

Chapter 1:

Effective Engagement

In this chapter we look at effective engagement as the common theme connecting the coach's work with the client to successful business outcomes. The quality of the engagement that the coach is able to generate is the major determinant of the success of the coaching. We look at:

- coaches who engage and clients who engage;
- characteristics of effective engagement between coach and client, including as a 'golden thread' the characteristics of 'respectful, listening, open-minded, flexible, supportive, challenging and forward looking';
- engagement as co-invention;
- varying the pace of engagement, covering thoughtful reflection, creative co-invention, purposeful dialogue and linking professional and personal priorities;
- engagement between the coach and the sponsor of the coaching; and
- where effective engagement can lead.

Coach, client and sponsor all have a part to play in ensuring the effectiveness of the coaching engagement.

Good coaching will feed directly through to the performance of an organization. The business case for coaching is based on individuals becoming more focused and successful in their work and contributing more effectively to corporate success. For this to happen, effective engagement is crucial at each step in the process, covering the relationship between coach and client, between the coach and business needs, and between clients and their own aspirations. The feedback loop to the success of the business is crucial to assessing the success of the coaching.

Coaches who engage

The following quotes are from buyers of coaching in a variety of organizations, who all put a strong emphasis on effective engagement between coach and client.

‘Coaches must be grounded in commercial reality and be good at challenging in an appropriate way.’

Jill King, Linklaters

‘Coaches should have experience and skills of their own to draw on. They must be able to hold the mirror up and be constructive.’

Philippa Charles, ABF Foods

‘A good coach needs to listen and ask good questions. The coach must be able to articulate their area of specialism and be clear with which sort of people they work.’

Noel Hadden, Deutsche Bank

‘Coaches must have high-quality interpersonal skills and be good at generating mutual confidence and quality relationships.’

Rob Edwards, UK Environment Agency

A consistent message is that coaches must work well with individuals and rapidly build an understanding of the environment in which they work. They need to understand the complexity of business life. It is crucial they bring organizational understanding and savvy. Common themes in these perspectives are understanding business reality, significant experience, strong ‘interpersonal skills’ and the ability to work with complexity.

Clients who engage

No effective coaching takes place unless the client engages with and is committed to the process. Here are some views from clients at the start of the engagement process with a coach:

‘You were very helpful to a friend of mine when he took up a new FD role on the Board. I’ve now taken on this Managing Partner role, which I have never done before.’

Managing Partner, law firm

'I am the youngest on the Board. I want to become a credible candidate for CEO in the future. What can you do to help?'

CEO, Latin America, commercial company,
who was interviewing three coaches

'I want to establish priorities and plan for 12 months ahead. I want to bring about changes in people and culture and need to develop my client-influencing skills and relationship building. I need a sounding board.'

CEO, major consulting firm

At the outset, clients often do not know what coaching is about, but what they do know is that they want someone they can relate to and engage with because they are willing to 'give it a go'. They are committed to coaching in at least three areas:

- *Context*: e.g. taking on a new role.
- *Content*: e.g. either of a business nature, with the opportunity therefore to work through issues with someone jointly; or of a personal nature, in that they are not sure how to move forward and whether they have the skills or confidence to do so.
- *Challenge*: e.g. they need someone who can challenge and stretch them; take them out of their comfort zone so that they develop into someone bigger, better or more influential; and play 'at the top of their game'.

Characteristics of effective engagement between coach and client

The 'golden thread' running through effective engagement between coach and client includes the characteristics shown in Fig. 1.1.

Respectful includes trust and unconditional mutual regard. *Listening* is all about being fully present and giving someone sole, undivided attention. *Open-minded* is about banishing preconceived notions, being fully on the client's agenda and finding the point of need. *Flexible* is about varying the approach, pace and timing to fit the circumstances of the individual, using a variety of models. *Supportive* is about encouragement, emphasizing the positive and helping individuals keep up their energy. *Challenging* is about an engagement between equals where the coach is not deferential: it is about slicing through the dross and holding up a mirror to the client.

