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“When the going gets tough...” Tools for maintaining client commitment

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Outline

One of the great strengths of coaching is the development of a learning *partnership* between the coach and the client. Yet clients, all too often, drop out of the relationship claiming a host of reasons such as time pressures, cost, effort required, lack of support, and sometimes just a “change of mind”. These clients miss out on the opportunity to achieve their goals and experience a lift in their personal development. How can coaches prevent this from happening?

Kilburg (2001) suggests that a strategy for ensuring *adherence* is one of the key components of coaching effectiveness. Coaches, he says, must pay greater attention to creating collaboratively negotiated agreements and adherence protocols very early in the coaching process. What could such a strategy look like, and how practical might it be in ensuring client commitment?

This presentation details the application of four simple tools for maintaining client commitment consistent with Kilburg’s (2001) recommendations and from my own testing and observation, particularly in the field of executive coaching over the past 3 years. The tools are: “Coaching Effectiveness” questionnaire; “Agreement for Coaching Services”; “Motivation Balance Sheet”, and; “The Cycle of Change”.

These tools arise from the psychology of coaching literature and can be demonstrated to profoundly influence the client’s decision to continue with the coaching process “when the going gets tough”.

Safe Containment

How many coaches does it take to change a light bulb? The answer is one. But first the light bulb has to *want* to change!

It's an old joke, but there is wisdom beneath the humour. First, the client has to *want* to change. But what if the client doesn't want to change? For example, the manager who is sent to you to be "fixed"; or the client who started out being very enthusiastic and goal-directed, but now wants some "time out". If results-oriented, collaborative learning is the *product* of a good coaching relationship, then *rapport* is surely its currency. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1995, p.1137) defines *rapport* as a "relationship or communication, especially when useful and harmonious", derived from the Latin *portare* meaning 'to carry'. The implication for coaches is that to develop *rapport* is to 'carry' the communication. In other words, the responsibility for creating a harmonious dialogue is predominately yours!

Kilburg (2000) says one of the most important things a coach can do is to provide a contained space where clients can safely explore the many dimensions of their lives. Setting up such a space demands confidentiality, predictability and reliability on the part of the coach. Kilburg (2000) imagines these places as "islands of reflection" where the client may temporarily retreat to sanctuary.

Similarly, Stacey (1996) talks of the need to set up "sandpits" of safe containment in corporations. This allows for the self-organization of *play* and its innovative benefits, which would otherwise destroy the dominant schema. These places are important reflective zones for leaders and colleagues to escape the typical complexity and uncertainty of their turbulent working environments.

Building *rapport* is, without a doubt, the first step to establishing a receptive learning climate (Zeus & Skiffington, 2000; O'Neill, 2000; Peltier, 2001). Setting up a safe containment for your client can be affected at the very first coaching session through:

1. Meeting on "neutral territory" (not the client's office).
2. Meeting in a pleasant, well sound proofed environment (preferably with an outlook).
3. Ensuring privacy (no phone, e-mail, or staff interruptions).
4. Explaining what to expect from the coaching relationship (respect, support, honesty, discipline, challenge, results-orientation).
5. Establishing clear guidelines with respect to coaching sessions (dates, times, duration, number of sessions).
6. Acknowledging accountability for confidentiality (code of ethics, privacy policy).
7. Setting out self-report or disclosure requirements for other stakeholders.
8. Agreeing on fees (and invoicing/payment terms).

9. Articulating expectations of commitment and follow-through on coaching assignments (cancellation policy, consequences of non-completion of assignments).
10. Getting informed, signed consent to the terms of a coaching agreement and the goals.
11. Displaying courtesy, consideration, accurate empathy, and understanding for the client's complexities at work or at home.

Successful coaching begins with the creation of safe containment, and one of the best tools is an *Agreement for Coaching Services* (see Appendix). In my experience, this greatly facilitates clarity about expectations and protects against any "misunderstandings" when the going gets tough later in the coaching engagement!

Adherence

Kilburg (2001) defines 8 components that contribute to an effective coaching assignment outcome. These key elements are:

1. Client's commitment to the *path of progressive development*, described as "the psychological motivation and associated behaviours that are necessary to move a human being toward defined goals over a reasonably extensive period of time" (Kilburg, 2001, p.257).
2. Coach's commitment to the *path of progressive development*.
3. Characteristics of the client's problems and issues (frequency, duration, intensity).
4. Structure of the coaching containment (clarity of the agreement, goal specificity).
5. Client-coach relationship (rapport, trust, empathy, warmth, challenge).
6. Quality of coaching interventions (appropriate use of techniques and methods).
7. Adherence protocol (anticipate client resistance and make appropriate use of client motivators).
8. Client's and coach's organizational setting (support for coaching).

