

The marketing of coaching tends to embed an assumption that everyone can benefit from coaching. For most marketing messages, whether about coaching or anything else, I would recommend adding “depending on what” to any appeal. Coachee readiness is certainly one dependency for coaching success. The time and cost of any investment (assuming you’re personally investing in either one) can ensure some motivation, but not necessarily enough to make the change you desire, to achieve anticipated success from coaching. Apart from these personal investments, the expectations of the coachee role in a coaching partnership requires some attention. How prepared are you for self-responsibility, self-direction, setting your expectations of coaching and openness to dialogue? You may also like to consider your expectations of the coach; not all coaches may suit you. Such issues are discussed here.

I know that I personally have been a poor coachee in the past. Becoming a professional coach has given me significant insight into how to be ready for coaching. For example, now being more open to things I might not like about myself such as not willing to be pushed this way or that, as naturally conservative and often reluctant to stretch myself unduly. I have become much more open to accepting who I am, what I think and do; too; in fact, this is rather helpful to controlling my own stretch for more successful change. Another example in the past, I might have found that saying I find personal goal-setting difficult was embarrassing myself. Being embarrassed is now interesting to notice; openness when working with a coach has helped me to become aware of such aspects which have been previously part of me, but not objectively seen. Only with awareness can I attempt to change things. Yet I may not be able to change all of me yet; I still struggle to find the words to explain myself, particularly in respect of emotion or body sensitivity. I’ve had limited skills to explain symptoms to a doctor or interpret a yoga instructor, so I can easily feel exposed when receiving coaching, but we all must start somewhere to improve. Airing any such frustration can help a coach help me to help myself.

I often use tennis as a metaphor for life because it is always a joyful experience, so a yardstick for my joy in life! I’ve dabbled with tennis coaching on and off and have recently been investing in it more regularly. I think it is benefitting me more now because I’m more conscious of what I’m looking for from the coaching process. The return on investment may still involve largely intangible outcomes but somehow, I can feel the benefit from a joy perspective. One indirect benefit is the inspiration for this self-reflective article which I hope you find useful and engaging in helping you to decide whether to commit to a coaching programme. Your story is unique, but I hope my story and metaphor will help you to think more broadly about coaching. Perhaps there is a metaphor you like to use for coaching. (E.g. a mode of transport to get you from A to B.) A metaphor can be useful in any communication and help you find the right coach.

With professional coaching, it is expected that you enter into a coaching partnership that means being able to discuss the partnership ‘contract’. In relationship-building it is hard to pin down invisible psychological aspects of relationship and yet to be partners there needs to be collaboration and thus an agreement of intentions. (Please ask about a separate document for explanation of my soft skills model that uses the idea of ‘intentions for relationship’.)

The aim of this document is to help you develop your thoughts about coaching in preparation for your investment.

Why invest in coaching?

Simon Sinek is often quoted to recommend 'finding your why' and Steven Covey for 'starting with the end in mind.' Being clear on your purpose is ideal, but clarity may not be there at the outset. Knowing what clarity you do have initially, and what more clarity you need may be a helpful way forward. Coaching needs to be something you want to use as a tool for your own development. You'll most likely feel that you are not making progress on your own. Ideally though, understanding that coaching is a tool to address something that is within your own control is important: you can make your own decisions and change your own behaviour in relation to the topic. It is not applicable for issues where you desire a change in other people. Only in how you may be able to ethically influence others. Even if the topic is within your control, you may be procrastinating on reflection or taking action on it; there may be a reason you don't want to even think about it. The consequences of inaction may be applying pressure to a typically long activity list.

For my tennis, I decided that I had become frustrated enough with not being able to return a certain type of shot which seemed to be restricting the sort of games I wanted to play. Certain tennis players have suggested that at my age I've learned enough about tennis, and I could just play to my current level and habits. In other words, why am I bothering with coaching rather than making the most of being on the court. Admittedly I could be more grateful for still being able to play but is it OK to coast if I could improve? I could easily be persuaded that spending money on coaching is an indulgence. Yet. I often play doubles, 'team tennis', not to mention the occasional friendly match, so I notice when I let the side down with a poor shot. What's wrong with seeking more success?

Having a goal is generally thought helpful for coaching because it can provide the motivation for change. (I surprised myself with coming up with my tennis goal for which it would be easy to measure success.) A goal is helpful because coach and coachee are in a partnership that needs clarity about aims, in order to keep both partners on the path or recognise when the path is changing. Even though changes to aims are quite common, the benefit of a stated aim will have been that two people worked together to find a path to move the coachee forwards; that path led to the realisation of any changed path; there can be learning too from a change of direction. It's like having an agenda for a meeting, or desired deliverables for a project: both help with alignment of the group, especially if managed well. Yet issues and topics can arise which all need addressing but there is a choice when to address them and a record of decisions.

Am I happy with the coach?

Some coaches offer a free chemistry session though I personally do not. I find there's usually an explorative, consultative call where I've asked lots of questions anyway. Also, paying something for any coaching session can mean an investment that encourages consideration of a real issue, from which value can be truly assessed. Coaching is not just a chat. It is desirable for perceivable results even at the outset, especially when both parties do not know each other well. Also, change may not be immediately apparent; it can happen after the conversation. Yet it may be important to you to know about your coach since you are relying on them for professional conduct. You might want to feel particularly safe if you're planning to air something sensitive. What do you need to ask to be comfortable about their manner or behaviour?

