

One-stop coaching:

seven influencing strategies for personal change



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Can we model influencing strategies in order to achieve one-stop coaching?

Imagine what clients would say if they had to work with their coach for just a few sessions and then were able to achieve all their aspirations effortlessly. We can only dream of there being such a person as a 'one-stop' or 'one-visit' coach – or can we? Some years ago, people believed that there could never be such a person as a one-stop therapist, but they were proved wrong. I wonder how wrong they would be about a one-stop coach.

Back in the early days of the development of Neuro Linguistic Programming, Bandler and Grinder¹ challenged the old convention which had assumed that therapy would always be a lengthy business – lasting many years, with a skilled practitioner. Their research proved this a myth. Bandler and Grinder quickly identified and modelled three key players in the world of therapy who often achieved a one-stop standard of performance: Dr Milton Erickson, the father of modern hypnosis; Virginia Satir, guru of family therapy; and Fritz Perls, originator of Gestalt therapy. Through careful analysis of their teachings, Bandler and Grinder were able to identify key

influencing strategies and language patterns that would enable their clients to change. These strategies of influence brought about significant change quickly, with no requirement for a lifetime of therapy. Just imagine if we could achieve the same standard with coaching by applying tried-and-tested influencing strategies and incorporating these into the coaching dialogue.

Coaches and therapists occupy similar roles and in many ways have a shared mission – to help their clients develop sufficient personal leverage to take responsibility to shape their own future. With this in mind, we explore how we as coaches influence the client to make their transitions.

Can we enable our clients to accrue the benefits of using specific influencing strategies with them? From our experience and on investigation, we can easily see how this can be of enormous benefit to the coach who will have the challenge of motivating people to adapt to learn, experiment and implement new ways of working. It is a good idea to establish rapport between coach and client,

as stated in an earlier module (see Issue 13, *Rapport building – matching the client style*). In this one, we explore the issue and relate it to seven well-known strategies of influence.

Process of influence

Before the coaching industry evolved in recent years, there were special individuals who fulfilled this task. Often they were unaware of the skills they possessed. They may not have had the label of coach. In business, they were the wise seasoned campaigner, on the sports field the enthusiastic supporter and observer of the art, in the classroom they often provided advice beyond their specialism. What united those people was a keenness to communicate through rapport. Through their special skill, they could influence others to perform above their perceived potential. In essence, they applied influencing strategies. They may not have been trained specifically to do so – they just tapped into their repertoire of learning and knowledge, and worked on persuading others to reframe how they saw things and to commit to new actions.

Partnership or coalition

Sometimes a coach has to ask the client to work closely with their peers to assess the right decisions. Seeking information and winning the support of others, both within and outside the immediate situation, can create a wider perspective for the client, enabling them to make a more reasoned decision. This requires the coach to help the client to align with a variety of other interests to provide a common front on a problem. Coaches need to be aware that overuse of this approach can be perceived as giving responsibility for personal change to the thoughts and impressions of a committee of peers.

Higher authority

The use of this strategy is very powerful. It is the approach similar to the assertiveness approach: 'What would be the response of staff senior to you if ...?'. This appears threatening, but it is simply asking the client to examine their behaviour and assess it from the perspective of those senior to them. This can be a huge wake-up call, and often works when everything else produces little change in behaviour. In the mind of the client, others senior to them are judging their performance and passing sentence. Higher authority is best used in critical situations where the client does not understand the gravity of their behaviour or actions and the danger they could impose on their future security.

One has to consider the aggressive alternatives of using the strategy of 'How would X judge your performance if you don't do Y?' Overuse of this strategy could be perceived as manipulative, divisive and task focused. This is certainly a strategy of last resort or to use

when trying to alert the client to the reality of the corporate world and performance issues.

Sanctions

We have included this strategy, even though it is of limited use because the coach has no formal control over the client – therefore the use of sanctions is perceived as being redundant. However, a coach can use them to help the client explore what may happen if they do not pursue a particular course of action, and it is similar to applying the concept of higher authority. In its pure form, this is a last-ditch attempt by the coach who has tried everything, yet the client makes little progress. Few of us would seriously adopt this approach, which is reminiscent of 'provocative therapy',³ but if it works when other approaches do not, it is an option.

It is important to note that excess or overuse of one strategy can significantly hinder coaching effectiveness. In this instance clients quickly identify with the coach's preferred style and can predict with some certainty the route that

they will take. Although this may provide some comfort, the coaching style will not stretch the client's way of looking at the world.

Applications

For coaches it may be the norm for these influencing strategies to be used either singly or in combination. You will note that you use different influencing strategies with different people or statuses within the hierarchy. We find that effective influencers have a set of primary and secondary (back-up) influencing strategies. It is critical to consider that overreliance on one of two approaches is as ineffectual as using every strategy equally without some preference.

Clearly, in the coach-client relationship there are key areas for improvement which centre upon the application of influencing strategies, and it may be possible to identify role models for coaching effective performance, as Bandler and Grinder have identified in the past.

References

- 1 Richard Bandler and Michael Grinder, *The Structure of Magic, Volumes 1 & 2 – A Book about Language and Therapy*, Science & Behaviour, 1975, 1976.
- 2 Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now*, New World Library, 2004.
- 3 Frank Farreley and Jeff Brandsma, *Provocative Therapy*, Meta Publications, 1974.

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Where is the client now and how can they move forward?

