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WHAT IS COACHING?

DEFINITIONS OF COACHING

If you were to ask the ordinary person in the street what comes to mind when they think of a coach, many people will reply with some notion of a sports coach. I myself have been having some golf lessons recently. As we worked on the driving range, the professional adjusted my grip by asking me to move my right thumb. When I sliced some shots to the right, he corrected the way I held my shoulders. And he encouraged me to lengthen my swing. As he suggested these changes, he briefly and helpfully explained why they would enable me to strike the ball better. He was also encouraging, always saying *Good shot* whenever I hit a half decent one.

I'd sum this up by saying that the golf professional understood perfect technique and was working with the intention of helping me get closer to an ideal way of gripping and swinging the golf club. He was telling me what to do. And I found this helpful. My golf did improve. And I was more aware of what I was trying to do, even if I couldn't always execute what I had in mind.

The approach of the golf professional is one method of coaching, and it can be very effective. One way of describing this kind of coaching is that it is directive. However, it's not what I mean by coaching. In the chapters which follow we shall largely be exploring a primarily non-directive approach to coaching.

Jenny Rogers proposes this definition of coaching, which she says is 'a simple one that conceals complexity':

The coach works with clients to achieve speedy, increased and sustainable effectiveness in their lives and careers through focused learning. The coach's sole aim is to work with the client to achieve all of the client's potential – as defined by the client. (Rogers, 2008)

Julie Starr offers this view:

Put simply, coaching is a conversation, or series of conversations, that one person has with another. The person who is the coach intends to produce a conversation that will benefit the other person (the coachee) in a way that relates to the coachee's learning and progress. (Starr, 2011)

There isn't an agreed definition of coaching. Here is my own definition that is the basis of my practice and which we'll refer to throughout the book:

Coaching is a relationship of rapport and trust in which the coach uses their ability to listen, to ask questions and to play back what the client has communicated in order to help the client to clarify what matters to them and to work out what to do to achieve their aspirations.

There are a number of points I'd like to highlight in this definition.

First and foremost, coaching is a relationship between two people. The definition offers a couple of pointers to the nature of an effective coaching relationship – one based on rapport and trust. The fact that the coach is operating non-directively will create a different relationship than if the coach were directive.

Second, the definition states that the role of the coach is to help the client to articulate their goals and how they will set about achieving them. Non-directive coaching is about facilitating, not instructing, advising or guiding. It is working with someone, not doing something to them.

In the following chapter we shall look in more detail at directive and non-directive approaches.

Third, the definition introduces three basic skills that will be explored a little later in the book – listening, questioning and playing back. However, while these skills are important, the more fundamental ability that the coach needs is to establish rapport and trust in the relationship. Coaching is an art not a science. The coach is continually drawing on their experience and their intuition to shape what they do next.

EXERCISE 2.1 WHAT IS YOUR DEFINITION OF COACHING?

You might be content to work with one of the definitions offered above. However, you may wish to browse through some books or search the internet for definitions used by other writers.

Here is another definition of coaching that is somewhat different from mine. Peter Hawkins and Nick Smith offer this definition as their 'working hypothesis':

Coaching is the focused application of skills that deliver performance improvement to the individual's work in their organization, through robust support and challenge. The coaching process should yield learning and personal development for the executive, and help them contribute more of their potential. This collaborative relationship will be short-term and practically focused, and will be marked by clear, strong feedback. (Hawkins and Smith, 2006)

In this definition Hawkins and Smith have in mind executive coaching, but their definition could be modified to include, for instance, coaching someone who isn't currently working.

You might like to summarise what you see as the different emphases in my definition and Hawkins and Smith's definition, and consider which feels most appropriate to you at this point in your development as a coach.

As an exercise, try to crystallise your thoughts by writing your own definition of coaching that you will use in your own practice.

It will be interesting to see if your definition evolves as you work through this book or in the light of your experience of practising coaching.