

The best coaching is simple

Part
three



By Lizzi Larbalestier



When it comes to working with clients, the magic happens when we simplify

Coaching, like surfing, relies on some simple (not easy) skills – hone these well and everything else flows.

In surfing the difference that makes the difference is *wave selection and positioning*. Simple. Of course there are a lot of component skills at play but when we distill what separates a great experience in the water from a mediocre one, *being present and being selective* are top of the skills list.

Let's clarify for a moment – 'simple' and 'easy' are not the same thing. 'Easy' requires minimal effort, whereas 'simple' is about removing everything except what matters... and THIS is far from easy – requiring a degree of professional discernment!

Depending upon our experience and mastery, our skills can be perceived as something we *have* or a clear part of who we *are* – embodied to such an extent that they become second nature, forming part of our very being.

As coaches we might naturally and intuitively have a tendency to adopt a coaching approach in many informal social situations, but when it comes to working with clients, no matter how expansive our toolkits are, the magic happens when we simplify.

Letting go of structure

When first embarking on a coaching career it can be tempting to rely on structures, collecting certificates and gathering more and more techniques to use – but like learning to surf, the theory of coaching is very different to the practice and it is in the practice that we develop grace.

As NLP professionals we love to use models. An A-to-B, formula-led approach such as the GROW coaching model might lend itself to incorporating any number of NLP techniques, such as and not limited to:



A key skill for all coaches is to ensure our interventions are *trajectory led* and progressive without being confined to a step-by-step approach. Too much rigidity can inhibit rapport and as a result limit progress. The over-use of techniques without well-refined skills of inquiry can impede discovery.

As we become more skilled, diving deeper with our coaching conversations, we develop our ability to work more heuristically and we truly connect with the 'less is more' value of simplicity. ▶



ALL change-making approaches fundamentally rely upon listening and questioning

► **Evolve:** identify or create opportunities to consciously approach your coaching with greater fluidity – challenge yourself to strip back your practice, becoming more selective to ensure every single intervention you choose adds value.

Creating space

Having encountered similar situations to that of our clients is not always an asset; in the fog created by our own sense of 'been there, done that' we can forget the subjectivity of experience. With the exception of executive coaching where our role can segue between coaching and mentoring, more often than not, experience can get in the way – after all we are not the experts of our clients' lives.

Remember: as coaches we are aiming to set aside our own sets of bias and minimise any contamination of the client's experience.

Suspending any temptation to advise is a skill in itself, especially when coaching familiar territory or working with clients we know well.

Reflect: consider your practice for a moment...

- How easy do you find it to park your own opinions?
- What triggers you to slip into advising?
- What does this do for them and what does it do for you?
- What is the ripple effect of you offering advice?

If we think we have all the answers our coaching will lack depth. There are many root causes for falling into this trap, such as the need to rescue, or a desire to appear as some form of guru; generally it is lack of patience or simply poor self-regulation. Whatever the cause, diving in to impart our pearls of wisdom serves neither ourselves nor our clients.

Remember: as coaches we are valued for our ability to hold space, to facilitate awareness and to encourage commitment to action. That's it – our very purpose within the coaching relationship.

Developing simplicity

If we refine the very essence of coaching – whether applied to maintaining rapport or progressing the client's level of inquiry – ALL change-making approaches fundamentally rely upon *listening* and *questioning* – in that order – and the very best coaches excel at these. All other flamboyance is irrelevant if we cannot nail these skills.

Ability to listen/observe

We talked about attention and focus in the last article of this series so let's build on this. It is all very well saying great coaches are attentive, but have you ever really thought about what you can do to sharpen this skill?

Firstly, consider, why is it important to develop this skill?

1 – Value Think about what it means to be listened to. When were you last truly listened to? What was your experience of being on the receiving end of somebody's full attention? I would imagine you had a sense that the conversation really mattered, that they were invested in your story. If our coaching clients are going to act on their insights, it is essential they place value on them. Listening and observing fully is a way of saying 'I value your words and actions'. In effect our attention can directly influence their motivation to take action.

