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Three principles of a coaching approach

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Introduction

This free course, *Three principles of a coaching approach*, will give you a good sense of the three core skills required to be an effective coach: rapport, listening and reflecting. It should enable you to recognise the use of a coaching approach in your workplace, and to enhance your day-to-day interactions at work.

Effective coaching depends for its success on a handful of core skills. These are:

- building rapport
- listening
- summarising and reflecting

These skills are employed in a disciplined way in performance coaching with the effect that the coachee should feel listened to, understood, supported, stimulated and focused. Each skill has a particular emphasis in performance coaching beyond their conventional use – we employ these skills in a very focused way.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course BG023 *Coaching for performance*, which is no longer in presentation. You may be interested in BGXS001 *Introduction to business and workplace coaching* and BGXC001 *Developing a coaching culture*.

Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- identify three core coaching skills
- apply these coaching skills.

1 Building rapport



Figure 1

Listen to the following audio to hear about the essential role that building rapport has within coaching.

Audio content is not available in this format.

Building rapport

The quality of the relationship between coach and coachee is fundamental to the success of the coaching. Various studies into the effectiveness of different psychotherapeutic approaches has revealed that it was in fact the quality of rapport which was the key indicator of success – not the approach itself. Where the relationship was strong the prognosis for success was high. Similarly, it is often noted that where the patient feels listened to and respected by their doctor it has a positive impact on their recovery chances.

Rapport is a key building block to a productive change process and is essentially a feeling of mutual connection, characterised by feelings of recognition and respect. It is not necessarily about mutual liking; it is more about seeing and being seen, listening and being listened to, and having mutual confidence in the relationship.

It is the responsibility of the coach to ensure they do all they can to create rapport. The coach manages the process – the dynamics, structure and energy of the coaching – in order that the coachee is left free to do their thinking in a productive and conducive environment. Rapport is a key part of this process.

We can all create rapport with those we instinctively respond to positively: usually with those people who are ‘a bit like us’. The challenge in performance coaching is to be able to create rapport with a wide range of people. How do we do this? How is it that some people seem to have the gift of creating rapport with virtually anyone − think Michael Palin on his travel programmes? Whereas others of us seem diffident and uncomfortable in relationship building, especially with those we might meet for the first time? It is not magic − rapport has a structure.

Essentially our quality of rapport is hugely dependent on first impressions. Think about entering a room on a social occasion or some kind of ‘networking’ business event. What do we do? Mostly unconsciously we search around the room making judgements! We might not like to admit this intellectually, but at an unconscious level we look to see who looks safe or possibly threatening, or who might be attractive or otherwise, or who might be ‘like us’ in some way. We then gravitate only towards the people who pass our unconscious selection test, avoiding the others. This is indeed human nature and it is hard-wired. Think about job interviews – it is well known that decisions tend to get made very early on in the interview process – often within seconds, based on very subjective ‘gut feeling’.

In our coaching role it is our job to create a first impression for our coachees that allows them to feel comfortable and reassured right from the first moments – especially if they do not know us very well. Coachees may feel a little anxious about the coaching and will certainly be in a state of high attention coming in to a session. Our job is to send signals through our body language and voice tone that say, at an unspoken level: 'It is OK – you are safe, recognised and welcome!'

We do this by:

- paying close attention to our coachee with our eyes and ears – really 'tuning in' to them from the moment we meet them for coaching
- adjusting our body language and voice tone so it tunes in with theirs. There are lots of things we can do here, e.g. matching posture, facial expression or gestures. We might also adjust our pace and energy, perhaps speeding ourselves up a bit if we have a fast-paced coachee or slowing down a bit if our client is slower-paced than us. Vocally we can watch out for levels of volume, pace and tone, and ensure our own voice 'tunes in' with theirs.

