

INSIGHT GUIDE #30

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

How can I stop giving advice to my coaching clients?

It has been suggested that coaching is fundamentally about unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance (Whitmore, 1995); it is about helping them to learn, rather than teaching them.

Yet one of the biggest struggles for a coach is to resist the temptation to give advice. How do we manage this boundary between supporting people to learn and teaching them from our experience?



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Coaching is a powerful intervention but that does not make it a panacea for every situation. As Korotov and colleagues (2012) note, at times a consulting approach is more appropriate, while at others, therapeutic approaches may be required. In these latter cases, the skilled coach's role is to refer the client to the appropriate helper (see *Insight Guide #22*, 'How can I refer coaching clients to other helping professions?'). We need to be clear that coaching is the appropriate intervention for the person and the presenting issue; this will always lead us back to robust contractual agreements for the relationship and the firm establishment of coaching agreements for each session.

But even assuming that coaching is the correct intervention, this does not necessarily mean we no longer face boundary challenges. It is interesting that we note that clients are 'experts in their own life'; but does that make them experts in everything? This is an area that can cause a great deal of soul-searching for the reflective coach. If the client really doesn't know the answer to a question they seek and the coach does, how ethical is it for the coach to withhold information? How useful is it to dig for answers that are just not there? This can bring us right back to the heart of the 'rules' of coaching: Am I allowed to tell?

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As humans we seek for certainty, our brains are wired to look for the rules that keep us safe and as coaches we want to learn what we 'should' and 'shouldn't' do. But this is one of those areas where, sadly, there is much more ambiguity than certainty. The boundaries of coaching and mentoring can be permeable, such as in the area of advice giving. This is especially true for coaches building their experience, where it is important to learn the rules. As we get more experienced, we may be able to flex a little more, but first we must practise keeping solid boundaries before making a choice to stray from our true north.

Adapt and flex

Anthony Grant (2019) argues that too rigid an approach in our coaching is in direct opposition to the needs of the individual or the organisation. Instead the coach needs to adapt and flex to meet the needs of their client. Marson (2018), too, highlights the coaching continuum, where individuals move across the spectrum of pull and push interventions, akin to John Heron's six intervention styles (Heron, 1989). Offering advice is at the opposite end – the push end of the continuum; this means it is more closely associated with mentoring. So how do we stay clearly in a coaching framework?

Sir John Harvey Jones, business advice guru from UK television's *Troubleshooter*, has suggested that two things happen when we offer advice: the client is happy because they have one less problem, and we feel good because we feel smart and clever. However, he suggests two other things happen: we have failed to help them grow and we have solved today's problems with yesterday's thinking. Even more concerning, if we 'help' our clients with our solutions, what does that say about them? Do we make them 'help-less'?

The boundary between support and advice

Many coaches come to coaching with a desire to help others. We feel we want to 'give back'; we feel we have something to offer. Perhaps we have had a successful career and we want our legacy to be supporting the next generation to succeed. Or maybe, in life we have navigated some rough seas and we want to share what we have learnt to prevent others facing those same storms. Left unexamined, this drive to 'help others', well-meaning as it may be, can create pitfalls for us as coaches. These can retard our development to become a transformational force in someone else's life. Elizabeth Gilbert (2016) urges those who write with the motivation of 'helping someone' to save themselves the bother – most people don't want that. This seems sage advice for coaches, not just budding writers.

If we believe our job is to help others, we risk forming the belief that we are responsible for the success of our clients and this can lead us to become distracted as we seek solutions to the issues the client brings. Even worse, given that we know that the 'rules' of coaching tell us to avoid directing the client, by taking on the responsibility for their success, we set ourselves up for an internal struggle. There we are: looking for solutions, working through the internal conflict, trying to resist giving advice. The result is often that we seek ways to find a clever question that forces our client to see the world through our eyes and to navigate their way through their world with our compass.

How might we resolve this issue of the boundary between supporting our clients fully while avoiding giving advice? Korotov et al (2012) explore the need for former consultants, therapists – and we could add executives to this list – to lose their identities and attachments to their former roles. As coaches we must be clear on our role and our motivations in order to keep the coaching space as a fertile ground for the benefit of the client's growth, and not as one set up to meet our own needs to be helpful. To do this, the first focus for our attention may be to revisit some of the assumptions underpinning coaching.

