

CHAPTER 3

The Directive – Non-Directive Continuum

Summary

Resisting the urge to offer solutions
The differences between coaching and mentoring
Advice from Association for Coaching members
Clean Coaching
The client's demands
Guidelines for suggestions
The coaching continuum
The cross cultural approach

A question frequently asked by managers on coaching skills courses is, "When should I coach and when should I be directive?" A short coaching course may create a conflict which can reduce a manager to silence when faced with a perceived obligation to ask instead of tell.

Coaches in training to deliver formal sessions sometimes experience a similar conflict, experiencing an overwhelming urge to 'help' by providing a solution instead of asking the type of questions which will facilitate the coachee's own ideas.

A debate on this topic on the email forum of the Association for Coaching demonstrated that there are many different opinions and approaches to this issue, not least what exactly is meant by 'directive coaching' and whether the two words together constitute an oxymoron.

I have noticed, while acting as an assessor for both newly trained and experienced coaches that people who describe themselves as coaches are sometimes actually delivering what might be defined as 'mentoring' in the last chapter - sharing their experience and advice with their clients. This is not to say that it is any less valuable than coaching, but it does not comply with the principles defined by the leading coaching bodies.

Some of my most productive moments as a coach have occurred when simply reflecting back a coachee's words, perhaps asking an open question, and then getting out of the way while my coachee explores the fascinating realm of the self. The insights (and consequent change) which can evolve during this process are more powerful than any advice I could offer.

This is eloquently expressed by AC member David Finney, who prompted the AC Forum debate:

"I got into coaching for many reasons, two of which were Tim Gallwey and Sir John Whitmore. For me they were the pioneers of something very new and very powerful. To 'learn without being taught' called out to me. It radiated energy and empowerment." - David Finney (www.theenergyofconversation.co.uk)

The work of Gallwey and Whitmore in developing Performance Coaching is described in Chapter 1 "What is Coaching?" People have different reasons for coming to coaching, and there are many who still do not understand what it is. In the corporate sector a coachee may be there simply because all managers at that level have been ordered to work with a coach, whether they want to or not. Therefore, a manager may be less willing to explore the 'inner self' or to accept any tips the coach can offer. In the quote below, AC member Jenny Gould uses the term 'clean' in the sense of being non-directive:

'I think it depends so much on what the client wants from the coaching. If it's life coaching then I generally use a more 'clean' style, but I tend to include more directive coaching with corporate clients, because in my experience the clients feel it adds a great deal of value to the work I do with them. It's horses for courses.'
– Jenny Gould (jenm.gould@virgin.net).

Some managers might choose to work with me because of my experience as a corporate MD and in particular my work with Sir Richard Branson; the possibility of picking up tips about Branson's management style may

attract a client more than coaching itself. However, I am a coach and I do not believe that solely offering solutions from my own experience matches my job description, however beneficial it may be to the manager, and it is not what I want to do, which relates to my point 2 below, about the coach's own values. AC member William Barron puts it like this:

'I tell my clients that I am sitting on a three legged milking stool, switching from one leg to another at any one moment in time:

One leg is called coaching, which is when I haven't a clue what the answer is and am dancing with the client in the moment hoping to be as clean as possible with my language.

The second leg is called mentoring, when I have some experience of the situation and am able to bring all of that to enrich and support the conversation.

The final leg is called co-consulting, which is where the client and I pool our resources to investigate and brainstorm the situation to come up with an action plan.'

- William Barron (william@creatinginsight.co.uk)

Three issues arise here:

- Satisfying the client – should he who pays the piper call the tune?
- Satisfying one's own wishes as a coach about how to spend one's time – I think that most coaches choose the profession because the satisfaction factor in asking rather than telling is high.
- Being as useful to the client as possible.

First of all, let us look at 'Satisfying the client'. It is crucial to be clear at the contracting stage about what the client requires and what you as the coach can deliver. The challenge is that it can be difficult for a new client to understand what coaching does without having experienced it.