2 – Information As NLP professionals we are no doubt aware of how much information resides within the subtleties of communication. As coaches it is our responsibility to ask powerful questions and these can only come from fully attending to all verbal and non-verbal communication our clients offer. If we are half present we are missing the clues to inform our process.

Three ways to develop our listening and observation skills – outside the coaching studio – are:

1 – Time in nature. This offers a way of taking our attention outside ourselves. A great exercise is to sit and wave watch

in silence – take in the sights, sounds and smells around you, noticing how long it takes for your internal chatter to start or your attention to drift. You might be surprised that it is probably seconds not minutes. Each time you become distracted by your thoughts simply accept and regroup. Regularly practising being externally present and quiet in this way will help manage your internal chatter, allowing you to become a more mindful and less distracted coach.

2 – Connect fully. Creating small talk with individuals you may otherwise partially attend to is another brilliant approach to developing observation and listening. Maybe with a shopkeeper or delivery driver, practise being really present for them, making them the centre of your attention for the short interaction you have. It is likely you will see evidence that your interaction has resonated – perhaps they might stand a little taller, for instance. Make it your aim to only offer high-level interactions – ones where people feel you are truly present for them.

3 – Look to listen. Conscious attention happens sequentially, so when we appear to be multitasking, we are in fact shifting our attention quickly back and forth between tasks... and this means we miss things. Part of our inability to pay full attention is lack of practice. We fall into habits of scrolling through social media, for instance, whilst holding half conversations and watching TV. This habitual semi-attentive state can seep into our professional lives. Practise using your eyes to dictate your attention: whatever you are predominantly looking at is what has your full attention.

Ability to ask simple versus clever questions

What is the most powerful coaching question you have ever been asked?

The likelihood is you cannot remember... and if you can, it isn't listed in one of the many 'Top ten coaching questions' lists.

This is because great questions are instinctive, coming from a place of absolute coherence and deep rapport. When we are fully focused on our client we create space for intuitive questions to emerge... and herein lies simplicity.

How can we improve our questioning?

Firstly we need to acknowledge that clever questions aren't clever... parking our awareness of the many types of questions we will likely be familiar with through the theoretical models we have studied. Of course we know our questions can be used to

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associate, dissociate, reframe, etc., but the minute we focus on asking 'clever' questions we lose our ability to access simplicity.

The route to great questions is being fully present with our clients so 'listening, observing and questioning' become one and the same thing – *the skills of inquiry* – much as wave selection and positioning are interdependent and not separate.

Reflect on the quality of your questions:

- What proportion of your questions in the last week have been powerful versus mediocre?
- What leads to mediocre questions?
- What can you do to create the perfect conditions for powerful questions?

If we really refine our coaching the likelihood is our question frequency diminishes. Silence becomes as valuable as our powerful questions, promoting a depth of reflection within our client where the lightness of touch from us in terms of our coaching intervention creates a wave of insight on their part.

Now reflect on your comfort with ambiguity:

- How comfortable are you with divergent questions?
- How comfortable are you with convergent questions?
- How do you ascertain whether to make your question divergent or convergent?

When we become truly comfortable with the gap between knowing and the unknown we can create a space that promotes freedom to explore at the pace most valuable for our client and as a result their insight flows more freely.

Now observe your general demeanour and state of being:

- How well do you breathe when you coach?
- How much of your lifestyle involves learning?

When we approach our clients from a place of balanced breathing our ability to access our intuition improves. When our lifestyle promotes curiosity an inquisitive mind becomes as much part of who we are as it is what we do. Our enthusiasm for discovery becomes a key motivation tool through *simply* knowing we are no more and no less than the facilitators of wisdom... and that is a pretty awesome wave to ride. ■



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