coach and coachee in the right direction.

When coaching fails, it can be because coach and coachee have little regard for time frame, expense and meeting of objectives. Often, this is a symptom that arises from a poor understanding of reporting protocol.

Information Gathering

Another aspect of coaching that may be unsettling to the coachee is how much information the coach will be gathering and how he or she will be gathering it. Unfortunately, the coach cannot learn everything he or she needs to know by talking to the coachee alone. That data provides only part of the picture since the coachee's knowledge may be limited and his or her point of view is personally biased. In strategy coaching, for example, the CEO or division head may not be aware of everything that is going on with the organization's operations. In leadership coaching, the coachee's perception of his or her leadership style may be completely out of line with how that style impacts peers or reports. What's intended as a joke or a motivational dressing down by a CEO may be interpreted very differently by a new vice president.

To gather critical information, a coach must understand the coachee's environment and interpersonal relationships to whatever extent the objectives dictate. There are a number of approaches or techniques that coaches use, each with its own limitations and advantages. The following is a representative list:

- Survey – To gauge the climate of the organization or assess the impact of a strategy or change initiative.
- 360 Degree Feedback Survey – To assess the coachee, from the perspective of superiors, reports, peers and even customers.
- Interviewing – Similar to 360 Feedback, except the coach will spend time personally with superiors, reports, colleagues, etc., discussing the coachee and his or her challenges confidentially.
- Internal Source – With permission, the coach works closely with one or two key stakeholders who know the coachee very well.

- Shadowing – The coach follows the coachee through daily assignments, in team settings, during key meetings etc., observing how the coachee works, how that impacts others, the dynamics involved, the information exchange, the power relationships, etc. Similar to the "participant-observation" data-gathering techniques of anthropology.
- Monitoring Output – Used when tasks and deliverables are good gauges of the coachee's current performance and progress.
- Past Performance – To understand a coachee's current situation, a coach sometimes need look no further than the past. Behaviors, attitudes, values and approaches are difficult to change. What may have been a benefit at one level can be a liability in another context. With access to information about past performance, the coach can intuit a lot of quality information about current challenges.
- Outside Influences – In some cases, what is going on in the coachee's personal or family life may have a drastic impact on performance. If the coach had no knowledge of such personal issues, coaching might be directed at entirely wrong areas.

It's understandable that the coachee will need to define a comfort zone when it comes to information gathering. In establishing the ground rules, the coach informs the coachee about preferred approaches, but permission needs to be secured and boundaries agreed upon. If those boundaries threaten to get in the way of a successful engagement, another solution needs to be found.

Making Judgments, Setting Objectives & Monitoring Progress

Following the information gathering stage, a best practice coach will end up with too much data. This data needs to be filtered, narrowed down and focused, a process that requires a significant amount of judgment.

The coach must be careful not to apply all of the data to the coachee unreservedly. Some of it may not be true, some of it may not be relevant, some of it may be relevant but not significant in meeting what are shaping up to be the key objectives. The coach overlays his or her own expertise on the data by looking for clues, echoes and patterns. As the coach begins to grasp what the issues are, he or she reframes them for others to respond to or push back on, adjusts them as required and secures alignment. The coach does not bring biases to this process; instead, the coach brings structure, thought, experience, instinct and knowledge to shape the information and focus it on a reduced number of significant objectives that are worth accomplishing.

The coach and coachee must come to agreement on these objectives and then on a plan of action. It is important that the objectives are in alignment with the client's or organization's needs or concerns, and that the action plan be part of the flow of information in the reporting protocol.

Objectives must be concrete, outcome-based, accomplishable in a defined time period and limited in number. Most coaches focus on only two or three objectives. Many coachees will push back on that and want to be more ambitious, but experience has shown that increasing the number only dilutes the focus and reduces the impact. Instead of doing two or three things well and benefiting from that in a lasting way, the coachee or the organization partially accomplishes five or six objectives with less impact. On the other hand, once the initial critical objectives have been accomplished, others can be tackled in turn.

Objectives need checkpoints at progressive stages. With any end goal, there are always steps that must be accomplished along the way. Those steps should be flagged and serve as markers both for monitoring progress and celebrating small wins.

The coach needs structure and skill to monitor progress effectively. Systems must be in place to measure how well the coachee is delivering on the identified actions. Frequency of follow-up is based not only on the coachee's need for counsel but also how frequently the coach needs to check in to ensure progress. The spectrum of approaches are quite variable. Some coaches work intensely with a coachee for a few months, then sporadically monitor progress and make adjustments along the way. Others do a few initial sessions, monitor from afar, and revisit when needed.

During follow-up, the coach is disciplined about having a specific objective in mind for each contact. Though the coachee may not always be aware of the underlying agenda, the coach is probing to monitor progress and adjust the plan as necessary. Without that discipline, coaching follow-up would lack structure. This might lead to unfocused sessions, filled up by friendly chatter and confession; or, it might cause the sessions to swing chaotically from one challenge to another, preventing steady progress on pre-set goals.

