

Putting the client in charge, from the start

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Who's in charge?

Clean coaching sessions start when the coach asks their client,

"And where would you like to be?"

After they have placed themselves, they are asked:

"And where would you like me to be?"

If there are co-coaches or observers, the client is asked:

"And where would you like to be?"

Once everyone has been placed, clean coaches ask the classically clean question:

"And what would you like to have happen?"

These questions set up a particular kind of coaching relationship right from the start: the coaching session will be client-led; they are in charge of the space; and they are in charge of what they want to have happen.

Apart from the invitations above, there are other things a coach can do to encourage a client to begin taking charge of their own development, even before the session starts:

1. Organise the furniture beforehand so that it's not expected the client should sit in a chair conveniently located across from another chair. Keep the space as signal-free as possible about where the coaching needs to take place.
2. Don't leave your writing materials on a table, or your coat or scarf draped on a chair, or your bag visible anywhere. Doing so could signal to the client that a particular space belongs to the coach, and is not available to them.
3. If a client has come to your home or office for a session, it's fine to offer them a drink before moving into the coaching space. Let them go in first and stand to one side when you ask them, "And where would you like to be?"
4. If you are already in the room when they arrive, stand up, move out of the way, and gesture to the entire space that is available when asking, "And where would you like to be?"
5. When inviting the client to find a place that is right for them and for you, if it seems like it is needed, you can add: "We can move things around if you would like."

What if a client doesn't want to?

But what happens if a client won't make a decision about where they would like to be, or where they would like you to be? The first scenario happened to me while I was coaching a client and being supervised live by James Lawley and Penny Tompkins. The second was something that happened when James and Penny were facilitating a client at this year's Adventures in Clean.

Scenario #1

Client: Oh, it doesn't matter where I sit.

Or

Client: It's your place, why don't you decide?

If the client says anything like the above, here's what you could do:

Coach: Well, if it doesn't matter, find any space that seems right to you. [Keep still and wait.]

Or

Coach: It's part of the process that you decide where we should be and how things should be arranged.

If you wait long enough, and show the client you're not moving, they will eventually place themselves somewhere.

Scenario #2

Coach: [After the client has sat down] And where would you like me to be?

Client: Oh, just sit wherever.

Coach: Well, put me somewhere. [And wait till the client decides where they want you to be.]

What does this do?

Apart from letting the client know from the start that the coaching will be client-led, setting up the session this way can help to do the following:

1. It gives the coach information about the client. For example, a client who struggles to decide might be demonstrating a larger pattern of not wanting to take charge. That may not always be the case, but it is information that you could track.
2. It gives the client information they didn't know they had. For example, a client who feels trapped in a situation might choose to sit where she can look out to the horizon, and in that position, feel the physical sensation of relief. Having a wide horizon in front of her might then allow her to clarify what she wants.

3. It lets the client know from the start that they are responsible for themselves, the choices they make during the coaching and even in their life.
4. In most cases, the client will not realise that there may be a correspondence between the spatial arrangement of their inner landscape and how they place themselves and the coach. Even so, it can still be significant to the session.

How do people answer?

Although most people choose to sit in the room, be prepared for the client to suggest unexpected places to work. On the Adventures in Clean retreat this year, clients chose to start their sessions: standing up, in the garden; walking in the countryside; on a beach; even in the sea.

One fascinating response to the opening question, "And where would you like to be?", was "I'd like to be in the middle of the alphabet". Without missing a beat, the facilitator asked, "And when you would like to be in the middle of the alphabet, where is the middle of the alphabet?" The session got off to a flying start!

For further reading see:

Metaphors in Mind by James Lawley & Penny Tompkins.

Clean Approaches for Coaches by Marian Way.

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