I was once asked to coach a top level leader in a large organisation whose directive style was on the brink of causing resignations among the team of directors he led. During our first meeting he enthusiastically welcomed coaching by telling me: 'When I was a child I didn't do what my father told me but I obeyed my teacher. Now my team won't listen to me, so you can be the teacher – I'll tell you what I want them to do and they will listen to you.'

My instinct was to get straight into the coaching so that he could experience the benefits rather than hearing me try to explain them, but I knew it was essential for us both to be clear on expectations in advance. What I chose to say was:

"How about if I could help YOU become the person they listen to?"

This conveyed the possibility that what coaching, while not in line with his expectations, might offer something even more valuable. The challenge for this manager was that he believed he could give his staff the best solution in a fraction of the time it would take them to reach it during a meeting and, therefore, he was acting in their best interests as well as the organisation's by saving their time and effort. And this may have been true, because he possessed a brilliant intellect matched with a long and glitteringly successful track record. However, times have changed and people do not like to be managed in this way, and this is where the problem lay.

This contrasts with my experience of working with Sir Richard Branson, who probably developed his coaching style because, not only did he have no knowledge or experience of the record industry, but he was also dyslexic. Either way, the coaching style of management motivates staff while a directive style tends to have the opposite effect.

During my sessions with the directive manager, I spent roughly half the time asking non-directive questions, during which he came to understand the impact that his current style had on the business and his own position, and the other half teaching him skills that would enable him to manage in a coaching style. Once he had grasped the coaching concept intellectually, he was able to deliver the coaching style of management with ease, with the result that energy levels at meetings soared and people began to enjoy working with him.

Organisations today tend not only to require their managers to have a coach, where affordable, but that those managers also incorporate the skills into their day to day leadership styles. The most efficient way of achieving

this is by group training courses, but I find that during one to one coaching sessions I am often asked for advice on a situation where some coaching skills could help, and I impart them where useful.

This touches on the third element above: 'Being as useful to the client as possible'. The coach's advice may relate to coaching skills, banking processes, marketing or wherever one's area of excellence lies, or it may simply be that the coach's intuition offers a way forward which the client may have missed. It seems to be expected in corporate coaching that some advice will be offered - and when one has a useful tip to give, where is the benefit in withholding it? So I suggest three guidelines which apply both to formal coaching and to managers-as-coach:

- Offer suggestions only after the coachee has run dry.
- Ask permission before giving advice, for example: "Could I offer something from my experience/intuition here?" This marks a boundary where the coach is stepping out of coaching and into consulting. It also gives the client permission to reject the coach's suggestion without fear of causing offence. (This is expanded in Chapter 22, 'Permission Protocol')
- Aim for suggesting no more than 10% of the time.

It is assumed here that 'suggesting' is as far as 'directive' coaching will go, and I think that advice is usually offered in this way in all schools of coaching today. Coaches never tell their clients what to do.

For coaching managers the situation is different. Sometimes people need a straight instruction and, at other times, the manager's responsibilities towards the organisation require him or her to be directive or corrective. Once a manager has integrated coaching skills, they can be drawn on and mixed with other styles at will. The managers we train have to practise delivering pure coaching sessions to each other, even if their intention is only to integrate the skills into their own leadership styles rather than become internal coaches. This ensures that they will be able to manage in a coaching style smoothly and that when an instruction has to be given, it can be done without jarring the coaching relationship.

There is a misconception that coaching is a set of skills. However, I believe that it is the intention behind the words which matters. Coaching leaders treat people with respect, trust their teams to take responsibility, and earn trust through consistency and being good role models. Without these intentions, no amount of coaching skills will make a good leader.

It is even possible to fire people in a coaching style and you cannot get any more directive than that. A manager I was training once reported back to me:

"I had to fire someone. I coached him for ten minutes and he fired himself, having come to the conclusion that it was in his best interests to leave. And then he thanked me for it!"

