

My client is in denial!

EXPERT GUIDANCE ON CRITICAL COACHING ISSUES. THIS SITUATION DEALS WITH A CLIENT WHO LIES AND DENIES THE ISSUES

the situation

“I am an external coach who gets referrals from a large corporation. I was sent a client with the briefing from the manager/sponsor that this man was not performing well and had trouble with his staff. Two members of his team have lodged grievances against him in the past month accusing him of bullying behavior, and there have been other, informal complaints. However, in my first session with the client he played down the issues, said he was getting great results from his team, denied that there had been grievances, and then got very defensive and even paranoid when I filled him in on what I had been told. How can I overcome his lying and denial and help him deal with his issues?”

Are you grappling with a sticky situation? You don't have to go it alone. Let our senior coaches give you some different perspectives to consider. Email your situation to: editor@choice-online.com and put “sticky situations” in the subject line.

Sounds like a case of a misbehaving student (him) being sent to the principle (you!). I'm wondering why the manager isn't dealing with this directly, or if a corporation can legally ask employees to get outside coaching, given privacy considerations. However, given your question, I get the impression that you got right down to brass tacks with him. I understand that you were trying to cut through his denial. However, the result was a loss of rapport.

It's interesting that the problem is his bullying, yet in confronting him directly, you came across to him as “the interrogator.” Caught in what is likely a childhood “control drama,” he went into the opposite position of defensive victim. Both of you are now stuck in this common control drama of interrogator/victim. My guess is this guy grew up with a domineering parent. He's used to shutting down and relying on domination to regain a sense of balance. The “drama” has to be de-constructed, and rapport re-established.

In the next session, you could take some of the heat in order to allow him to relax and trust that you are on his side, not their side. For example, I might say, “Look, in our last session, I think I might have sounded a little bit like a high-school principle rather than a coach. I'm sorry if that put you off.” Give him time to respond to that, and be careful not to make any defensive responses if he agrees!

Once he's responded, let him make a choice about whether he wants to go forward. You might say, “However, I do need to know what you think about coaching. Do you think this has any chance of helping you be happier and more successful in your job? If not, then we'll both be wasting our time. I am not interested in being the bad cop here to make you do anything. However, I am curious. What's really going on with you at work?” Give him time to talk.

Listen, and reflect back with comments that let him know you understand. If he refuses to acknowledge the grievances, keep using lead-in comments, such as, “I'm curious how...,” “I'm wondering if you see any patterns in other job situations....,” “I'm wondering what kind of expectations you had with this job...” and so on. Get him to open up about anything. Once he trusts that you are really trying to understand him, suggest that he come up with options for handling specific performance issues.



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Right now, it is your client against the company and in his mind you represent the company. Not good.

Your description suggests that your timing, in which you reveal what you knew about the grievances against him AFTER he spoke of his great results, worked perfectly to create an environment of distrust. It's likely the impact of that sequence of disclosure not only made him feel like he had been made out to be the liar you claim him to be, but also forced his reaction of what humans often do in such a situation – deny and defend.

A coach's trap in working with an identified "problem" employee is that the client construes being "sent" to coaching as part of a case being built up against them. This does occur, but more often than not the company values the employee and is investing time and money to help bring them around. If the coach doesn't make this distinction and "get on the client's side," the deck becomes stacked against the coaching ever working.

This sticky situation could have been avoided with a stronger, up-front, cards-on-

the-table, why-we-are-here conversation prior to the first coaching session. You would have clarified coachability, focused the topic, created strategic approaches and fomed a trustworthy alliance with a clear intention. The client would have an opportunity to understand that this was a benefit being handed to him by the company, investing in him as a people manager and a producer.

Now, to recover working ground together, here's what you might do: If your intuition tells you this first response has been classic alpha-male stuff, take a stand that coaching with you will be high-stakes, intense and a thrilling challenge. This WILL get his attention.

It is imperative, however – if you go this provocative route – that he feel you are 100 percent at his back. No exceptions. Any inkling that you'll throw him under the bus and your worth to him will be finished. It's risky, but at this point in-the-box coaching will not get you very far and he'll be there because he has to be. His opportunity for growth and development would be lost. This one could be very rewarding for you. Good luck.

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What I'm hearing loud and clear is him saying, "you're not the boss of me!" And that attitude combined with a murky understanding of why you've been called in to coach him creates an ineffective coaching relationship. The scenario can be the classic set-up for failure – for the company, for him as the client and you as the coach. Creating an understanding of how you will work together can be done by fitting the relationship into this structure:

Go back to his manager/supervisor. Ask him or her to have another conversation with the employee about the issues that they would like the employee to work through with you as his coach. My experience is that without leaders being straightforward, you can't succeed.

Next you must agree on the issues to be tackled with him. What's at stake for him? Also, if grievances have been formally lodged, there is a potential for litigation if the company doesn't address the aggrieved employee's issues. Will you be working with the company to make sure those

issues have been covered and resolved?

Then you must show up as authentically as possible AND walk on delicate ground that is shifting under your client. In your initial meeting (I think another one is in order after his meeting with his supervisor), begin again. Make sure it's a dialogue, not a monologue. See if he is willing to concede some points and offer some ways to coach the ISSUES so that he is less threatened.

A tool such as the DISC Assessment developed by John Geier can be an excellent starting point. Books like *Crucial Conversations* by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan and Switzler would be another great resource. In both of these examples, there is an assessment that will become one of the building blocks for him to understand his own behavior and how it affects others. Then the age-old coaching question can be asked of him: What does HE want to do about it? Your focus should be on him, not the goals of the organization. He will shift, he will learn, he may backslide. Your success will rely on staying with him through all of these steps. •

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