

Coaching in Khaki

What if a coach is unable to coach her client as an equal because the client directly outranks her? Is quality coaching then possible at all? Oh yes, says Colonel Marian Lauder, given the right depth of organisational culture.

Coaching is about building — relationships, people, teams and, through them, organisational performance — but like all buildings, it needs to stand on a firm foundation. Management Futures helpfully provides this by offering a set of six principles on which coaching should be based. As I eagerly soaked up this wisdom during my coaching training, I found my mind being constantly drawn back to principle number five: 'the coach and the client are equals'. It intrigued me because I intended to coach where I work, in an intensely hierarchical organisation with clearly defined structures and visible signs of rank denoting one's place in the pecking order: the Army.

I wondered if this partnership of equals had to be an absolute? If I observed the normal military conventions such as wearing badges of rank and using language like 'Sir' and 'Ma'am' - not quite the stuff of equality - would that mean there could be no coaching, or that coaching would be suboptimal? I was soon to find out

as this was the approach I intended to adopt.

In the year since then I have coached officers both senior and junior to me. Their needs and the routes they have taken to my coaching room may have varied but two constants have held throughout: [1] Rank has always been most evidently present, acting as a superficial reminder of the deeper disciplines, boundaries and protocols that it serves to express within the military; thus maintaining a constant focus on the disparity, rather than the equality of the relationship. [2] Yet there has been no obvious impairment to the quality outcome of the relationship.

So, how can coaching survive in the Armed Forces without principle number five?

It owes its resilience, I think, to a combination of our *modus operandi* and cultural heritage. My clients will more often than not set their coaching experience within the more familiar frame of reference of Army training and tactics - sometimes explicitly sometimes with just a brief nod to the military language we share. Yet this goes deeper than a common lexicon. It taps into some of the underlying principles and rhythms that military coach and client alike understand. It is about us knowing, *inter alia*, that assistance flows to the person with the greatest need, not the person with the higher rank (the principle of 'supported and supporting'); and that there are formalised structures of communication in the Armed Forces that ensure a smooth operation in times of crisis and transcend rank (processes such as 'mission command'). I will spare you the full tactics lesson: suffice to say that we are quite used to senior people supporting their juniors - and vice versa - as and where the situation demands; we are able to have confidence that those allocated to a task will be trained and skilled to carry it out, especially in an operational environment.

So coaching fits well with the way we operate. We accept expertise coming from a variety of sources that flows up and down the chain of command, so my clients - junior and senior - do not question my training, qualifications, level of experience or - most usefully - my relative status. Which does not of course mean we ignore the rank of the person before us. There is no suspense of evident inequality for some higher coaching purpose: every one of my coaching sessions has graphically illustrated its own subtle references to rank - a subtlety deriving from the fact that for those who serve, rank carries layers of meaning accumulated over centuries of living working, fighting - and

dying - together. Rank is not something artificially imposed on top of everything else we do. It is part of the bedrock of the Armed Forces very being.

That same cultural heritage delivers benefit to coaching. The dependency and openness of relationships forged in demanding operational conditions builds deep trust and understanding. We have an inherent culture of sharing, protecting and mentoring. Officers and soldiers tend to know more about each other than do civilian bosses and workers - a natural consequence of our cheek - by-jowl way of living and operating. And coaching can be a natural extension of this most unusual way of life.

The downside, predictably, is that Armed Forces clients can be instinctively - and wrongly -- inclined to rule out non-military coaches.

As these reflections arising from a military context could have a wider application for internal coaches working in other strongly hierarchical organisations, I have two conclusions to offer them:

[1] Guiding principles matter but should not be treated as sacred texts; internal coaches will encounter circumstances where they must be adapted or even foregone. The Army can't be the only organisation that

sometimes has to suspend the assumption of equality.

[2] A loss of equality is acceptable if balanced by significant gains elsewhere; I find the receptiveness of coaches, the credibility of the coaching relationship and the cultural and training heritage brought to bear by both coach and client, far outweigh the loss of equality.

