

## Authentic Vulnerability in Systemic Coaching

### *An exploration of coach and client postures*

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Whenever they are considering a relationship with such help or supportive professionals as with consultants, trainers, experts, therapists, doctors or coaches, potential clients are generally experiencing feelings of vulnerability. More specifically, the main apparent or underlying motivation for many coaching prospects is that they are either struggling with or suffering through important transitions, sometimes wrestling with very deep personal transformations.

Of course, many clients also incrementally call on coaches to be accompanied as they work through much lighter short-term projects or to achieve outcomes that are just slightly more challenging than the ones they normally target. Among these, we can also consider those who enter a coaching relationship by first announcing rather superficial operational goals. Then, as their work progresses, they become aware of deeper yearnings or much more consequential issues and progressively gather the courage to face much more important challenges.

Consequently, if many client initial needs could be perceived as incremental issues or operational problems to resolve, just as many clients may come to coaching to address deeper personal and professional life-changing quests and much more absolute existential necessities. With this in mind, we could position two general forms of client motivations

- Whenever a personal need is very clearly, concretely and operationally defined, potential clients often precisely know whom to call. They will most probably choose an expert or specialist in the field they have predefined. By doing so, they are very practically looking to acquire appropriate means to achieve their well-positioned goals or solve their clearly defined problems.
- Whenever potential client aspirations are not so clearly defined, if they have been lingering in time, are more uncertain or more complex, if they have been evolving over time or have remained unresolved in spite of multiple attempts, then these prospects may more probably call on a coach.

The above types of client motivations may not be the only ones that differentiate between those who would rather call on solution-providing specialized experts and those who would rather choose a coach. However, they do shed a light on the fact that although many coaching prospects may initially seem quite clear and decided as to their desired coaching outcomes, they may also tacitly call on coaches in order to embark on deeper forms of personal or professional quests.

Beyond those apparent motivations however, is that coaching prospects may all harbor common, more or less intense feelings of inadequacy or vulnerability. They may simply admit to not knowing or that they could usefully benefit from a sparring partner's support. They may admit to a simple lack of operational clarity as to how they could achieve a goal with available resources in their personal or professional environment.

- More deeply and as the coaching relationship builds, however, clients often admit to not having the time, or competencies, or motivation, or resilience, or environmental support, etc. to achieve their desired outcomes or meet the expectation of others.
- Much more importantly, many coaching prospects also want to work through major life transitions often involving an overwhelming and detonating combination of health, professional, personal and existential issues.

No matter the true motivation or apparent importance allotted to their initial coaching goals however, coaching prospects initiate their coaching process by first owning and sometimes admitting a perceived personal inadequacy or feelings of vulnerability.

### ***Complementary relationships***

Depending on the intensity of client feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability and depending on the way they are expressed, such an initial client relational posture could be defined in numerous ways. One could perceive it as adopting a low position, an underdog posture, a powerless attitude, a victim role, a delegating strategy, etc. But it is not this article's object to embark into judgmental considerations or logical justifications for such initial client postures. More important to the coaching process, however, is that any person who adopts a low posture at the onset of any relationship is perceived as tacitly inviting their professional partner to assume a complementary role.

The complementary position to that of any person embarking on a positive professional on a personal or personal quest could be named a challenger, a leader, a teacher, a mentor, a master, coach etc. Less positively, the same polarity can be described otherwise: a victim may be looking for savior's support, an underdog for a top dog, a powerless person for a caretaker, an adept for a guru, etc. All these top-down and bottom-up complementary relationships are rather common and are both socially acceptable and politically correct, relatively.

This type of rapport is often foundational at the onset of most service professions. On the one hand, prospects and clients admit their needs, their shortcomings, their incapacities and vulnerabilities, and on the other hand, they project that the professional they are seeking knows, understands, can help, is powerful, healthy and capable.

**Caution:** As a consequence, clients who initiate coaching relationships by tacitly or authentically admitting to their intrinsic vulnerability naturally invite their coaches to adopt the complementary relational position.

Socially indeed, the latter is expected to be the one who knows, who will be open, supportive, and understanding. Therefore for the usual prospect, the coach is initially the one who can, who has intrinsic capacities, who wields energy and power, who cares for and validates, who will be able to motivate, etc. That perception of the coach allows these prospects to enter the relationship with relative security, feeling it will be productive.

This initial polarity however, can also be an invitation for coaches to become much more responsible for their clients or client outcomes than they should or indeed could be. Remember that coaching is defined as a peer relationship within which clients have the power to find their own most appropriate answers.