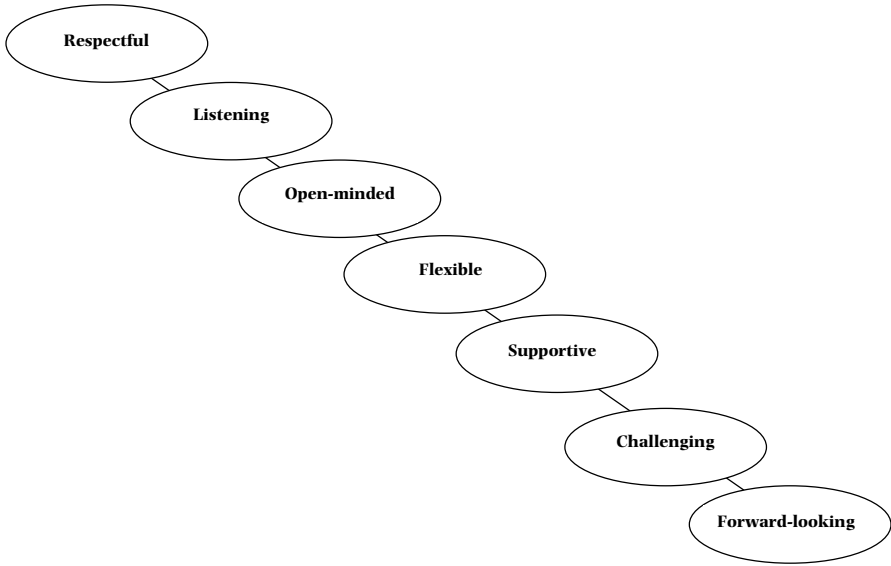


Fig. 1.1 The ‘golden thread’ running through effective engagement

Forward looking is about a relentless focus on the future, whatever past or current travails there have been.

Effective engagement between coach and client involves various areas (see Fig. 1.2). Effective engagement requires the coach to have a grounding in the *business needs* and priorities of the organization. This does not mean the coach will have worked in precisely the same situation, but direct per-

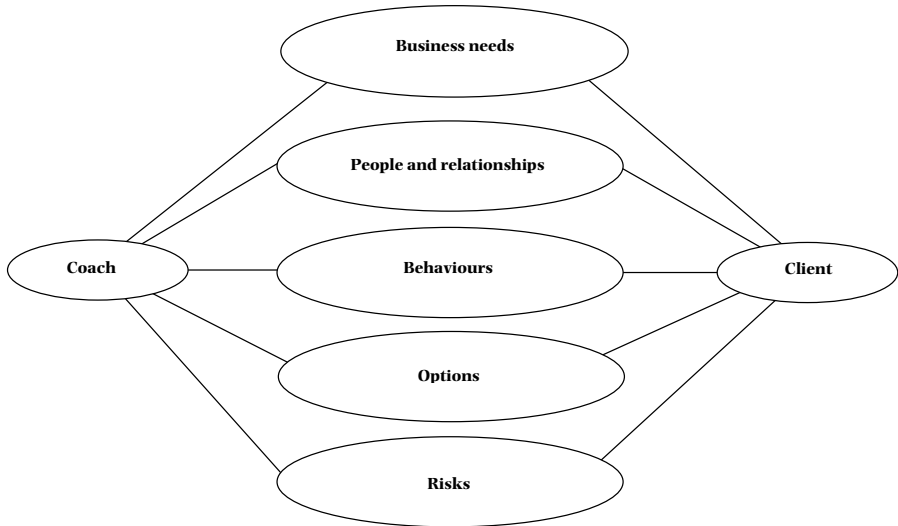


Fig. 1.2 Effective engagement between coach and client

sonal experience of a similar leadership position will be immensely helpful. It helps root the conversations in business reality. Using an analogy from sport, good sports coaches do not have to have been the champion at the same level, but they do need to have been ‘up there’, living and breathing the joys and pressures.