Speaking now for Colonel Lauder's civilian counterparts, Jenny Rogers Finds that for internal civilian coaches at least, the dynamics are surprisingly similar — and makes a small tweak to her famous Principle Five.

Coaching in Civvies

When I developed the Six Principles of Coaching it was because of my growing conviction that most beginner coaches struggle with three overwhelming urges: to give advice, to rescue or to direct.

So Principle Five: **'The coach and the client are equals'** is a reminder that were not working as doctor to patient, as good Samaritan to victim or as boss to subordinate.

The principle of equality between coach and client is relatively easily observed for the external executive coach. The client has his or her work status, the coach has his or her reputation and coaching skill. In most circumstances the client cannot do the coach's job nor can the coach do the client's job. Where hierarchy is concerned, you meet on neutral ground.

It's bound to be different when you are working inside an organisation, either as Marian describes - as an internal coach - or as a line—manager coach, when all of the principles need some calibration. The uniformed services with their badges and formal salutes are just the most overt example of how hierarchical we human beings are. We must have leaders; the 'self managing team' is a contradiction in terms. As a tyro coach at the BBC nearly 20 years ago, I also coached people several notches up or down the hierarchy

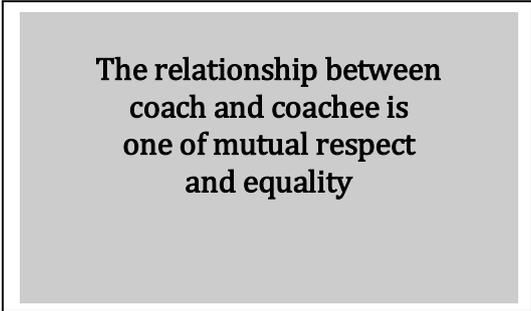
from me. How was that different from what I do now as an external coach? Probably much the same in most respects but with some crucial differences.

First, I see now that it was hard if not impossible to challenge the taken-for-granted in the organisation's culture because they were as invisible to me as to my clients. If a client brought me an issue about his bitter disappointment over a rejected programme idea, I would be inclined to go along with his belief that put-up-or shut-up was the best option. This was because I shared the fantasy that Channel Controllers were superhuman beings whose power was absolute. Then, too, much internally-offered coaching is implicitly about fitting in, i.e. with preserving the status quo. So when a talented client, the sort of person we both knew the BBC would be keen to keep, told me about profound dissatisfaction with her job, I probably assumed that it would somehow be unethical for me to raise the possibility of her leaving.

As an external coach, it is much easier to be overt about the whole—life nature of the client's agenda. It can feel like prying to ask about personal life when you are the client's boss or a colleague. Fears, often irrational, about confidentiality may also prevent the internal client bringing you such issues. As an internal coach I never once worked with a client who confessed to problems with sleep, teenage children, marital difficulties, chronic anxiety alcohol or drugs, whereas I have many times worked on such issues when I am seen as an outsider whose promise of confidentiality is implicitly trusted.

The kind of coaching you can do as an internal coach is profoundly affected by the nature of the organisation's culture and this is easier in some organisations than in others. I have worked as an external coach in places where the climate is so toxic, so drenched in dread of making a mistake and where staff become so expert in shovelling blame upwards that it is impossible to imagine how any internal coach could, do good work, however skilled they are. In the Army, Marian describes many features of its life that make coaching seem like a natural fit, among them the intense and crucial interdependence needed in combat. There may be another that she does not mention. All officers now do an entry year at Sandhurst where their tutors are NCOs and Warrant Officers. The necessary humility this requires from young recruits must have a career-long impact.

When we train line managers and internal cadres of coaches in coaching skills, we now offer them this version of Principle Five:



**The relationship between
coach and coachee is
one of mutual respect
and equality**

The model in true coaching is colleague—colleague because it is based on total respect for each other as individuals, regardless of place in the hierarchy. Here I think Marian and I can probably agree with perfect equanimity.