Alan Sugar is famous for the firing techniques he displays on his television show "The Apprentice", where contestants are regularly reduced to tears. However, it is not so well known that Sir Richard Branson made a similar series in the USA called 'The Rebel Billionaire: Branson's Quest for the Best'. The show was considered a ratings failure, probably because Branson was nice to the participants. However, each week, like Sugar, he had to fire someone. However, in contrast to "The Apprentice", Branson's rejects tended to react with inspired enthusiasm, thanking Branson for the best experience of their lives. The difference was that where Sugar told people what was wrong with them, Branson summarised their strengths and expressed how much he regretted having to let them go. Sugar's approach often leaves participants looking dejected, demotivated and bereft of self esteem. The people fired by Branson, on the other hand, seemed to feel that they had gained from the experience and felt positive about the future. It is not hard to imagine the differences in the long term effects of each approach upon the participants.

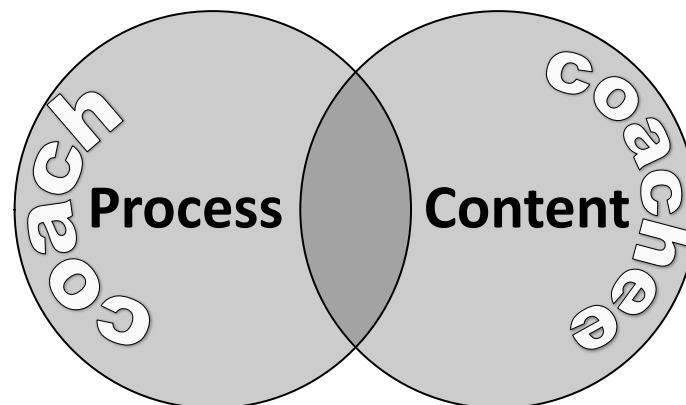
Translating this back to the company's reputation and ability to attract the best talent, it is not hard to imagine the negative comments that Sugar's contestants might make about working for his organisation, and the positive recommendations that Branson's might take away.

Both asking and telling can be done in a coaching style as long as they are grounded in emotional intelligence rather than, say, bullying, or a desire to appear clever. There is also the question of what we mean by "Directive Coaching", raised by AC coach Angela Dunbar:

'Any question is going to be at least partially directive, isn't it? We shine a light on a particular aspect of a coachee's experience and, by doing so, we are directing their attention on some aspect that we have decided to focus on.'

- Angela Dunbar (www.cleancoaching.com)

Coaching is indeed directive in terms of the process, and that is where coaches have the right to challenge and lead. As illustrated below, the coach is responsible for the process and the coachee for the content. However, if coaches stray over the line into content, without recognising the boundary by asking permission first, then they are no longer coaching but colluding with or leading their clients:



The least directive form of coaching is arguably David Grove's Emergent Knowledge, described in Chapter 29 of this book. Initially Grove evolved a set of questions which would least influence the coachee's thoughts, which he called Clean Language; This evolved into Emergent Knowledge and converted the whole coaching process into spatial exercises which require no verbal content at all from the client, and only the sparsest of questions from the coach. Angela Dunbar, quoted above, worked with myself and David on these techniques and now trains practitioners in the skills through www.cleancoaching.com.

AC member Edna Murdoch describes the subtle influences which occur in and empower the coaching relationship, and the pitfalls that lie therein:

"There is a living, energetic, embodied connection between us which quietly - or not so quietly - influences every intervention, pause, powerful question, comment and shrug of the shoulders! That connection also influences the coachee's perception of us and their capacity for learning in coaching sessions. If we are not mindful of the power of relationship, we may be blind to its influence which might then 'muddy' the clean spaces that we seek to create and affect the coaching much more than we had originally intended."

- Edna Murdoch (www.coachingsupervisionacademy.com)

AC member Stephen Burt describes the difference as a continuum rather than opposing processes:

"Directive and non-directive are two ends of a spectrum, not two discreet options. We can tell, advise, suggest, offer, speculate, feedback or ask."

- Stephen Burt (stephen@thefaradaypartnership.co.uk).

