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**INTERNATIONAL
COACHING
NEWS**

COACHING TOOLS, TIPS & TECHNIQUES

DECEMBER 2018

ISSN 1218 - 1223

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02 772050 12 2018

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5 Steps to a Structured and Flexible Coaching Conversation

by Kirsten Dierolf (Germany)

“What I would really like from this coaching session is a plan on how to talk to my boss about a pay raise”, is what you hear from your coaching client. Now, there might be several things going through your head: “How do I help her plan this meeting?”, “What’s important to her about it?”, “What will be different if she has this plan?” How do you then decide what to invite your client to explore?

As a coach trainer, mentor coach and member of the ICF assessor team for professional certified coaches and master certified coaches I have had the opportunity to observe these kinds of coaching situations in many variations. Candidates, mentees and participants in my coach training programs have described two difficulties:

1 If you run with the first goal that a client mentions (in this case asking about measures of success for the plan to get a pay and creating the plan), the coaching is in danger of being very flat. The coaching might only be about what the client needs to do rather than encompassing more about who the client is, what is important to the client, thereby enabling the client to reflect deeper and make more significant progress.

2 If, as a coach, you ask client to explore more (in this case, maybe, by asking ‘so what difference would it make if you

had a plan?’ or ‘how is this important to you?’) you run the risk of getting lost in the exploration and never ending up actually discussing what the client came for (in this case, discussing the plan for the pay raise).

The ICF core competencies ‘Creating the coaching agreement’ and ‘Coaching presence’ ask the coach to partner with the client not only in what the client wants to talk about but also in how the coaching process is run.

Coaches face this conundrum: they would like to be able to serve the client by providing clear process and by helping the clients to focus, yet they don’t want to narrow the focus so much that it hinders exploration and deeper learning. In the middle of this quagmire, some get lost and the coach and the client turn in conversational circles of broadening and narrowing and broadening and narrowing the focus of the discussion without moving anywhere.

Here are five steps to give focus to the discussion and talk about what is truly important: the double diamond of coaching, an idea borrowed from design thinking.

The double diamond of coaching:

Using the metaphor of a double diamond can be useful to loosely structure a coaching conversation for the benefit of clarity and partnership between coach and client. The widening and narrowing of the diagram represent the widening and narrowing of the focus of the coaching conversation and the numbers as turning points represent possibilities for the coach and the client to partner around the change of direction.

1 Initial request, problem or issue

In the beginning of the coaching session, the focus of the discussion will often be quite narrow. The client brings a request, a problem or an issue that they would like help with the coaching session, e.g. “planning a conversation with my boss”. The coach can then ask for permission to explore the issue or the request a little further before agreeing on a coaching topic or goal. This can be done by questions like:

- ◇ Would you like to explore the situation a little bit further before we agree on a coaching goal -- or would you like to jump into this issue right away? (It might be entirely possible that the client only wants to make a plan)
- ◇ Can I ask you a few questions about what you are looking to achieve before we enter into the topic that you mentioned (e.g. planning a conversation with your boss)

If the client agrees to some further exploration, the topic broadens. The coach might ask questions like:

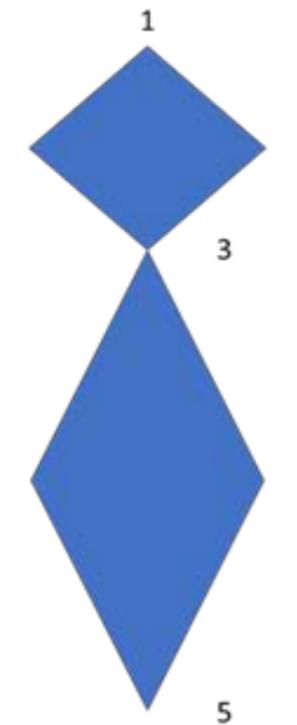


image provided by author

- Suppose you reached your coaching goal (e.g. a successful conversation with the boss), what difference would that make?
- How would you notice that difference?

- Who else would notice that difference?
- What’s important to you about your coaching goal?
- What do you have to get right about your coaching goal?