When the objectives are accomplished, the coaching engagement is over. Depending on their relationship, the coach may still check in occasionally, but it would be off the clock. Alternatively, if the objectives aren't accomplished and the time frame is exceeded, the coaching engagement may have failed. That's up to client and coach to evaluate. A useful exercise is to assess levels of blame. Rarely is it one person's fault that a coaching engagement doesn't work. The percentage of blame allotted to the coach, coachee and others can be insightful.

How a coach ends the engagement can be as important as how it begins. An exit strategy must be in place. Some coaches will hang on for as long as the client will pay, but a best practice coach let's go at the optimal time. The goal of coaching is not to create dependency but to give the coachee the tools and capabilities to excel and grow on his or her own.

Part II: Creating Lasting Impact

Best practice coaching is a combination of empathy and structure. Coaches develop the structure by setting the stage, assessing the current situation, creating alignment around needs, focusing on objectives, laying out a future plan and executing it with sufficient follow-up. The art of coaching lies in the human dynamic, however. It encompasses the means by which the coach builds trust, adjusts the coaching process to meet the coachee's personal strengths and pace, and fosters the conditions necessary for success.

Personal style has a lot to do with how best practice coaches create lasting impact, but describing that dynamic can help coachees and clients know what to expect.

Building Trust

Trust is both a foundation and an outcome of the coaching partnership. Best practice coaches are able to create the foundation of trust from the outset, by the end of the first meeting. How do they do it?

- Self-Awareness – Coaches are people with a high degree of self-knowledge, gained over time. They are not without ego, but they are humble and open, and can project these qualities clearly. They have a strong personal ethic and set of values which they demonstrate in their behaviors.

- Empathy – Coaches are skilled at listening, questioning and empathizing. They develop an understanding of the coachee's position and personality very quickly, focusing keenly on that person's needs. They adjust their own style to fit the coachee.
- Credibility – Coaches have a level of experience which provides them with instant credibility. They can communicate in a language and style with which coachee's are familiar. They have a knowledge base, which is now at the disposal of the coachee.
- Real Relationship – Coaches do not just give, they receive. Coaching is a journey of learning and growth for both coach and coachee. If the relationship were one way, it wouldn't foster the highest levels of trust.

The coaching partnership achieves its impact because of the foundation of trust. The more trust the coach can generate, the more the coachee can ahieve.

Managing the Dynamic

Whether the coaching objectives are directed toward strategy, personal leadership, transitions or organizational change, at least 75% of that coaching is focused on the human dynamic over the more technical aspects of the challenge. In order to meet the coaching objectives in the desired time frame, the coach must be able to skillfully manage that dynamic, allowing the coachee to learn, grow and succeed at an optimal rate. This growth takes place at the very edge of the coachee's comfort zone, where creative possibility is just within reach.

How does the coach produce such magic? First, the coach has a clear understanding of what needs to be worked on, in large part because he or she is able to think in terms of behaviors. For example, most people are quick to hold a person's personality at fault if they are not accomplishing some objective. Manager X is ineffective because he is not assertive or risk-taking enough, while manager Y is overbearing and closed off to new ideas. As personality traits, these can be intimidating challenges, but when viewed as behaviors, they are eminently changeable.

As an example, a manager who is not assertive enough or who is too risk-averse needs to:

- Understand the context in which that behavior occurs
- Have the behavior pointed out when they demonstrate it
- Be trained to have an alternative behavior available to them for future occasions
- Be encouraged to continue practicing that behavior even when it feels awkward or meets with less than spectacular success
- Become a natural and skilled user of that learned behavior over time

Although this is a basic example more in the domain of leadership coaching, there are parallels with other kinds of coaching as well. There is a behavioral change aspect to the manager who is unable to accept the new responsibilities of a merger, or the COO who needs to work with a senior team in a different way to manage an organizational shift, or the CEO who must think in radical terms to create the organization's new competitive strategy. By focusing on behaviors and measurable outputs instead of personality traits and characteristics, the coach is able to deftly manipulate the levers of growth and change.

Overall progress is not judged by the person making the change but by those who view the change. In other words, the coach doesn't measure success by measuring the coachee's level of satisfaction, but by measuring the impact on the surrounding environment.

For example, the manager who needs to be more proactive about providing feedback is not the best judge of whether he or she is doing a better job. Even though that manager may be much more deliberate than in the past, the important question is whether direct reports feel the same way. If they don't, is it because the manager is truly failing to change or because reports have not clued into the change that has taken place? The coach must judge, and adjust tactics as needed, suggesting, perhaps, that the manager tag a feedback moment more openly in the future so that reports are made consciously aware of it.

