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[Headline] Walk the talk

[Standfirst] Coaching can become even more effective when you step outside the constraints of a formal office and seek to apply creative techniques

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Certain approaches and models have tended to dominate the practice and teaching of executive coaching. These approaches and models, which have largely arisen in response to the curricula of vocational awarding bodies and individual authors, can assume that the practice of coaching, as a way of helping executives perform better, is a prominently linear set of events dictated by the use of words in the form of questions and responses.

While the ability to ask questions remains a core skill, along with listening and the use of silence, there are many other ways for coaches to elicit responses from their coachees. Qualified coaches have a variety of means at their disposal to explore the challenges and issues faced by their coachees. This is important to remember, since the purpose of executive coaching is to induce some meaningful action on the part of the coachee, not just to contain the perceived coaching process in an action-free bubble.

In this short article, I will explore some alternative ways in which coaches can engage with their coachees – ways that are different than many of those explored in conventional books and texts. These creative approaches are partly based on my own leadership development research between 2008 and 2013, and the subsequent close examination of the ways in which adults learn. (See the ideas that were outlined by Steve Kempster, Arthur Turner and Gareth Edwards in *A Field Guide to Leadership Development*, published in 2018). In addition, I take a tentative glimpse at other leadership development techniques help to shine a light on more creative and emergent interventions.

A collection of ideas and reflections

Frameworks are helpful in understanding the essential processes within a contracted coaching relationship. Good examples include those espoused by David Clutterbuck's lifelong research into coaching and mentoring effectiveness (see *The Mentoring Life Cycle – Best Practice*, by David Clutterbuck and Gill Lane, published in 2004). The ethical guidelines published in 2018 by the European Council for Coaching and Mentoring and the Association for Coaching are also helpful in this respect. Yet these guidelines reveal little about what exactly happens within a coaching relationship. The episodes, insights, moments and revelations that colour many executive-coaching interactions often emerge from an apparent muddle of ideas and reflections. The skill of the coach, therefore, lies in precipitating an understanding on the part of the coachee – creating a 'space' for deep

thought and reflection on behaviour. Creative techniques and approaches allow the coach to change tactics and methods to both challenge and support the coachee's journey of discovery.

Some of the most consistently used methods of engagement that feature under this 'creative umbrella' include the:

- **Use of Walking.** Walking reduces the face-to-face nature of the coaching. For some people, it has the effect of removing the coaching from being anything that looks like managerial processes or more formal organisational interactions. Walking together through environments (both urban and rural) can create stimuli for conversations that it is impossible to find in static coaching, office-bound, sessions.
- **Utilisation of Symbols.** These are things that point to a deeper reality. They are useful in coaching as they can help the coachee access meanings and ideas on different, more complex levels than the superficial. For example, the philosopher Paul Tillich identified that music and poetry can act as symbols by opening up new levels of reality in people and help to conjure up images in the mind. Red traffic lights, as an example, are symbols that convince motorists of the need to stop, yet deeper meanings lie behind the colours.
- **Provision of Mediating Objects.** These are objects that are intended to act as a stimulus for thought. Examples include finger puppets, maps, pictures and photos. These types of objects and images appear to create more open dialogue and to help the coachee-coach dynamic by exploring the views (or perceived views) of others who are not in the room or on the walk. The use of mediating objects creates, in my experience, very different conversations from those that are not mediated by objects. Similar to the way in which souvenirs and mementos elicit narratives and stories, objects represent different views and ideas – particularly if those objects come from different cultures. Here I am thinking particularly of historical and ethnically diverse characters that can be represented by finger puppets.
- **Exploring of Metaphors.** This technique notes that the English language is rich in metaphorical imagery and language and may involve the use of poetry, for example. Often metaphorical imagery and language can provide insight and clarity.
- **Adoption of Narrative.** The work of Dr David Drake, founder and director of the Center for Narrative Coaching in the US, has allowed me to see that coaching is a multisensory activity. Narrative coaching principles are represented in ideas such as: what you need you already have; being fully present; learning to embrace silence; focusing on experiences through narrative; and working with stories to carry the coach across insight thresholds.
- **Appreciation of Music.** There are many ways in which a variety of music (including duets, jazz improvisations and orchestral pieces) can open up avenues for conversations across a wide range of human emotions and situations.

The approaches that I have listed above are not meant to be replacements for standard, frequently taught models and approaches, but rather adjuncts to the process of coaching and coaching-led development and the search for deeper understanding. While it may seem daunting to introduce new methods and approaches, spontaneous inclusion of a pertinent technique can make a huge difference to the outcome of the coaching process.

[Box] Get creative

Here are a few guidelines for those who want to use greater creativity in their executive coaching interactions:

1. Introduce the concept of creative coaching to the contracting process so that the coachee is not over-surprised by your suggestions.
2. Listen carefully to what the coachee says when you are building rapport at the start of your relationship. Pay attention to clues that reveal their ideas interests. This will enable you to think about suitable artefacts, pictures and symbolic ideas that you can use in conjunction with more straightforward questions when you are coaching them.
3. Keep a bag or a box of artefacts with you when you are coaching. This could include items such as keepsakes, pictures, postcards, maps and other small objects.
4. Work out, in advance, where you are going to coach. Within the boundaries of possibility and mobility, finds ways of to introduce the idea of walking and talking.

[Author box]

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