

Eight Essential Coaching Skills

In this section we describe eight essential coaching skills. These were selected because they are fundamental to effective coaching whether that is one-on-one or team coaching. Team Coaching International's *Understand & Access the Tools* course you will have an opportunity to take the Team Leader View™ and use that tool in a personal coaching session with one of our faculty.

This one-on-one session has three learning objectives:

1. Provide a demonstration of coaching skills by the TCI trainer
2. Provide the experience of taking an assessment & learning about the tool
3. Learn how to debrief assessment results and create action steps and accountability

Note: In the description of skills in this document the reference to “the client” applies to either an individual coaching client or the team in a team coaching relationship.

1. Contracting / The Coaching Alliance

This skill is used to create explicit agreements between coach and client. It is especially important at the beginning of the coaching relationship as a means to:

- > Establish guidelines
- > Set expectations for the process — what's expected from the client; what's expected from the coach
- > Create safety for engaged, confidential conversation

You and the client mutually design an effective relationship that supports the coaching over time. In addition to this initial “big picture,” contracting can also be applied to more specific situations. For example, the coach might ask the client, “What do you especially want to accomplish in the hour we have together?” Or, “I have an exercise I think would be very helpful in this discussion. Would you be willing to try it?”

2. Coaching Questions / Powerful Questions

Coaching questions are short and open-ended. The best coaching questions pursue new territory — they are provocative. For that reason they are often called “powerful questions.” They often begin with “What ...” For example, “What do you want?” “Historically, what sabotages your plans?” Notice that “How” questions tend to head in the direction of action. “How will you develop that skill?” “How will you track progress?” Closed-ended questions tend to start with “Do...” “Is...”

“Will...” They can be answered with “yes” or “no” and tend to bring the process to a conclusion. An exception would be when there is confusion or the possibility for misunderstanding. In that case a closed-ended clarifying question is appropriate.

As coach, if the energy in the questions and responses is ho-hum, it may be that the client has covered that ground before. They have well-rehearsed ways of talking about the topic. You could even be transparent with the client as in, “It sounds like you’ve covered that ground before. What’s the ground you haven’t covered or were reluctant to cover?”

3. Active Listening / Summarize

Active listening is the simple act of playing back what you hear, to check to make sure you are hearing what was intended. A related skill is summarizing — taking a step back to recap “this is where I think we are right now.” This helps you and the client re-align on the important topic and gives you an opportunity to check your understanding. Clients appreciate the summary because it shows you’re really listening and you care about staying on track. It’s okay if your summary is not 100% on target; the client will help correct the course.

Active listening and summarizing are especially useful skills with teams when there is the potential for multiple conversations happening simultaneously, multiple points of view and frequently team members more intent on stating a position than listening to others. The pause to summarize can bring order to the conversation.

4. Tuning In: 3rd Dimension

Tracking the content of the client’s conversation is important, obviously. But listening at that level is only part of where you can tune your awareness. In addition to everything that’s being said, you might get curious about what’s not being said. You might notice a shift in energy — the client dropped quickly from great enthusiasm to something like disappointment. Your intuition might be telling you, “There’s an elephant in the room and we keep dancing around it. I wonder what that is.” Sometimes the tone of what’s being said doesn’t match the words. There are three dimensions to listening:

1. aware of self
2. aware of other, and
3. the 3rd dimension is everything else.

5. Mining for Learning / Perspectives

Every client action and experience presents an opportunity for learning. In coaching there's an obvious commitment to moving forward, being in action. Just as important is the emphasis on drawing out the learning from the action or experience. The learning along the way helps shape the new action to be taken.

One example of how learning re-shapes action is to help clients see how they view an issue and how that perspective impacts the way the client addresses the issue. The perspective they are in is a lens that controls what they see and how they will react. If the client's perspective is, "This reorganization is doomed" — they have created a self-fulfilling prophecy. The client will create out of their expectations. As coach you can spot that rigid way of looking and help creatively look at other perspectives the client could take on. The circumstances may not change but when the perspective is open to other ways of seeing the issue, there are more options for the client's action.

6. Mirror

One of the simplest and most effective ways coaches help clients is by reflecting back the behavior and patterns we observe. To mirror is to shine a light on what the coach observes. The mirroring should be as neutral as possible. It is curious, not analytical. The reflection has no judgment; it's just an observation. It is a useful and valuable skill because clients are often not conscious of their own patterns and habits of behavior.

The observation makes the invisible, visible and in that awareness clients see options for making other, conscious choices. For example, "I notice that when the subject is about _____ you always laugh it off. What's that about?" Or "I notice a pattern. Maybe you've noticed it too. There are a couple of action steps that you say you will complete, but when we check in nothing has changed." When you are working with clients in person there is even a wider range of potential behavior's to mirror. "I notice that you're tapping your foot and checking your watch."

7. Action Planning / Goal Setting

Coaching is fundamentally a change process. It relies on the synergy of action and learning to move the client along a path that leads to the fulfillment of client goals. Goals can be one of two types. One is a goal with a specific outcome completed in a certain period of time. Sales targets are obvious examples of this type of goal. "One thousand units sold by March 31."

A second type of goal is a new practice that becomes a habit, or a practice that replaces an old habit. For example, "Goal: practice active listening in five meetings or conference calls each week." Or, "Devote a minimum of 1 hour every day to competitive research and analysis."

8. Accountability / Structures

Without accountability goals can drift and turn into nothing more than good ideas and good intentions, and nothing changes. Accountability closes the loop and gives muscle to follow-through. It is based on three questions:

1. What will you do?
2. When will you do it?
3. How will you report your experience?

The coach holds clients accountable to their vision or commitment and asks them to account for the results of their intended action plans.

A structure is any device that helps clients keep their attention on a goal or practice. Structures support behavior change. There are endless possibilities. Simple examples include, a practice of reviewing team agreements before each team meeting; using a log to track goals and stepping stones; self-reporting on feedback given and received.