In particular, client compliance, or *adherence*, may be defined as "an active, voluntary, collaborative involvement of the client in a mutually acceptable course of behaviour to produce a desired preventative or ameliorative result" (Meichenbaum & Turk, 1987, p.20).

So, why do clients sometimes "run off the rails" or fail to follow through on coaching assignments? Kilburg (2001) makes the point that most of the problems contributing to non-adherence show up early in the coaching assignment, usually at the first session. He details the major client and coach problems (Kilburg, 2001, p.263) as:

1. Insufficient agreement or goal clarity.

2. Lack of commitment to the path of progressive development.
3. Insufficient client competence-cognitive complexity.
4. Insufficient coach competence-cognitive complexity.
5. Client-coach defensiveness, conflicts, emotionality.
6. Regression in the coach's or client's organizational environments.

Kilburg (2001) emphasizes the need to raise the client's awareness of their attitudes toward compliance, and to seek examples of when they have successfully adhered, or failed to adhere, to a program of behaviour change in the past. The coach can then work with the client to identify mutually agreeable *measurements* of adherence (keeping appointments, assignments, preparation), use traditional methods to strengthen and deepen the *working relationship* with the client (accurate empathy, appreciative inquiry), and educate the client on specific *adherence methods* (self-regulation and behaviour modification).

Following from Kilburg (2001), I invite the client answer a series of questions in writing, usually at the first session, to promote awareness of adherence (see *Coaching Effectiveness* in the Appendix). Then, I explore the client's *theory-in-use* (Argyris, 1993) in relation to their development needs and understanding of the current situation, seeking to enhance self-belief around resources they have used in the past to successfully achieve behaviour change. In this way, I believe stronger coach-client collaboration can be forged early in the engagement as an assurance against non-adherence, increasing the likelihood that clients will reach their goals and pursue the path of progressive development.

Change Readiness

What motivates clients to change? Motivation may be best thought of as a fluctuating *state* of readiness or eagerness to change, with the implication that the coach can help to influence this state in the client.

According to Prochaska and DiClemente's (1984) *transtheoretical model* of behavior change, clients move through a series of stages from not thinking about change (*pre-contemplation*), to being unsure about it (*contemplation*), ready for change (*determination*), engaged in change (*action*), and keeping going (*maintenance*). However, *relapse* is often the rule rather than the exception, during which individuals regress to an earlier stage. Most successful changers are likely to have cycled through all or some of these stages several times before entering maintenance or achieving permanent change (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992).

The main implication of the model is that clients at different stages are likely to benefit from different interventions. Prochaska and colleagues (1994) have demonstrated that these processes of change are distinct and measurable, and

that efficient self-change depends on doing the right things (processes) at the right time (stages).

Miller & Rollnick (1991) outlined a range of *motivational interviewing* techniques to specifically enhance the client's motivation to change depending on where they are in Prochaska & DiClemente's stages of change:

- Pre-contemplation: Raise doubt – increase the client's perception of problems with “the way things are now”.
- Contemplation: Tip the balance – evoke reasons to change, risks of not changing, and strengthen the client's self-belief.
- Determination: Help the client to determine the best course of action to take in seeking change.
- Action: Help the client to take steps towards change.
- Maintenance: Help the client to identify and use strategies to prevent relapse.
- Relapse: Help the client to renew the process of contemplation, determination, and action, without becoming stuck or demoralized.

This approach is guided by 5 general principles (Rollnick & Miller, 1995), which have particular resonance for coaching:

1. Express empathy, through the use of reflective listening.
2. Develop discrepancy between the clients' goals and present behaviour
3. Avoid argument; by assuming the client is responsible for the decision to change.
4. Roll with resistance, rather than confront it.
5. Support and encourage self-belief and optimism for change

The emphasis on *ambivalence*, where the client simultaneously wants to change and still maintain their current behaviours, implies a state of psychological discontent (described in more detail in the next section). *Motivational interviewing* seeks to arouse this, and then focus the behaviours arising from it so that they help to move the client in the direction of change (Emmons & Rollnick, 2001).

Explaining the *Cycle of Change* (see Appendix) to clients at the very first session can be quite empowering. I point out that *relapse* is a normal evidence-based stage in the process of change. This helps to reduce the saliency of resistance to change, when and if it arises later in the coaching engagement, and contributes to client commitment.

Motivation Balance

Expect resistance to change in the coaching relationship, despite yours and the clients' best intentions. Expect it, and look for it. That way you won't take it personally!