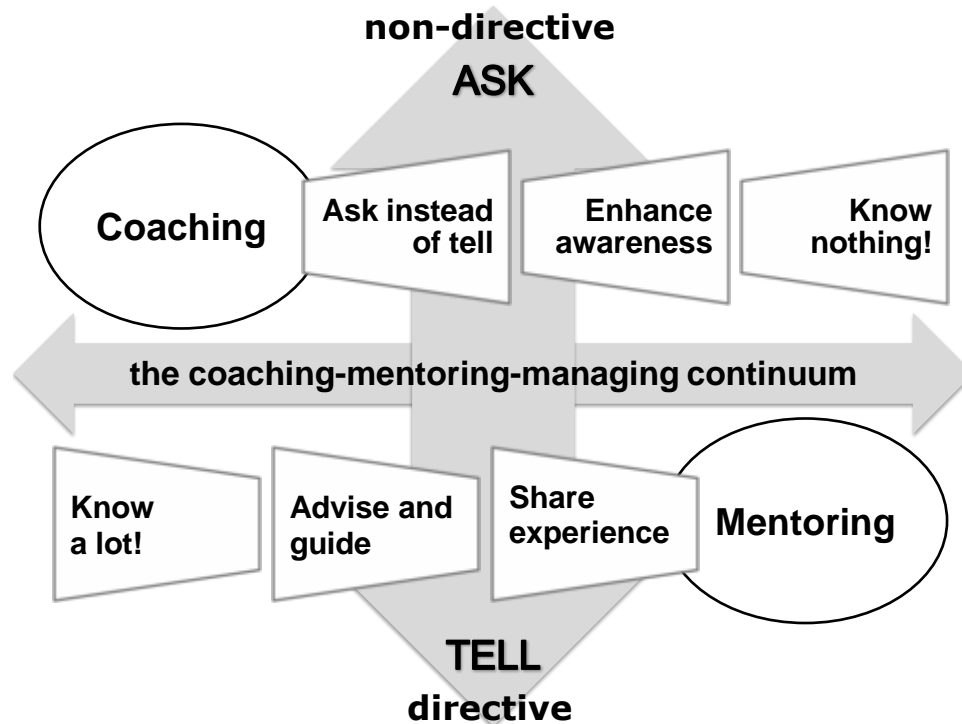
This is not a question which arises only in the UK. Management styles vary across the world. For example, Western cultures are said to exhibit more open aggression at work than Asian ones. My experience of delivering coaching skills training to managers from all over the world (including America, Malaysia, China, India, Australia, Europe, and Eastern Europe) is that different cultures experience cultural challenges in introducing a coaching style, but that once the managers successfully assimilate the skills, they find the coaching style works better both for themselves and for their staff, providing a bridge not only across cultural differences, but differences of personality as well.

In his "Global Coaching Survey 2008/2009", AC member Frank Bresser finds:

"There is an overall balance of directive and non-directive coaching approaches in the world. The predominant coaching style is directive in 28 countries, non-directive in 24 countries. In 110 countries, this is undecided".
– Frank Bresser (www.frank-bresser-consulting.com).

The coaching-mentoring-management continuum

Ideally a manager will be able to move smoothly between being directive, guiding as a mentor and eliciting self directed learning by asking questions:



At times managers must tell people what to do or what not to do, it is part of their role. A coach, whether internal or external, will never be directive in the same way. When a coach talks of being directive, it is in the sense of imparting information ideas or advice rather than purely asking questions.

Coaching is a fledgling profession and I am struck by how often a trainee coach will come up with an observation which adds a new perspective to my own knowledge. The real learning takes place out in the field when putting the skills into practice. I believe that once the foundation principles have been absorbed, every new coach and coaching manager has the potential to contribute new wisdom of their own.

A coaching approach provides an excellent way of helping people to think clearly and move past immediate barriers. Sometimes, however, there are blocks more deeply embedded and it is useful for both coaches and coaching managers to be aware of some common ones and how to move past them. My next chapter is about the type of obstacles that we throw in our own path without even realising that it is happening.

About Carol Wilson FILM FAC FPSA:

International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is Managing Director of Culture at Work and a Fellow of the ILM, the Professional Speaking Association and the Association for Coaching, where she is also on the Global Advisory Panel. A cross-cultural expert, she designs and delivers programmes to create coaching cultures for corporate and public sector organisations all over the world and has won several awards for coaching and writing. She is the author of 'Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training' (Kogan Page London), has contributed to several other books and published over 50 articles including a monthly column in Training Journal.

www.coachingcultureatwork.com