

5 Common Coaching Surprises

When I started coaching, I remember being really surprised by the first demonstration of the GROW Model that I observed. The pace at which it moved along, the clear focus, the clever questioning techniques – these all had a big impact on me. Now, several years later, having had many, many hours of coaching practice and trained over 500 managers in coaching skills, here's a summary of **the 5 most common things that still surprise people about coaching.**

So, if you're already an experienced coach, see if you agree with these; and if you're just starting out, you can use this as a useful checklist. Here goes...

1. The time it can take to tease out the goal

The signs of a good goal are when it is positively stated, inspiring, specific, measurable, within the coachee's control to achieve (perhaps with others' help), and has a timeframe attached. When the goal-setting stage is done well, the coach not only draws out the overall coaching topic or 'final goal', but also establishes a specific 'session goal'. In other words, they get a clear answer to a question such as, "When you get up out of your chair, what outcome would be most valuable for you?" The consequence of not taking the time to do this is generally a conversation that tends to be vague, frustrating and purposeless. Often, the coachee can find it challenging to articulate what he or she wants to achieve from a coaching conversation and there is a strong tendency to start talking about the current situation (Reality) in depth. The coach needs to be adept at bringing the coachee back to the goal-setting stage by probing and questioning until a realistic goal becomes clear.

2. The value of visualisation

As Stephen Covey says in his book, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, "To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you are going, so that you better understand where you are now and so that the steps you take are always in the right direction". Very often, coachees state a goal without having actually considered what they mean by it. For example, one of my coaching clients revealed that he wanted "to become a more strategic leader". Nothing wrong with that, I thought to myself, especially because he'd recently been promoted into a very senior role. What I didn't do, however, was continue by saying, "Ok, good. So that means you need to be able to clarify your vision, develop strategic plans, lead your Directorate effectively..." No. Instead, I asked him **when** he wanted to be in a position where he was effectively operating as a strategic leader. I then said, "**Describe to me, in detail**, what this looks like, feels like, what you're doing, and how you're behaving". By putting the onus on the coachee to define their goal, they become more responsible for considering what they actually want to achieve. The great benefit of this technique is that by the time you get to the Options stage, these flow more readily and tend to be greater in quantity and quality.

3. The benefit of rapport-building

A coaching partnership works best when there is a relationship of equals. Clearly, many opportunities for coaching in a work environment will be between line manager

and direct report. Even though this hierarchy exists in day-to-day operations, the manager needs to adopt an approach whereby the coachee feels able to express him- or herself freely, and isn't directed towards a pre-determined solution. The structure of the GROW Model, with its emphasis throughout on open questions, favours rapport-building and as one delegate on our [Coaching for Results Workshop](#) recently commented, "Without the structure of the GROW Model I wouldn't have found out half as much as I did. I was amazed at how much rapport we were able to build in a 15-minute conversation".

4. The impact of open questioning

When delegates first see our sample GROW questions, there are some that they can't imagine ever asking! For example, "If you knew the answer, what would it be?" or, "Imagine you were advising a friend, what would you say?" My advice is to be brave and try out these questions when suitable opportunities arise in the conversation. After all, there's no point reverting to just a 'normal' conversation when you're there to learn coaching skills. And what never fails to surprise delegates is that even though they might feel that asking certain questions seems artificial, the coachee nearly always disagrees. For them, the questions are thought-provoking, incisive, and effective.

5. The importance of praise and encouragement

Coaching is essentially a supportive intervention and the behaviour of the coach is paramount to its success. After all, who wants to be coached by a pessimistic, disinterested, directive 'coach'? The vast majority of people respond well to praise and encouragement and there's a time and a place within coaching for this to happen. Just hearing your name being used can make you sit up and take notice. It really makes you feel that the coach is 'present' for you. Praise can be targeted at the efforts you've already taken to achieve your goal, your ability to come up with a wide range of options, or the creation of a comprehensive action plan. On the other hand, when you're coaching you need to take care not to pre-determine solutions to the issue and use praise when the coachee manages to come up with exactly what you were thinking. That's not what coaching is about and the result would be a disempowered coachee who feels that the conversation is pointless because you know the answer anyway. Effective praise and encouragement generates the opposite feelings and is a highly significant factor in ensuring that the conversation ends on an upbeat, positive note and the coachee leaves, completely inspired to carry out his or her action plan.

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