Assuming the coaching relationship has been successful up to this time, the point of resistance usually occurs when the client faces a conflict between what they *said* they were going to do and what they *believe* about themselves or the situation. In social psychology this is called 'cognitive dissonance'. It occurs when the client feels or senses a fundamental disharmony or *dissonance* due to opposing or paradoxical thoughts, attitudes, or behaviours (Elliott & Devine, 1994; Harmon-Jones 2000).

For example, the client might feel *dissonance* due to inconsistency between an achievement-oriented self-concept and feeling "exposed" in the coaching session when they seem unable to demonstrate a particular skill important to them (such as talking more effectively to the MD). The existence of dissonance is considered to be psychologically uncomfortable and the client is motivated to try to reduce the dissonance through a number of strategies (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). In other words, clients will alter the way they think in the face of situations that could create cognitive conflicts.

There are a number of conditions thought to arouse dissonance and cause clients to want to change their behaviour. Usually this change is in the direction of feeling "comfortable" and away from actually making the changes they told you they were going to make (Devine, et al, 1999). In particular, the motivating effects of dissonance are maximized when:

1. Goals and behaviours are freely chosen.
2. A behavioural commitment is made.
3. Goal attainment is presented as effortful or costly.
4. The client recognizes responsibility for their behaviour.
5. The current behaviours (reasons for NOT making the desired change) result in consequences that are experienced as aversive.
6. Inconsistency involves an important cognition, such as the self-image.
7. Behaviours *consistent* with the desired goals or preferred self-image (reasons FOR making the desired change) are maximized, and behaviours *inconsistent* with the current unhelpful self-image (reasons for NOT making the desired change) are maximized.
8. There is no overt reward in doing the desired behaviours.

The telltale signs that a client is experiencing dissonance are when:

1. They try to change the element(s) that is dissonant by adding a consistent cognition (for example, finding another reason for NOT making the desired change) (Pyszczynski, et al, 1993).

2. They increase the proportion of consonant element(s) through adding a consonant cognition or subtracting an inconsistent one (for example, increasing the rating of reasons NOT to change, or decreasing the rating of reasons FOR making the change) (Gibbons, et al, 1997).
3. They reduce the importance of the dissonant element(s) through *trivializing* (for example, “diluting” reasons FOR making the desired change) (Simon, et al, 1995).

Draycott and Dabba (1998b) showed how *motivational interviewing* principles and techniques could be used to arouse awareness of inconsistencies, which optimize the dissonant state:

- The coach can ask open-ended questions (*eliciting self-motivated statements*) about the clients’ state, goals, and problems to explore ambivalence and produce statements inconsistent with present behaviour (*summarization*).
- At the same time, the coach can encourage the client through telling them that they have the ability to make a good choice, increasing self-belief and responsibility (*affirmation*).
- The clients’ spoken views are restated (*reflection, reframing*) by the coach to encourage acknowledgement of the desired state favouring change. This is the same as emphasizing cognitions, which are inconsistent with the clients’ present behaviour, introducing dissonance.
- The coach picks up on attempts by the client to trivialize, add consistent cognitions, or change cognitions. These options are rendered psychologically “harder” by the coach to prevent the dissonance dissipating.
- Getting the client to make a list of the reasons for giving up the problem behaviour and the reasons for retaining it (*balance sheet*) helps to summarize the state of their individual cognition and consequently their overall level of inconsistency.

Draycott and Dabba (1998b) concluded that: “The preferred outcome is that clients produce an intention to change their behaviour, which will reduce their experience of dissonance because it becomes consistent with their ideals, values and goals” (p. 360). Since the dissonant state lasts only a few minutes such statements should be acted on immediately to re-introduce the dissonance that elicited the clients’ response (Harper & Hardy, 2000).

The *Motivation Balance Sheet* is a useful coaching tool along the lines of Draycott & Dabba’s (1998b) suggestions for maintaining cognitive dissonance in favour of the change desired by the client.

Clients fill out a balance sheet at their first coaching session, listing the reasons FOR making their desired change, and the reasons for NOT making the change. They also weight each reason (cognition) in terms of importance to them.

The balance sheet is then used by the coach (coach's copy) as a basis for discussion, and referred to throughout the session to allow dissonance to be maintained. At the end of the session, clients are invited to re-rate their reasons for and against change, and to take this balance sheet with them in order to maintain dissonance between sessions.

The coach can revisit the balance sheet at each subsequent session, helping clients work through the cognitions that are consistent with NOT making the desired change, in order to reduce their importance or remove them from the balance sheet. At the same time, the coach attempts to increase the importance of cognitions that are consistent with the reasons FOR making the desired change, or adds new ones.

You should look for opportunities to emphasize the clients' own responsibility for their present behaviour (consistent with the reasons for NOT making the change), the aversive nature of the consequences of maintaining the behaviour (NOT making the change) and any conflict between this and the clients' self-image, in order to "personalize" the inconsistencies found (Rollnick, Butler, & Stott, 1997; Colby, et al, 1998).