This learning is critical to any coaching relationship. These coaches do not use a magical formula or claim to have a process that is suitable for all. However, they do have the behavioural flexibility to adapt. They work from where the client is currently, not from a theoretical perspective of where they would like the client to reside. Effective coaching grounds the client in the reality of their situation now, before moving forward.

Change starts in the now

Great coaches start with the end in mind. They know the direction for change, but they want to ensure that they start from where the client is today. This coaching approach is seen in the work of Eckhart Tolle.² He focuses upon helping seekers or clients to take stock of the now, rather than to procrastinate about the future or dwell in the past. Personal change starts here, not by being drawn to looking back and focusing on failures or by losing your thoughts

on potentialities, endlessly looking forward to what could be. Change starts today. That's what being in the now means. No excuses, no stories, no explanations or rationalisations. If the client wants to change, what will they commit to now, today; not tomorrow or next week?

The key building blocks for the coach are the tools and strategies of communication. These strategies can be used in a variety of contexts.

Rapport x strategies = change

Without mutual trust, the coaching relationship is going nowhere. There has to be a joint understanding that each is part of the change process. It is important that the client has sufficient trust and faith in their trusted adviser for them to be confident about trying new approaches where they have little experience.

In a coaching relationship of close rapport, the client is able to move

forward, but this is almost impossible if the coach does not have the skills and influencing strategies to bring to bear on the client's issues and to develop new ways of working.

Influencing strategies

After establishing rapport, the coach has to decide which strategies will have most impact with their client. We find that few coaches demonstrate equal dexterity with each strategy. Coaches often nurture their favourite style and neglect to explore other ways of influencing. Sometimes we get so tied up in the coaching process that we neglect to examine our own behaviour. As in life, most people

focus on what works for them. Now, this is fine in our early career when we discover various influence strategies that work for us, but when they become habitual and unquestioned, our effectiveness may be questioned. Like our clients, we coaches have to develop a self-critical attitude in order to look at the repertoire of skills we use, and reappraise whether they could be made more effective by using a different strategy.

Every coach must have experience of the *stuck state* with a client – when, whatever they say or do, the client seems motionless in terms of development. We have found that coaches use a variety of strategies to influence others, which means looking at combinations of different approaches. The seven influencing strategies are portrayed in two distinct areas. We have highlighted that a large proportion of coaches tend to rely on two distinct styles: reason and logic, and sociability or friendliness.

The two core influencing strategies noted below are most widely used.

Reason

The use of logic and information is often used to justify a request. It is probably the most common form of influence, and certainly one that many coaches will leap towards. However, the rational process requires a level of debate.

Sometimes, the disadvantage of using this strategy excessively is that logic requires more and more time to debate the full implications of issues to the nth degree. There is also a danger that coaches who use this style almost exclusively will engage their client in more and more detail to explain their decisions or choices. Overuse of this approach, without using other influencing strategies as secondary back-up, can make the influence process long and tedious for the client.

Sociability and friendliness

This approach may smack of the 'Hail fellow, well met' strategy, relying on social skills and confidence. Using friendliness to help others change has its place, as does humour, but one has to draw the line. The danger lies in overstepping the mark, bringing oneself into favour with the other person by being friendly to them or being overtly positive about them. This is a common strategy, as common as reason and logic, but it is fraught with danger if used excessively. If one overrelies upon one's interpersonal competence, the approach can be perceived as manipulative, condescending or approval seeking, depending upon how we use it. An additional danger is that if we use this approach with those who are senior in status, they may start to doubt our motives.

We have found that more effective coaches do not just rely on these

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strategies, but also focus on back-ups including assertiveness, negotiation and bargaining, partnership or coalition – and on the use of higher authority and sanctions as an unusual but successful coaching strategy.

We must state that exceptional coaches will be able to flex between each of these strategies with their client, and even integrate the approaches into their coaching dialogue. We have found that working with managers who were recognised as exceptional in motivating and coaching others – even when they did not have a formal role as coach – demonstrated these behaviours and the ability to move between strategies with ease.

Five additional back-up influencing strategies

Assertiveness

This is all about the coach projecting an assertive manner to make the client seriously consider the implications of pursuing or not pursuing an action. This means that coaching is not just about being empathetic, but about realising there are times when the coach has to be a little tougher. The requirement to be forceful in terms of getting others to consider the seriousness of their actions or inactions is important, and an area some shy away from. Some are uncomfortable with having to use a tougher style to bring about change. Coaching is not just about

debating issues, it's also about helping the client make tough decisions. This is a powerful strategy, but clearly if the coach gets into overusing it, it can create the impression that they are overbearing. Overuse of the assertive influencing strategy can also create a tendency towards assessing situations as win-lose, with little opportunity to explore where all can share in the gains.

Negotiation or bargaining

As coaches we all negotiate at some stage, but this approach is used to help clients consider what they have to give in order to get. This may be displayed as options for the client of what they have to forego now so they can reap later. The coaching relationship may be categorised as working together for the best overall result, offering a choice of and an exchange of risks, the benefit of which is inherent in the ability to compromise. The coach has to be careful not to overuse this strategy as it can result in the formation of a bureaucratic relationship, categorised by sets of obligations and terms that are often counter to the give-and-take process of the relationship. Another danger is that often when we agree a bargain with clients, we give up something now for a promise in the future. It is worth bearing in mind that the value of the promises in the future may not be realised; the client may go back on their word and, subsequently, their development.