

EXPERT GUIDANCE ON CRITICAL COACHING ISSUES

## My client questions the value of coaching



### the situation

“I’ve been working with a client for about six months, and while he has made some progress in some areas of his life, he still seems very ambivalent about the coaching process. He says nothing is improving and he is questioning the value of continuing with the coaching. How should I respond when he says he’s not seeing an improvement through coaching?”

### the experts weigh in

By Craig Carr, PCC

**H**ow sad it is that this client has not experienced the full power of coaching or received the gift in front of him. Unfortunately, I suspect this scenario repeats far too often and my guess is that it is more common in cases where the client is “sent” to coaching. This client does not seem to be someone who came to coaching because he wanted to.

Here’s the bottom line: If you take on a client with an air of ambivalence (you used the word “still” so I assume he came in with that attitude), and if it is not the first thing that is addressed, you are going to work very hard coaching the un-coachable. I get that you really care, but I have to ask, did you think you were going to change him or convince him of something with your

brilliance? Did you tolerate this because there was a contract to fulfill? For what reason did you look past the elephant in the room?

In no uncertain terms he is telling you that something has to shift and it’s not going to be him! He’s digging his heels into the position he had six months ago – that not much can be improved, least of all by you and with this coaching thing that he’s on the fence about anyway.

Your job is to articulate what is going on and be a mirror for him. Perhaps a sports metaphor would work: If he was a player on the field and the coach saw him playing half-heartedly, what would happen? He would be off the field in an instant! He’d be sitting on the bench watching the game go by!

The field is really his Life, not the small stuff of the day-to-day to-do list

game. So the stakes in the coaching game are seeming really low to him. He remains ambivalent. He doesn’t need you to handle the small stuff and you haven’t shown him that there is a bigger game he should care about. That is the field of Passion, Aliveness, Excitement and Creativity!

If he won’t give himself an ALL-IN attitude there will be more of the same. You have to get that agreement and listen very carefully for when and how he is hitting the 100 percent mark, or not. In the end, that may be the most valuable thing he gets from his coaching experience. If he can’t agree to playing fully while on the field, it’s best for both of you to get out and move on. That, then, will become the crux of the learning and your job will be to complete with an honoring of what did occur.

#### 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](mailto:editor@choice-online.com) and put “sticky situations” in the subject line.

By Carol Adrienne, PhD

Since your client didn't quit outright, you might have room to look a little deeper at his ambivalence. Of course, if you have any ambivalence of your own about your practice, you might be tempted to assume that he doesn't think you are effective. True, he could have decided that your style of coaching is not right for him. However, as coaches we are prepared to recognize that ambivalence is a form of resistance, employed by the ego to maintain its comfort zone.

To be fair to him and his process, other external factors could be at the root of his resistance. For example, he (or a family member) might think that he should spend his money on other concerns. Perhaps he hoped that coaching would outline a quick, sure route to results. It's possible that he lost his original motivation, and it's easier to blame coaching than make the effort to try new things. You just don't know.

Let him know that you completely understand if he wants to quit. However, if he agrees, there are questions that might help identify unconscious assumptions and blocks. For example, if he is primarily a thinking, rational type of person, ask: "Do you think you have to wait until you have a plan almost 100 per-

cent worked out before proceeding?" Thinking types often stall by over-researching or over-imagining possibilities, fearing that they won't be able to deal with unknown factors. The antidote starts with breaking things into small steps and assessing feedback as you go (which is the heart of coaching).

Another question, especially for those with a tendency for perfectionism or who feel that they have to maintain a rather high status, is, "Is there anything at which you are afraid you might fail if you continue with coaching?" The answer may provide a good foundation for discussing how these fears are truly obstacles or how he might work around them.

You might also ask: "Is there a part of you that would feel like a faker if you achieved the goals we are working toward? Do you feel like you would have to become almost a different person? Perhaps more competitive or more organized or more disciplined?" Any realizations he makes could be a turning point in the coaching. The issue of authenticity and congruence is deep and might not be easily resolved until he regains sufficient motivation to move forward – or, on the other hand, to accept himself just the way he is.

Ironically, once the insight is gained, synchronicities often open new doors!

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By Victoria Trabosh, CDC®

**M**y first thought is that your client can't see the forest through the trees ... but what is he focusing on? One of the ways to connect your client's results (the forest) to the coaching he receives (the trees) is to learn the art of asking better questions of him and yourself. None of us will ever bring our best to the coaching world unless we continue to challenge ourselves and our clients to higher levels of coaching and results.

If you look back on the last few months of coaching, what progress do you see? What coaching that you've given do you relate to his progress? When I coach a client for six months or longer, we both can see the results that are directly attributable to the coaching. If not, there is no further need for my services.

Three things I think you can do:

1. Decide if you believe your coaching is of value for him in particular. Analyze how you found this client, if you identified specifics that he wanted to attain through coaching, if you're still working on those specifics, and if he identifies as your ideal client.
2. Have a conversation with him asking him to outline the specific value it brings to him. That is the entire purpose of the conversation; otherwise the ambivalence will continue.

I'd have a non-coaching call conversation about just this issue. And no leading the witness – ask better questions, such as: “Let's discuss if coaching is of value for you right now. How has coaching around (insert issue or goal here) been of value? And if not, what is missing for you to insure your success?” That conversation should enable you to see if you missed anything or got off topic. Remember, don't defend what you've done – listen to his view.

3. Raise your coaching 'game' after the conversation by coaching to more measurable results or step away as his coach. A great conversation will clear the air and either give you a clear measurable path forward or allow you to come to the conclusion that your coaching is not what he needs.

This is your business. And while everyone you work with won't be 100 percent satisfied, I believe that coaching is no different than any business. We must serve our clients so they are highly satisfied or we shouldn't try to serve them at all. Take inventory of what is going on with him and decide if you have the skills, the energy and the better questions to work effectively with him.

While this isn't personal, it can feel that way if you don't take a step back. And then you can take a step forward confident that you too can see the forest through the trees. •

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Scott Seagren, CPCC, ACC  
Certified Professional Coach



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