Co-creation of the coaching relationship is expected of coaches, but what exactly is a coaching relationship? I would say it is not necessary to know your coach well, but like other professional relationships how you get on with your coach is important. Accredited coaches follow an ethical code and coaches are generally skilled in gaining rapport, but if you have expectations about the behaviour of a coach, it is good to air these at the outset. This airing of intentions is part of

'contracting'. You might, for example be expecting advice. Professional coaches tend to want the coachee to do their own thinking and reach their own conclusions. However, coaches can have a particular area of expertise and may have a specific set of tools and processes that they are willing to share with you. I know most about project management, empowerment, motivation, logical thinking and coaching skills, and I would be happy to share my experience with these, outside of the coaching conversation. I would say my best skills relate to the coaching and particularly to listening with presence to support you to think, to understand and then to experiment with making changes. I am careful about boundaries to the relationship too because I believe in the power of the coaching philosophy. I am conscious of my tennis coach getting close to boundaries even though he is knowledgeable about fitness and healing the body, not to mention purchase of tennis racquets or clothing items.

A coaching relationship can improve over time, but I think only if you're prepared to talk about intentions for that relationship. I'd say I'm still getting to know how my tennis coach after more than 20 sessions though of course I get a better idea about the person along the way. I recognise that sports coaching tends to be different from professional coaching but believe that Timothy Gallwey (author of Inner Game of Tennis book) is one of the fathers of professional coaching. I'm impressed with my tennis coach who seems to understand 'Inner Game' principles. These principles are about educating me to notice things related to body, racquet, ball. Interesting then that I also notice his attempts to influence me to raise my standards: how I look and act on the court, the racquet I use. Is he giving me direction or stating his position for me to make my mind up about? Or acting with a professional sense of care? For the coaches reading this, it feels like I've concluded that this is a combined coaching and coach supervision perspective, in raising my expectations of being part of the tennis world as coach supervisors raise expectations of myself as a coach. The more we work with a coach it may be inevitable that some of their values show up in conversations around the coaching conversation if not directly in the coaching.

Am I clear about coaching?

To reiterate, the coaching philosophy implies that the coachee owns responsibility for success. Although the coach must be competent, the coachee must bring appropriate topics to work on, set appropriate goals for themselves and take action to get the most out of the sessions. How aware are you of your intentions for coaching and your expectations of it or the coach, even how you want to be coached? At the outset, expect that a coach will initiate a conversation about overall expectations. They may forget later to check in on the big picture, having got into a routine, so practice participating in the contracting for each coaching session, then you'll have a better idea how to negotiate in future. It's worthwhile learning for taking responsibility.

Feeling empowered to have a conversation about how you want to be coached is ultimately ideal, but it may take time to become confident to do so: for example. It can feel awkward initially to find the right words. Unless one has been coached by different coaches, one may not have the experience to converse on this. However, you will be able to do this better if you start doing it, so do check out the coach's terms and conditions and ask them to explain meaning, so that you can come back to negotiate whenever needed. It is an interesting and useful thing to explore due to its relevance in consideration of any other relationship you have. So often we make assumptions based on the names of roles (coach, coachee) or processes (coaching).

An interim step is to talk about the coaching relationship and how you expect it to work: consider what your current intentions are and ask about the coach's. This is a chance to air views about the role of the coach. Would it help to think of the coach as an expensive tool with lots of capabilities to

be utilised? What do you expect will be most useful given your strengths and weaknesses? What do you want to be in control of, if anything? Consider that coaching can address immediate issues but may reveal unconscious habits which you may or may not want to address. It is ultimately your choice. What would you ultimately like to learn about yourself through the coaching?

For my tennis coaching, I think I was clear as coachee at the outset but recently I feel I've got into a routine of listening to the coach too much and letting him lead. If this is truly a partnership, I need to retake more of a lead. Nevertheless, having done so, I'm getting to understand his style and know how to work with it. In a sense I'm willing to see what he can offer but I need to stay vigilant that it is working for me. Paying close attention and practising appropriately from session to session is paying dividends but I do not want to let go of the question "have I got the most out of it that I could?". Investment in my view must be cost effective so if the answer is "possibly not", I'd like to be reflecting and improving on my intentions.

How many sessions do I want?

From a budgetary perspective, investment of both effort and money needs consideration against the cost of individual sessions. Maybe a coach will give you a discount for a programme or set of sessions. Or maybe there is a choice of a particular programme (or several) versus individual sessions. Personally, I prefer to be flexible and tailor to the client's need. I think that aligns with coaching philosophy.

For my tennis, rather atypically I had a SMART goal, but in hindsight I did not know how many sessions that would take. It was clear early on that it was going to take more than the 10 I possibly had in mind. Yet, I'm now conscious that I'm constantly measuring my commitment to act based on what I'm learning and what is happening when playing tennis. It feels like a new world is being disclosed to me. Even if new horizons are appearing, coaching is still a choice; the budget is a consideration.

There has been some investment time in understanding how to get the most from my coach, and perhaps more importantly in what I can get from myself. I originally thought I would have a few coaching sessions and see what happened. Now it feels like I'm doing the same with more possibilities due to the growth. Maybe I'll take a break or extend the time between sessions to compensate. It is up to me to decide.

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