The good coach will bring to the conversation a firm understanding of *people and relationships*. There will be a natural empathy with different types of people, coupled with a hard edge about what helps individuals focus and deliver more effectively. An understanding of behaviours will be an essential underpinning to the dialogue, to help the coach bring new insights and perspectives.

Good coaching conversation will be engaging, with *options* and *risks*. There will be the private space to explore topics in a measured and emotional way. The coach is pointing out angles or implications, but the client is shaping the options and working through later stages. A crucial contribution from the business coach is to help an individual engage with the issues which are most important and to think through the risks effectively. Understanding risks well is possibly the most valuable perspective a coach can bring.

Engagement about business needs will be at different levels, depending on the responsibilities of the client. The more senior the client, the more the discussion will be at a strategic level. But whatever the seniority of the individual, a common theme is likely to be working at identifying key priorities.

These are four important levels of engagement between coach and client as shown in Fig. 1.3.

Factual is about being on the same page in terms of information. It is about having a significant understanding of the background and the context. It is not having an encyclopaedic knowledge of an area, but does involve a good understanding of the key parameters and levers.

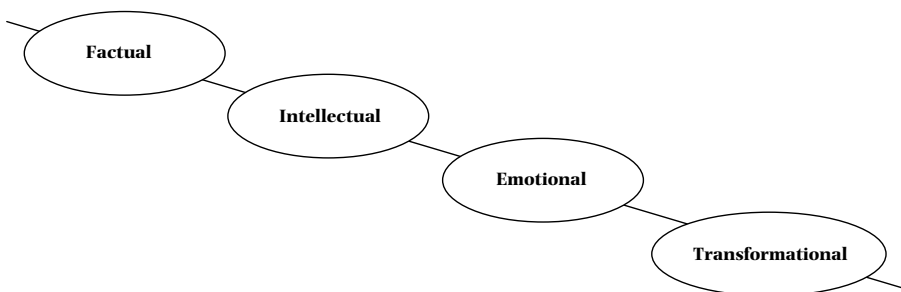


Fig. 1.3 The four levels of engagement

Intellectual is about being able to talk about issues on equal terms in a robust way; it includes seeing the policy and operational consequences of different actions.

Emotional is about an openness of human strengths and frailties. It is creating a relationship whereby the client is willing to be open about their emotional reactions and to move on, through recognizing what they find difficult and how they want to develop their own capacity for courage and resilience. Emotional reactions in leaders may be getting in the way of the individual's clear, authentic leadership; if the coach can help bring clarity, a road block to progress can be removed.

Transformational is about a quality of coaching discourse which results in the client viewing themselves and their situation in an entirely different way. The coach has to be prepared to read their own emotional reactions in a coaching discussion, using them as a barometer of the impact the client has on others.

In the best of coaching discussions there is the creativity of two people working well together. There is focused questioning and dialogue when the overall result is more than the sum of the parts. The interaction leads to creative and dynamic progress towards new solutions. Sometimes when the coach and client look back, they are surprised by the progress that has taken place.