So more subtly, coaching should not be a profession that rests on any form of one-up attitude or top-down behavior or relationship. In no way should the coach adopt a snug posture of knowledge or human experience. It is often repeated that the client is perceived as the one who can and who knows. The client is the only person who has access to the power and the means to achieve their own goals and solve their own issues. The coaching relationship is notoriously said to define the coaching posture as one who cannot be responsible for the client, who does not know more than the client and who cannot do anything in the place of the client.

### *Symmetric competition*

Consequently, at the onset of coaching processes, whenever clients initiate the relationship by adopting a low position, expecting help or support, how can a coach pertinently respond?

- **A)** Some coaches more or less subtly or bluntly tell the clients that they don't know either.

This type of coach response illustrates what could be defined as a symmetric or competitive posture. Both coach and client are echoing each other's underdog posture. On the one hand such clients come to a coaches because they don't know what to do, and on the other hand, not wanting to pick up the tab, their coaches are saying they don't have options to offer. This is the quagmire in which many beginning coach-client relationships may unwittingly get stuck.

Unfortunately, if both coaches and clients are mirroring each other, both competing for the "not knowing" position, what can ever come out of their relationship? If both partners are symmetrically competing for the same underdog position, the relationship could indeed quickly come to an unproductive standstill or stalemate.

- **B)** Some coaches choose to explain the relationship to the client: They patiently elaborate on the fact that coaching is about the client finding their own paths to achieve their desired results.

Although this information is truthful, it is nonetheless given from a "knowing" position and may unwittingly reinforce client feelings of inadequacy, if only temporarily. By attempting to inform or teach, coaches who adopt this form of response may in fact be embodying a top-down relationship, if only in the client's perception.

In still other public situations, coaching prospects want to challenge coaches by adopting a very different, assertive and sometimes aggressive top-down attitude: "What do you mean that coaches never offer options? Why should coaches be paid if they cannot offer any tangible help?" could be an arrogant or condescending comment aiming to push coaches out of their seemingly smug position.

- **Caution:** For some coaching prospects and in many cultural contexts, clients may not openly want to admit to any form of personal uncertainty or vulnerability. If these feelings are ever openly shared, they could quickly be interpreted as indicators of impotency or weakness. In some street-wise environments, that could be perceived as dangerous.

In these cultural contexts or in the case of initial, top-down, prospect positioning, many coaches experience a difficulty to respond appropriately. Whenever such communication takes place in a public setting, they may immediately feel disqualified, attacked, or inadequate.

- **C)** Consequently, whenever prospects powerfully display their assertive capacities, coaches may also react symmetrically by choosing to painstakingly explain that the coaching relationship rests on clients assuming their own responsibility to work out their own issues in order to achieve their own goals in their own way.

Unfortunately, in doing so, these coaches are also teaching or demonstrating their expertise on coaching. In doing so, they are also subtly revealing their prospect's lack of knowledge of coaching, or telling them how to behave. The message could be construed as a judgment or put-down that the prospect is incapable of assuming his or her personal responsibilities. The form of relationship offered by the coach could be perceived as communicated from a competing stance, also vying for a top-down position, symmetric to that of the challenging client.

This is a second form of symmetrically competitive response where both the coach are vying for the powerful top-dog position, each trying to prove

they know more than the other. It will also lead to a type of argumentative quagmire in which many potential or beginning coach-client relationships unwittingly get stuck.

- **Caution:** Whenever both coach and client are in symmetrical relational positions, either both vying for the underdog, not-knowing position or both competing for a powerful top dog, knowing and defining posture, the relationship will most probably lead to an unproductive stalemate.

As a reminder, the preferred posture for clients in an appropriate coaching context is when they own their own capacity to think, emote, intuit and behave in the manner that will best help them solve their own problems and achieve their own ambitions.

At the onset of any coaching relationship, the best way for coaches to allow clients embody their own posture of self-reliability and responsibility, or their own capacity to achieve, is for coaches to leave this actively empowered solution-oriented role wide open for their clients to embrace. Indeed, should coaches ever adopt that posture, their clients will choose a complementary low position that would be considered less productive, in a coaching perspective

Consequently, the best initial coach posture, from the very first hours of any client relationship is a focused and modest, attentive and discreet, reserved and respectful, totally available presence. Coach moderation and simplicity mixed with very occasional pertinent or supportive comments will set the stage for clients to expand or unfold into all the spaces they need to fully own their active part of the coaching partnership.

### *Coach vulnerability*

Beyond the basically humble or unassuming professional coach posture described just above, coaches can also honestly or authentically come into contact with and very simply share their own vulnerability with their clients. In effect, such a coach attitude is the equivalent of a low posture, embodied in a sincerely humble, modestly human way. It could be formulated into “I too, am not perfect”.