2 Getting to a clear and meaningful coaching agreement

Again, at the turning point of the diamond, you can partner with the client about the change of direction:

- Do you think we have explored the issue and what you want enough so that we can start narrowing down what you want from this coaching session?
- Would you now like to summarise what it is exactly that you are looking for from this coaching session?
- Given all that we have talked about, what are your best hopes from this session?



Coach and client can then proceed to narrow down on a more meaningful level what it is that the client wants from the session. In our example, the client might have discovered that she is usually very nervous asking for anything from her boss and that she would like to approach the situation with confidence and a feeling of bringing value to the organisation. For the coaching agreement, the coach can then ask questions around measures of success:

- ◇ Suppose you were successful in doing everything that we just talked about, what would be different?
- ◇ What will you have by the end of our session the points in the right direction?
- ◇ What will you have by the end of our session that will tell you that it was worth our time?

3 Starting the exploration toward the desired progress



When the client and the coach seem clear enough about the coaching agreement, the coach can partner again:

- ◇ Are you now clear enough about what you want to accomplish in the session?
- ◇ How would you like to proceed from here?
- ◇ So, what should we start with?
- ◇ When you usually think about issues such as... what process do you use?
- ◇ How do you usually go about...?

And then, the coaching magic happens: coach and client explore what it takes for the client to move closer to their coaching goal. This can be done in various ways depending on what fits the client and the coach. A simple solution focused process would be:

- ◇ Suppose a miracle happened overnight and your issue was solved (e.g. you were this confident person who knows that she is bringing value to the organisation), just like that. What would be the first tiny sign the next morning that would tell you that the miracle happened?
- ◇ What would you notice?
- ◇ What would other people notice about you as you go about your day?
- ◇ On a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 is the morning after the miracle, where are you now?
- ◇ What tells you that you're already at X and not at 0?
- ◇ What else?
- ◇ How would you know that you have moved one step further on that scale?
- ◇ What would others notice?
- ◇ What else?

At this stage, any coaching process that fits you and the client that is suitable to bring them closer to their coaching goal is fine.

4 Starting to wrap up the session



Again, the turning point offers an opportunity for partnering with the client:

- ◇ How are we progressing toward your coaching goal?
- ◇ Are we on the right track?

- ◇ Have we explored sufficiently to start wrapping up the session or is there anything else that is lingering in your mind?
- ◇ Would this be a good time for you to summarise what you have learned so far?
- ◇ How would you like me to support you in harvesting your learning from the session?

Once the client has agreed that it is now a good time to start wrapping up the session, the focus of the discussion can narrow again.

- ◇ What has emerged so far?
- ◇ Would you like to summarise what you are taking from the session?
- ◇ Would it be a good idea for you to summarise your plan and next action steps?
- ◇ Is there anything that can support you in taking this further?

5 Closing

The last opportunity to partner with your client is at the end of the coaching session:

- ◇ Would you like to take a step back and think for a moment what you have learned about yourself during today's session?
- ◇ Would it be interesting for you to take a moment to reflect on your learning process during today's session?
- ◇ Are you good to close now?

The benefit of the double diamond of coaching is that it gives coaches a loose orientation on what kind of discussion they are engaging in with their clients. It leads to joyful and meaningful conversations with good results and a happy coach and a happy client.



ABOUT **KIRSTEN DIEROLF, M.A., MSFP, MCC**

Kirsten has been coaching executives, middle managers and teams for global corporations since 1996. She also designed and delivered large leadership development programs all over the globe. In 2016, she was certified as Master Certified Coach. She has coached over 3000 hours as a professional. Kirsten is member of the ICF assessor team for PCC and MCC. She is a prolific writer with over 30 articles and two books: "The solution tango" with Louis Cauffman and "Solution Focused Team Coaching".

Kirsten has been running programs to develop professional Solution Focused Coaches since 2008. Her first ICF Accredited Program (ACTP) ran in 2015. ICF accredited Coach Training and Mentoring offerings can be found here: www.solutionsacademy.com Publications are here: www.kirsten-dierolf.de