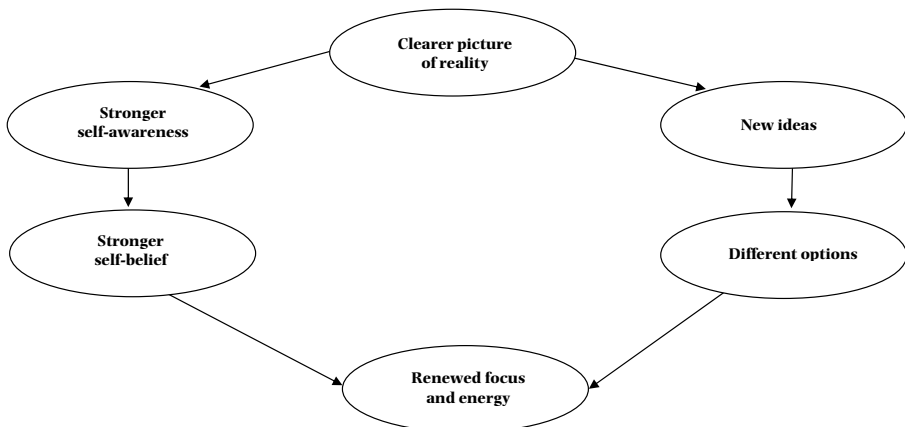


Fig. 1.4 Engagement as a co-invention of ideas and possibilities

Engagement as co-invention

In our view, coaching is not the coach just asking questions and listening, nor is it the coach providing solutions: the best engagements include a co-invention of ideas and possibilities (see Fig. 1.4).

Co-invention has to start from a *clear picture of reality*, grounded in facts and in a good understanding of the context. Co-invention may then travel down two tracks. On the left-hand side of Fig. 1.4 is the personal dimension, covering *self-awareness* and *self-belief*, where psychologically based approaches can be a valuable aid. On the right-hand side of the diagram is the business dimension, where creative discussion leads to *new ideas* and *different options*. The result of exploring both dimensions is *renewed focus and energy*.

For engagement to happen effectively, you cannot have a rigid process or a forced fit. The engagement between coach and coachee has to evolve. In a long-term coaching relationship, the engagement will have gone through many different phases. Coaching is like going on a route through a forest where the terrain varies: sometimes the coach and client are travelling together, but through very different terrain; on other occasions, they will be going through similar landscape and dealing on a regular basis with issues that the client finds most difficult.

Varying the pace of engagement

The engagement between coach and client is always client focused, but is likely to have a range of different dimensions (see Fig 1.5).

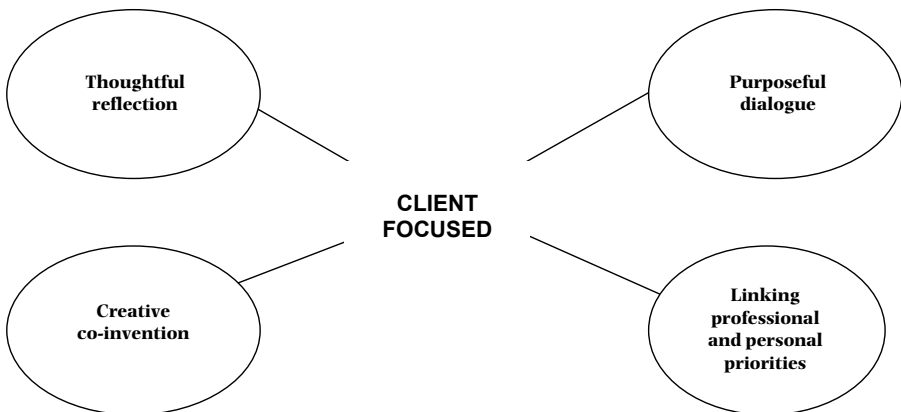


Fig. 1.5 The different dimensions of client-focused engagement

Thoughtful reflection may well be looking at the implications of past and current events. It is looking at the context and assessing the relative importance of events. It is standing back and considering how important something is ‘in the great scheme of things’. *Purposeful dialogue* is likely to be focused on a particular issue, looking at possible action and risks. It is moving to specific measurable next steps and outcomes.

Creative co-invention is considering in a more open way new approaches and dimensions, possibly with a long-term focus. *Linking professional and personal priorities* is about always coming back to an individual reflecting on their own values and interlinking the vision and responsibilities they have at both a professional and personal level.

The coaching conversations must always enable the client to engage effectively with the worlds that are most important to them. Key elements are illustrated in Fig 1.6.

The rationale for business coaching is helping to meet business needs, but the four dimensions in the diagram need to be in reasonable harmony if an individual is going to make a maximum contribution to meeting business needs.