As another example, in the case of an organizational change initiative, the coachee's success at developing and implementing that change can't be measured by how well the coachee feels but by how clearly the organization has been impacted. Again, the coach takes the pulse of that impact and adjusts the coachee's approach accordingly, keeping in mind that not everyone's perception of macro-change is always clear.

A behavioral change or a strategy implementation will not succeed if the coach is only there to provide the initial push, no matter how solid and insightful the advice. Progress must be monitored at appropriately frequent intervals to ensure the change. The coach understands the coachee, the environment and the challenge well enough to know when to apply more gas, when to touch on the brake, and when to change direction. The coach is always trying to create the most powerful and sustainable results in the shortest time frame. How fast can the coachee be moved along? How is the coachee doing emotionally and mentally with the changes taking place? Is there a danger zone approaching in which the coachee will be placed in a situation that might jeopardize chances of success or reduce his or her willingness to take further risks? Is the organization providing sufficient support for the change?

The coach modifies the approach as required, recalibrating it to optimize the pace of the coachee's development in a way that allows the coach to meet his or her commitments and agreed-upon objectives. The coachee's best interests are kept in mind throughout this recalibration. Even though the organization might be the paying client, the coach is not going to be part of any vehicle operating against the coachee. The ethic of coaching requires the coach to manage the client's expectations just as skillfully as he or she manages the coach's progress.

Sustainable Success

Success isn't measured by how well the coachee performs with the coach's direct help; it must be judged by how well the coachee performs after the coach has left the scene. If the coach has truly done the job, the coachee will have the capabilities and tools to succeed independently.

How does the coach create sustainable success? First, the coach must ensure that the coachee is actually anchored to the change they've experienced. It's easy to change in the short-term. It's more difficult to change permanently. In some ways, this is the difference between technique and understanding. In other words, just because the coachee is making a conscious effort to think or behave differently, that doesn't mean he or she won't go back to old habits when that conscious approach falls off the daily to-do list.

That's the internal battle. There will also be a great deal of external pressure on the coachee to leave their new performance zone for the familiarity and comfort of the old zone. To manage the external pressure, the coach tries to create the conditions for success in the coachee's environment. That might involve preparing the people around the coachee for the changes that are taking place by enlisting their support and understanding. Not all of the coachee's reports and colleagues will be actively rooting for his or her success, especially if behavioral problems have been part of the mix. But if 80% of those people can be brought on board, the chances of that success being sustained are much greater.

Creating sustainable success is part of the coach's exit strategy. The process of weaning the coachee from the coach's guidance involves checking in to ensure the change is still in place. It's the coach's obligation to help the coachee prepare for the change, accomplish the change, and sustain the change. The occasional phone call to the coachee or the coachee's key stakeholders can evaluate how well the coaching impact has lasted. The impact of monitoring after the engagement is formally over cannot be underestimated.

As coaching comes under more and more pressure to demonstrate its return on investment, demonstrating sustainability of success is becoming critical. Revenue for even the blue-chip consulting firms has fallen, in large part because clients were never actively weaned from consultant-dependency and capabilities were not sufficiently transferred. The business model of best practice coaching is clearly aligned with these new demands, but coaches must be able to demonstrate that they are living up to those demands through their results.

Ultimately, the success of the coaching partnership is not measured by coach-coachee chemistry or the satisfaction of the coachee; it is measured by the business results. Nevertheless, the partnership is one of mutual benefit and the satisfaction in that should be felt by both parties. The coachee has taken a journey from vulnerability to competence with a new base level of high performance. Along the way, he or she has received side-benefits of greater satisfaction in their work, more authenticity in their personal calling and increased creativity in their role. The coach has also taken a journey, though it is perhaps one more leg on an even longer adventure. By working closely with another human being and seeing that work come to success, they have gained a valuable experience while developing in approach, insight and self-awareness.

Coaching Checklist

Creating a Powerful Coach-Coachee Relationship

- Establish the ground rules for the relationship
- Has the coachee agreed that the coaching engagement will be treated as an opportunity or is the coachee reluctant?
- Is the coachee committed to the process?
- Has the coach ensured that the coachee understands the benefits to their business dealings?
- Establish how confidentiality will be defined in the relationship
- Have you agreed on who the client of this assignment is?
- Establish how success, or lack thereof, will be communicated back to the organization
- Establish and agree on the steps in the process
- Agree on who will be part of the data gathering process
- Agree on how information will be gathered
- Has the coach taken the information that is gathered and focused on two to three main themes that they believe are critical to bring upon the important changes?
- Have you agreed on how frequently you will communicate with each other?
- As a coach, are you ensuring that you are adapting to the needs of the coachee rather than applying your standards/expectations to them?
- What will success look like?
- Have the coach and coachee talked about when the coaching relationship is over or needs to be reevaluated?
- Have you gotten agreement on the method and frequency of follow-up?
- Are you managing or maintaining control of the relationship?