As coaches we honour the client as the expert in their own life and work, and believe they are whole, creative and resourceful. Standing on these foundations, as coaches we encourage self-discovery and support client-generated solutions and strategies based on their own goals and aspirations. Could this offer our first compass point to help us to navigate the boundary?

Managing the balance

While accepting that there are no clear steps we can take as coaches to navigate this murky area of supporting clients without leading them with our solutions, there are some areas we can reflect on that could help us to find our own unique way to manage this balance.

- **Role clarity**

We can be clear from the start of the coaching relationship, and at the start of each session, about what our role is in the conversation. We should also ensure that coaching is the most appropriate intervention for the client. We can remind ourselves that coaching is an equal partnership and we can examine our own need to 'help', reasserting our basic assumption that 'I am OK, you're OK' (Harris, 1995). From this foundation we can be clear about who owns the goal, the issue and the solution, liberating ourselves from the need to provide the answer.

- **Sharing knowledge and experience mindfully**

Part of our role in supporting our clients is to share our knowledge in a way that moves the person forward, especially when they are lost or overwhelmed. This can appear to be in contradiction to all we have learned about coaching, unless we set it in the context of not leading with our ideas and solutions. The second criterion is that our 'advice' is limited to facts as opposed to opinions: 'Moscow is the capital of Russia' is a fact. 'Moscow is the most beautiful city in the world' is an opinion. As a general rule, we should try to avoid providing personal opinions and limit our advice to facts, when asked. An exception to this might be when the client asks about your experience, here it may be best to hold back, saying 'Can we come back to this in a moment? Let's focus on your thoughts first.'

Only after fully exploring a client's ideas, should we return to this. And when we return to it, we should avoid giving our opinion, but instead share our experience. For example: 'You asked what I would do. Well, this is a common challenge I have heard from many leaders. I have heard others suggest X, Y and Z as possible ideas they wanted to explore. I wonder how these ideas from other leaders might fit your organisational context, while recognising that every organisation and every leader is different.'

Our approach aims to reduce the impact of our influence as the coach in the relationship, and instead draw on our experience in working with others, while also encouraging the client to adopt a critical perspective of such experience from others, reflecting on their own context and personal style.



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- **Regular self-reflection and supervision**

As there are no guarantees that we will manage this boundary successfully all the time, we need to honestly reflect on our voice and views in each session and on the impact of our need to be helpful. Jane Austen reminds us in *Mansfield Park*:

We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be.

- Reflection and supervision offer us the opportunity to identify gaps in our approach and continue our personal journey of development.

If as coaches we can become more concerned with supporting our clients to discover their inner guide, rather than working hard to prove our worth as a coach, we could let go of the responsibility for finding answers and trust our clients to find their own.

As Bob Keegan (2014) puts it,

we bring our humanity and not our pedigree to coaching.

Henley Centre for Coaching

The Henley Centre for Coaching is a global leader in coaching research and coach training. We are the only triple-accredited coaching provider in the world offering both postgraduate university qualifications in coaching and accreditation from the Association for Coaching (AC), the International Coach Federation (ICF) and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC).

The Centre provides formal accredited coach training through our *Professional Certificate in Executive Coaching* and *MSc in Coaching and Behavioural Change*, and accredited supervision training through our *Professional Certificate in Supervision*. These programmes are delivered in the UK at our Greenlands campus, and at venues across the world.

The Centre provides continuous professional development for coaching professionals through masterclasses, webinars, conferences, and via online access to journals, ebooks and coaching research. These are all delivered through our online learning platform, meaning coaches can connect from anywhere in the world to engage in professional development.

The Henley coaching team consists of leading practitioners and academics who have shaped the coaching profession since the late 1990s. They have written many of the most popular coaching books and they continue to publish in leading management journals and to contribute at conferences worldwide. Their writing, thinking and research informs our teaching and ensures our programmes are at the cutting edge of coaching practice.

The Centre offers annual membership to all professional coaches, providing a virtual-learning environment where the members shape research and practice in coaching. Check out our website for details on how we can help you and your business come to life.



Karen Foy

Karen is a tutor on the coaching programmes at Henley Business School.

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Henley Business School

For more information, please contact:

Henley Business School
Greenlands
Henley-on-Thames
Oxfordshire
RG9 3AU

coaching@henley.ac.uk
Tel +44 (0)1491 418 767
henley.ac.uk/coachingcentre