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Appendix

AGREEMENT FOR COACHING SERVICES (corporate)

CLIENT NAME: _____ DATE: _____

COMPANY: _____

ADDRESS: _____

WORK PHONE NUMBER: _____ MOBILE NUMBER: _____

FAX NUMBER: _____ E-MAIL ADDRESS: _____

SERVICE AGREEMENT

Duration of Agreement: From: _____ To: _____ Number of Sessions: _____

Goals of Coaching:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Type of Confidentiality to Be Observed:

- Completely confidential _____
- Limited disclosure with prior agreement _____
- Service delivery accountability _____
- Full disclosure _____

Notes on confidentiality: _____

COMPLIANCE AGREEMENT

Session dates, times, and venues will be arranged by the client and the coach consistent with the terms of this coaching project. Cancellations made less than 48 hours before a booked session will be charged at 100% of the agreed fee.

The coach will engage in direct and personal conversations, and the client can count on the coach to be honest and straightforward in asking questions and making requests. Any homework assignments or reasonable requests that are mutually agreed on will be honoured to the best of the parties' abilities. However, the power of the coaching relationship is understood to rest with the client, and if the client believes the coaching is not working as desired, the client will communicate this to the coach and take action to return the power to the coaching relationship. Both the client and the coach agree to communicate clearly and address openly any problems, disagreements, or questions that arise over the duration of this coaching project.

By negotiating and signing this coaching agreement, both the client and the coach commit to following through with all of the major components specified.

COACH DATE

CLIENT DATE

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Coaching Effectiveness

1. How effective do you think this coaching will be?

2. Can you think of any problems that we might encounter in following through on the coaching agreement?

3. How likely to occur are these problems in follow-through?

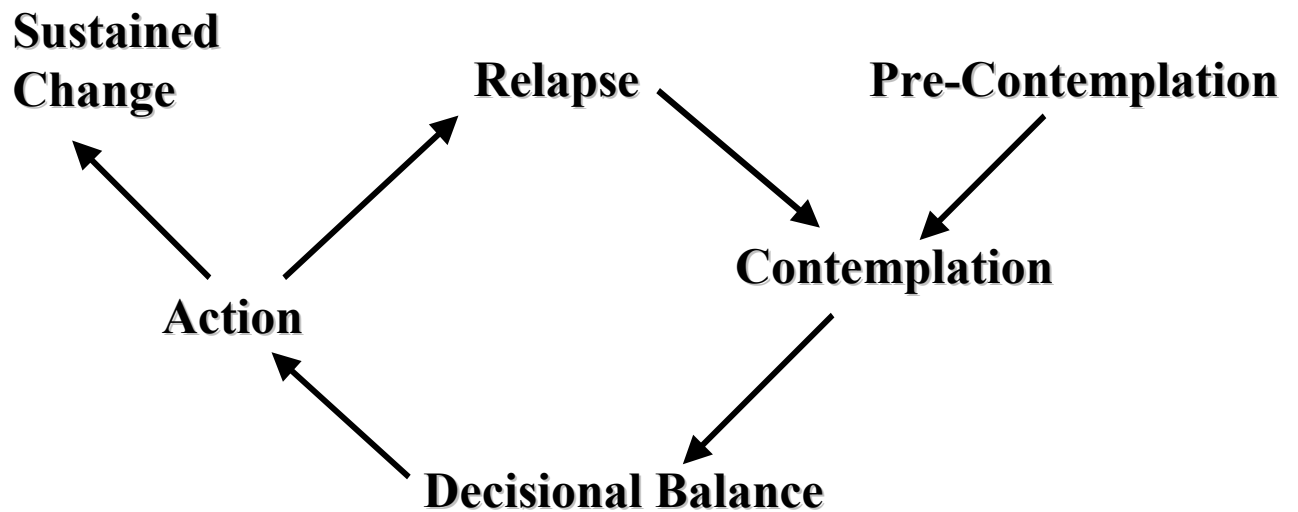
4. Is there anything that we can do to increase the likelihood that you will follow through?

5. When you've been able to achieve or change something in the past, how did you best accomplish that?

6. When you've encountered problems in achieving or changing something in the past, what has worked best for you to overcome those problems?

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THE CYCLE OF CHANGE



Adapted from: Prochaska, J.O., and DiClemente, C.C. (1984). *The transtheoretical approach: crossing the traditional boundaries of therapy*. Homewood, IL. Dow-Jones/Irwin.

MOTIVATION BALANCE SHEET

Reasons FOR making the desired change	Rate	Reasons for NOT making the desired change	Rate

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