

Coaching Mastery: a balance of heart and head

This is the third in the series of “master coach” articles from Teresa Poole, Judy Feld and now, me. If you remember (and if you didn’t, here are the links), [Teresa shared the power of the ICF coaching core competencies](#) in working with dominant executive clients. [Judy talked about the Sherlock Holmes aspects of coaching](#) and our responsibility to work with data, not assumptions. I am honored to be in the company of these two wonderful, insightful coaches! And now, what can I share about mastery?

I want to take us in a slightly different direction – to explore what makes coaching “masterful.” What are the distinctions between good coaching and mastery and how do we get there? They are questions I’m familiar with – because I didn’t get it for a long time. Let me share the story of how I learned the difference between *doing* coaching and *being* a coach.

From the time I first became a coach, I wanted to become a Master Certified Coach. I didn’t understand what it meant but it appealed to my competitive nature. As I let my intention be known, a wise mentor told me to be successful I would need to understand the *heart* of coaching.

I set about learning everything I could – I attended lots of coach training, read books and became accomplished in the *doing* of coaching. I had processes and techniques, different approaches and lists of short, powerful questions at my beck and call. In fact I was so good at doing, I didn’t realize what I was missing. That was until (to put it in very Texan terms) I was slapped up the side of the head with a couple of powerful ah-ha’s.

The first ah-ha came when I was in a coaching workshop. We were in small practice groups and it was my turn to coach. I was artfully moving my client along his agenda when I saw a shift in him – the direct result of particularly powerful question. I saw tension in his face that rippled through his body to the point that it affected his posture and breathing. I let him stare at the floor for a full minute or so in silence before I asked, “What’s in the tension?” From my perspective my coach skills were rock solid - recognition, intuition, the use of silence and then the powerful question. I was feeling good.

He looked up at me and said, “You don’t know what I’m feeling.”

It was like a slap in the face – or more precisely, the whack of the first ah-ha. I’d never had a client challenge my “intuition” quite so harshly. Truth was, he wasn’t being harsh, he was being honest. My first realization of the *being* of coaching was the hard reality of how much I relied on assumptions. I thought I was exercising curiosity and intuition. Instead, I was making things up to fill in what I didn’t know. And it was so easy to fabricate a back story to fill the void! Creating assumptions is a subtle form of control: if I

can know what's happening in my client's mind, I can 'guide' him more effectively with the coaching. (BTW, you won't find "guiding" in the Coaching Core Competencies.) My client taught me that it was OK to not know.

By the way, *not knowing* is simple – but it's not always easy. I had felt that knowing was one value I brought to my coaching. That's true for a consultant, but unnecessary for a coach. In fact, *knowing* is seductive – thinking that my knowledge and background is what will make my coaching masterful or that I'll be better if I understand my client's circumstances.

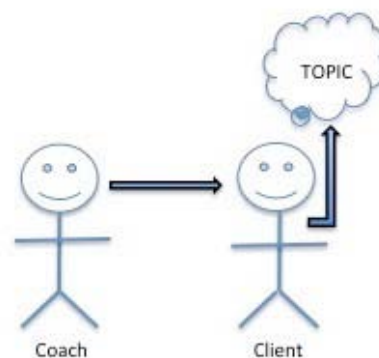
I began to practice curiosity as a substitute for assumptions and knowing. This was curiosity like I had never experienced before. Coaching curiosity has a childlike simplicity to it – no judgment, no assumptions, no conclusions. It is not the kind of "data gathering" curiosity that helps me understand the situation so I can help solve something. Let's go back to my workshop client – curiosity with no assumptions would me sound more like; "I just felt my energy shift when you looked down. I was wondering what's going on for you?" I learned to rely on what I feel, not assume what I thought I saw in others.

The second ah-ha came when I spoke with one of my first MCC examiners. The short version of this story is that I failed the MCC exam the first time and decided to go through the process again. My first step was to request a short conversation with one of the examiners to find out what I had done wrong. Did you catch it – what I had DONE wrong? She shared her experience of my coaching and pointed to the lack of coaching presence. I had executed coaching skills well enough. However, I was focused on helping the client solve their issue rather than being a part of their journey.

Let me pause to say I find explaining the *being* of coaching to be a challenge so let me share the picture I draw for myself. The message is as simple as the picture: The client connects with their topic. I connect with the client.

Notice -

- The client has an arrow connecting him to his topic.
- The coach has an arrow connecting to her client.
- The coach does NOT have an arrow connecting him to the topic.



I draw this when I find myself slipping into problem solving mode...those times when my arrow begins to creep up to point at my client's topic. This simple exercise helps me keep my attention where it belongs – on my client. The message clear - "coach the client, not the topic."

If it helps, imagine the picture asks you to stare into your client's eyes. Remember, their eyes are the windows into their soul. When you try it, notice what happens with your energy. Focus on connecting their being with yours and let go of doing coaching well. If it feels like sacred space, you are sensing the power of mastery. I've learned that when I work energetically to be with my client, purely curious and questioning any assumption I make, I am able to connect. That's when I experience mastery in coaching.

Here is the bottom line: My job is to be with my client as they work through their topic/issue/problem/growing edge. My questions are directed to my client, about them. I don't directly help to solve anything.

Whew, pretty abstract, right? Remember my story about coaching in that workshop? I merged my client with his topic, created assumptions and connected with the circumstances more than the person. That's not coaching mastery. It was Janet Harvey, MCC, who said, "It is not a coach's job to be helpful. It is the coach's job to be a useful partner." I am a useful partner if I can help my client see himself clearly in the context of his topic. From there, she will find what she wants.

So the dots that had to get connected for me – were first to understand my ego and my need to be of value – and to realize how that limited my coaching. I had to embrace the power of curiosity and not knowing. Finally, I had to find ways to intentionally connect and stay connected.

To really [grok](#) (deeply understand) coaching mastery, I had to get out of my head and practice being in my heart. It has been a humbling, empowering lesson to realize that a master coach is not something I am, but something I always work to be.

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