



## CHAPTER 9


# Facilitative Coaching Conversations

*Read this when:*

- You need strategies to gently elicit a client's thinking or help a client release emotions
- You feel stuck in your coaching and want different ways of engaging in conversation with a client

### COACHING CONVERSATIONS

When I first started coaching, I had a hard time describing what I did with clients. “We just talk,” I’d say, “Mostly, we have conversations.” While it’s true that coaching happens in conversations, there’s a lot that’s gone on in order to arrive at the conversation, a lot that a coach does during the conversation, and a lot to do after a conversation. For a coach, the conversations themselves can be cognitively, emotionally, and even physically exhausting, because *a lot* happens in conversation. As our intention is to impact behavior, beliefs, and being, it is our job to artfully guide a coaching conversation in a way that produces results in these areas. It is at this point, during a conversation, that we’ll apply different kinds of questioning strategies. Chapters Nine and Eleven deconstruct the coaching conversation in order to illuminate the dozens of moves that a coach makes when in dialogue with a client.



*The process of coaching requires both backbone and compassion. The coach must be courageous enough to be gently irreverent with the client to test the client's view of the world. However, coaching can work only when the coach cares deeply about the client and is able to cast aside his own ego to support the client's efforts.*

PATRICIA MCNEIL AND  
STEVE KLINK (2004, p. 185)

A word of caution: As a coach starts pushing and probing into behaviors, beliefs, and being, clients can feel uncomfortable. Some have described this as feeling that their whole brain is being re-wired as they go through a process of unlearning. Clients return to the place of feeling like a beginner—they don't want to engage in the old behavior patterns, but they haven't quite mastered new strategies consistent with the values they want to embody (Schwarz and Davidson, 2008, p. 82). As we engage in conversations, while our clients make this shift from old patterns to new ones, our support is critical. Coaches must be very patient and compassionate and constantly check that our client is willing to engage in coaching. If we don't, we risk losing trust and therefore, the possibility of transformation.

---

### Essential Framework 3: Coaching Stances

One way that I became clearer about what was happening in coaching conversations, and one way in which I improved my coaching practice, was to apply an analytical framework to the talking that happened with clients. A framework for conversation does three things:

1. It provides a metacognitive structure to guide my questions and statements.
2. It helps me strategically plan a coaching conversation (see Chapter 13).
3. It offers ways to think and act during a session, especially when I'm unsure how to move my client forward.

There are a number of frameworks that can be applied in coaching. After experimenting with different models, I've found that for me, John Heron's is the most effective.


John Heron, a pioneer in counseling, facilitation, and personal and professional development delineates two broad approaches we take in the helping professions: a "facilitative" and an "authoritative" stance. From the facilitative stance, a coach pulls and helps the client to be autonomous by using what Heron identifies as a cathartic, catalytic, or supportive approach. From an authoritative stance, a coach takes an instructive or directive role on

behalf of the client and we might use what Heron calls a prescriptive, informative, or confrontational approach from this stance. When referring to Heron's "authoritative stance," I usually use the term "directive" as a synonym.

When I'm coaching, I sometimes imagine that I am shifting my body back and forth between two large, flat river stones—the "facilitative stone" and the "directive stone." Based on where my feet are planted, I behave differently—I say different things and ask different questions. I move between these two stances in response to who my client is, where my client is, and what I hear from my client. Usually, in a coaching conversation, I use most, if not all, of these approaches—I shift my feet often. Visualizing the stones helps me stay anchored in a specific approach and be intentional.

Conversations in which a coach uses a facilitative or directive approach are reflective: either about something that has happened, on thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and being, or on something that a client would like to do. Interspersed with reflective conversation are activities—sometimes even occurring during a coaching conversation itself. For example, a coach might engage a teacher in a reflective conversation on a lesson that didn't go well, and then immediately support the teacher to design a new lesson. Or a coach could help a principal process a difficult conversation that he had with a staff member, and then role-play the principal's follow-up conversation.

The following chapters dissect coaching conversations and activities to illustrate the various components: facilitative coaching conversations are explored in this chapter, followed by a chapter on facilitative coaching activities. Chapter Eleven dives into directive coaching conversations, followed by a chapter on directive coaching activities. In reality, in the coaching dance, we integrate all these strategies.

  
*Masterful coaches inspire  
people by helping them  
recognize the previously unseen  
possibilities that lay embedded  
in their existing circumstances.*

ROBERT HARGROVE (2003)

## FACILITATIVE COACHING

From the facilitative stance, a coach guides, helps, and pulls the client's learning. Heron names three ways in which we do this: from what he calls a cathartic approach, a catalytic approach, or a supportive approach.