Individual clients need to be able to engage with themselves in terms of understanding their strengths and weaknesses, and have enough self-knowledge to enable them to move on. Clients need to be conscious about the relative importance for them of the family and community dimension, both in terms of understanding themselves and in terms of clarity about their personal priorities. It also helps if the individual is willing to engage

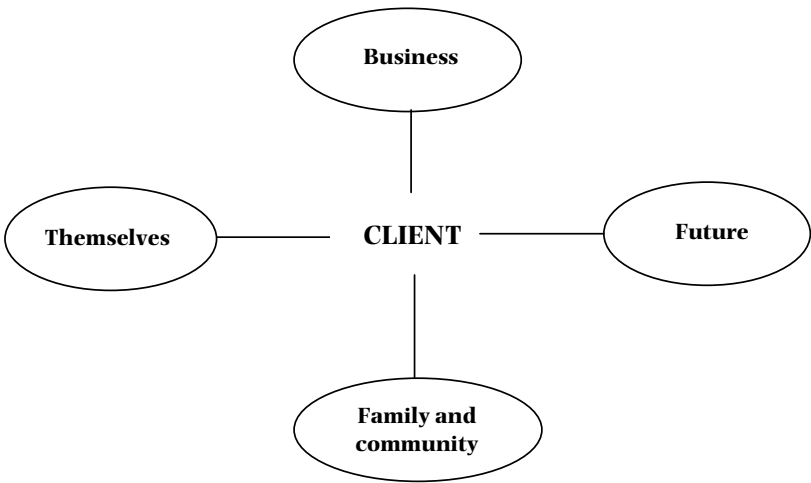


Fig. 1.6 Key elements of coaching conversations

with different options about the future and is willing to sometimes remove blinkers that might be constraining their view of future possibilities.

Part of individuals engaging with themselves is understanding the complex web within them that brings together their drivers, frailties, fears and aspirations. It is the fascinating interlinking of these different aspects of personality that makes engaging with yourself as an individual absorbing. It must not become excessively self-indulgent. It needs to be an engagement that helps the individual move on to more effectively engage themselves with their work and personal priorities.

Engagement between coach and sponsor

Coaching is part of a three-way relationship between coach, client and sponsor (see Fig 1.7).

The sponsor is the lead person within the organization employing the client. This might be the CEO, HR Director or the Line Manager, depending on who is taking the primary responsibility in ensuring the success of the coaching. Often all are involved to some degree.

The engagement between coach and sponsor is important in ensuring the success of the coaching work, without in any way affecting the confidentiality of the relationship between the coach and client. This engagement might cover the areas shown in Fig.1.8.

Where the coach understands the business needs and opportunities from the perspective of the sponsor, they can more readily focus the coaching work. Briefing about the organization in terms of its structures, organiza-