- **Example:** Should a client voice difficulty in any field, for example in managing a group of turbulent, noisy teen-agers, in learning how to swim, in taking an important managerial risk, in cold-calling sales, etc. the coach can offer “I know what you mean. I have the same difficulty, and it is not easy.”

Note that the coach comment is in the present tense. In no way is the coach pretending to be beyond the issue, having faced it and solved it in the past. That would be indicating a subtly top down position, slightly more mature or more advanced than the client. The client would then most probably ask the coach how the issue was solved, validating the coach knowledgeable position.

Of course, truly modest and partnering type of responses rest on a systemic awareness that clients very often offer ambitions and issues or admit to vulnerabilities that are identical or at least very similar to the ones their coaches also face in their own lives. This type of modest and positive posture could be called a positive symmetric stance, mirroring that of the client. It very often simply opens the door to an authentic coach-client partnership. Indeed, if both the coach and the client can be authentically vulnerable about similar (if not identical) issues and ambitions together, then they can also partner to embark on a common quest for solutions and growth.

More importantly, whenever coaches realize they are getting very emotionally involved in a client issue, they should share it. When they are becoming aware the client is delving into a situation that is dangerously similar to one they are also facing in their private or professional lives, coaches should indeed clearly speak up. In those situations, coaches need to be ethically transparent and tell their clients that they have a similar issue and that their emotional involvement could affect the quality of their coaching presence. An agreement that they should both watch out and alert each other in case of undue coach projection and involvement in the client issue could then ensure a cleaner development partnership.

Furthermore, whenever a coach perceives that the quality of the coach-client relationship could affect their partnership or work in any way, they should inform, or warn their clients as to whatever may be getting in the way of their professional solution-oriented rapport.

Admittedly, sharing with clients what could be perceived as coach shortcomings is not easy. Many coaches and clients may feel this could be disqualifying. The point is that any authentic transparency volunteered by a coach, any shared coach vulnerability, will paradoxically often help consolidate both the coach-client partnership and the client's capacity to also fully own their own issues.

- When coaches embody their personal vulnerabilities and share them with clients with simple words and moderation, they are assuming a posture of modesty.
- They are respectfully modeling that when clients face difficult issues, feelings of inadequacy, fears, shortcomings, oversized ambitions, sadness, etc. they are also just being normal and human.
- When coaches recognize their own personal and professional human issues with simple honesty, they paradoxically help their clients empower themselves to solve or move beyond theirs.
- Paradoxically in return, when succeeding clients ultimately develop their own capacity to build, achieve and grow, they model back how their coaches can also succeed on similar terrains.

In keeping with Brené Brown's “Power of Vulnerability”, the coaching relationship is built on a very particular type of rapport:

- On the one hand, prospects often initially enter the relationship with a relatively low position, although sometimes just very subtly admitting to their feelings of powerlessness. They expect their coaches to assume a complementary position of knowledge, power and/or leadership.

- On the other hand, coaches respectfully welcome their clients by also displaying a simple, modestly positive position that embodies an unassuming but trusting form of transparent vulnerability. This coach posture will help them meet with their clients on a common ground. It serves to initiate an honest, solid partnership that will allow both the coach and the client to constructively proceed and grow together.

### ***Marketing and sales consequences***

A clear understanding of this type of fully transparent and respectful coach-client partnership can have some obvious sales and marketing consequences.

- At the risk of creating competitive relationships with prospects, at no time can coaches market their coaching services by adopting a top-down posture or communication. This would indeed be counter-productive to future relationships with prospects that decide to become clients. The latter will then expect their coaches to continue to be the ones that hold the position of power and responsibility.
- At no time can the coach over-sell their competencies, over-promise achievements and results, over-impress their prospects or future clients. Such sales over-confidence could either lead to a top-down complementary relationship or to a top-top symmetrical competition. Both would be counter-productive to any ulterior coaching relationship.

To conclude, any socially powerful, impressing or impressive type of initial coach position may undermine the future coaching relationship. Indeed, coaching does expect clients to be in full control of their own ambitions, issues, processes and solutions while being accompanied by a silent, respectful, minimalist and pertinent partners that position themselves as peers.

This could lead to the conclusion that the best way to sell coaching and follow up with a positive partnering coach-client relationship is to under-promise and under-sell in a modest and respectful way. At most, one should avoid push-selling and barely initiate pull-selling. This may in fact be the only marketing and sales strategy that truly attracts the appropriate kind of prospects and rapidly establishes the type of relationship that allows coaching to over-deliver.