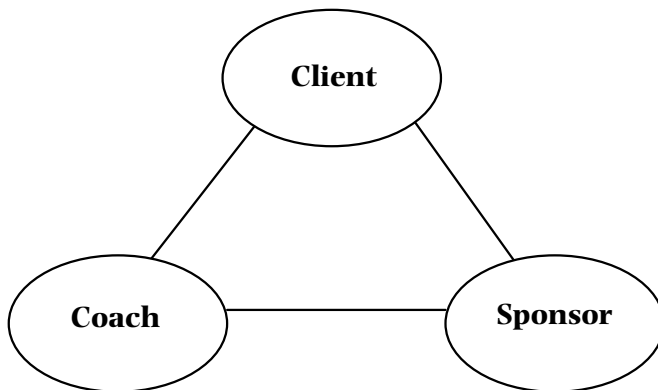


Fig.1.7 Coaching as a three-way relationship

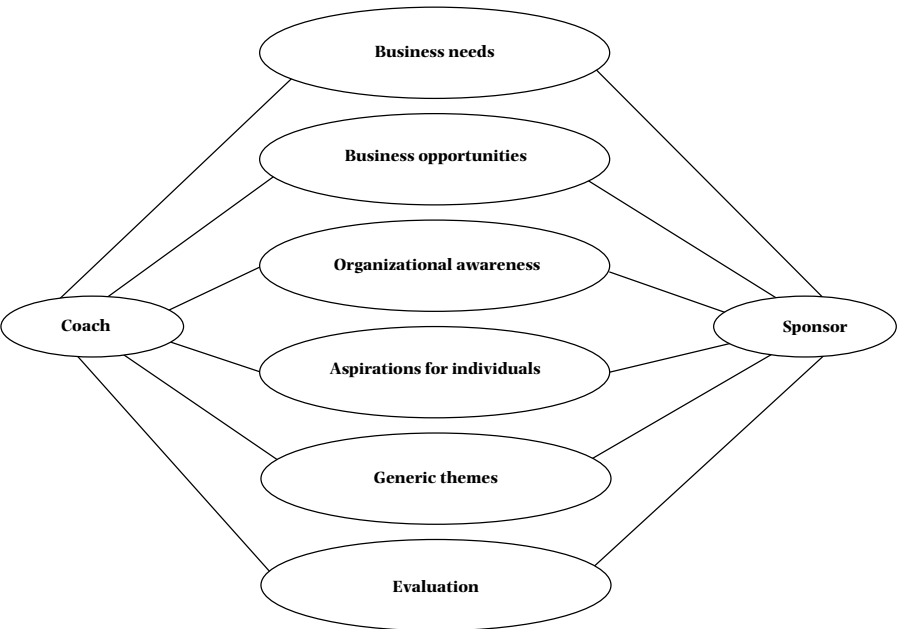


Fig. 1.8 The engagment between coach and sponsor

tional behaviours and culture can provide a valuable context for the coach. Being aware of the organization’s perspective on an individual in terms of capabilities and potential is an important starting point.

Effective engagement with the sponsor includes feedback of generic themes where a number of clients are involved, and the evaluation of the outcomes of the coaching work. Part of effective engagement is the willingness of the sponsor to change their mind about an individual when there has been a transformation in an individual’s confidence and competence. The sponsor needs to believe that coaching can work and not be fixed into a rigid perspective about an individual’s capabilities!

Effective engagement internationally

Effective engagement by coaches will take account of both cultural and linguistic differences as shown in Fig. 1.9. Economic drivers mean that cross-cultural and international working is essential. Coaches who are internationally aware can enable individuals to cope effectively with cultural and linguistic differences and ensure that economic drivers for co-operation are used effectively. Using modern communication well and ensuring virtual

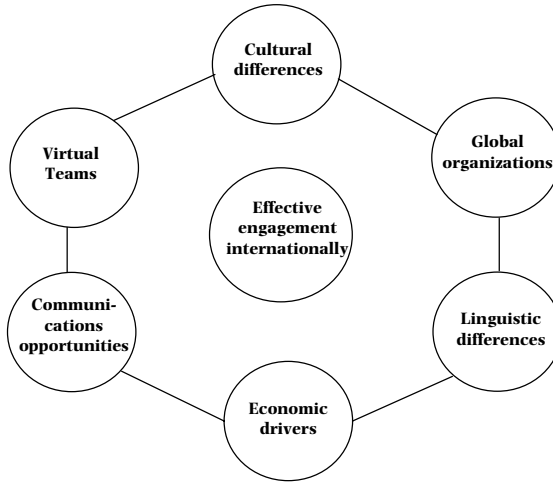


Fig. 1.9 Effective engagement internationally

teams are successful pushes the business leader into new and innovative ways of engaging. Elements of effective engagement internationally are illustrated in Fig.1.9.s

Where can effective engagement lead?

Our thesis is that good business outcomes require the client to be engaged on the right activities in a focused way. Achieving this depends on effective engagement of coach and client: engagement that is factual, intellectual, emotional and transformational, with phases of thoughtful reflection, purposeful dialogue, creative co-invention and the linking of professional and personal priorities alongside a positive mental attitude. This book now looks at effective engagement through a range of different perspectives. Engagement is not about 'one size fits all'; it is about a flow of conversation that moves an agenda on at a pace which fits the needs of the client and enables them to be energized by the process.