1.1 How to build rapport

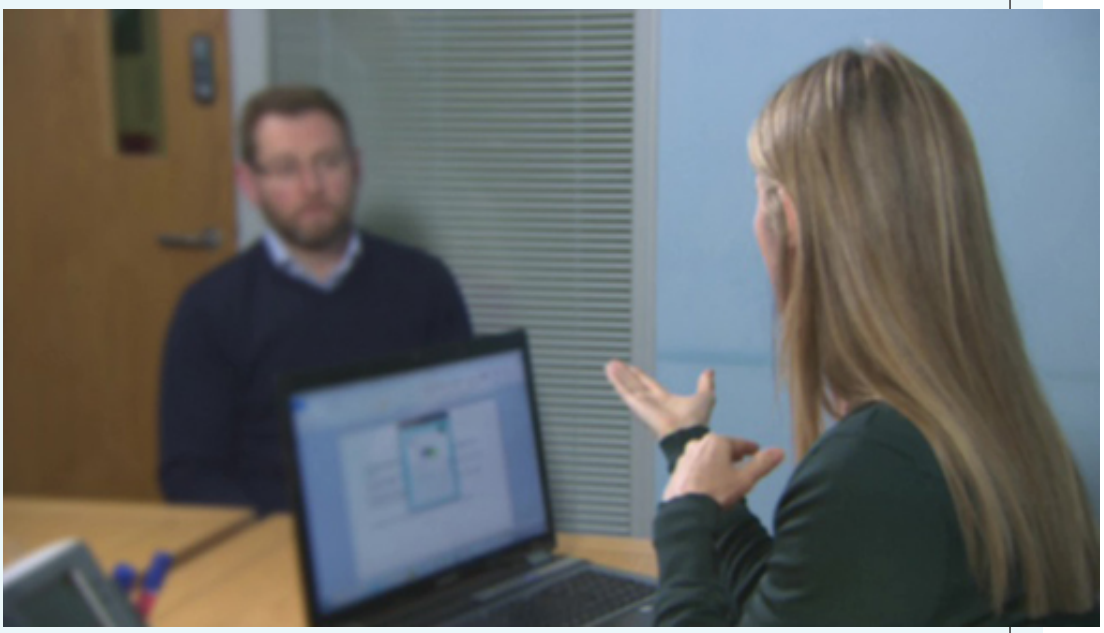
The two activities in this section are designed to provide guidance on building rapport.

Activity 1 Failing to establish rapport

Allow around 10 minutes for this activity.

Watch Video 1 to see what happens when a coach fails to establish rapport with the coachee and how uncomfortable the session becomes.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 1 Bad rapport



What do you notice the coach has done or not done?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

As this video makes clear, if the rapport is not there it is going to massively de-power the potential for the coaching. Where coaching becomes weak or uncertain it is often the rapport factor that needs attention rather than any other influence. We can hardly emphasise this enough!

Activity 2 Impact of good rapport

Allow around 10 minutes for this activity.

Watch Video 2 to see the impact of good rapport on a coaching session.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 2 Good rapport



Again, what do you notice the coach has done or not done?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

We are *not* suggesting rigid mimicry here! This is not an automatic mirroring process but a nuanced process of careful observation, listening and behavioural response.

You might try at some point just ‘tuning in’ to a colleague or friend in this way and notice how much easier it makes it to really listen to them and to build a comfortable relationship.

You may initially feel this to be a little ‘unnatural’: in reality it is just a social skill, and we have all learned these as we have developed as people – how many of us were born knowing how we were supposed to behave at table for example? We learn these skills, either through observation or instruction. We are in fact developing a new social habit – one which will serve us well in all our communications and especially in performance coaching.

2 Listening



Figure 2

The act of consciously creating connection through building rapport sets the scene for really attentive listening. The good news is that if you focus all your attention on to someone else in order to be able to respond to their body language and voice, then you are already a long way towards being in a state of mind where you are able to *really* listen to them – because your focus is on them rather than on yourself.

Ask yourself: how often do you feel someone is really focused on you, is fully present with you, during a working day? And how often are you really listening to or being present with someone else? We are beset with distractions.

- *External* distractions include ambient noise: phones ringing, colleagues talking, computers that go 'bing!' as each email arrives, mobile phones − to name a few.
- *Internal* mental distractions are created by our busy schedules – the frustrating meeting we have just been to, the daunting meeting coming up, the numerous matters needing our attention.

Then there are the ways we can distract ourselves *during* a coaching conversation. We might find ourselves worrying about 'getting it right' in various ways, or wondering if the coachee is valuing the session – self-doubt is a rich source of distraction from listening.

The way to become a better listener is to practise. The key areas are:

- **Intent** – setting out to be in rapport, pay attention and bring your attention back when you find yourself temporarily distracted – as you will inevitably be.
- **Attention** – practice becoming more focused on where your listening attention is really going – are you listening to what is being said with a view to understanding, or with a view to rehearsing your next question?
- **Focus on their agenda**, not what it means to you and your agenda. Sometimes we hear what someone says and in an effort to make sense of it we refer it mentally to things we understand ourselves. For example a coachee says they have got a dispute with a colleague and our mind immediately jumps to something like: 'Oh yes ... I had a row with a colleague recently and what I did was ...' This is sometimes called 'level one' listening, where our attention is really on our own thoughts, feelings and judgements rather than on focusing intently on the coachee.

The benefit to the coachee of really focused 'level two' listening, i.e. listening that is truly focused on them, is that they get to think better. Studies have shown that when someone is listened to attentively and non-judgementally they think better than when they are thinking on their own.

2.1 How to listen

We each have our strengths and weaknesses as listeners. In performance coaching there are a number of different things we need to listen out for:

- **Facts and narrative** – the nuts and bolts of the situation or issue under discussion.
- **Feelings** – some of which may be expressed openly, as in 'I feel worried about this', others which may not be voiced but which may show up in body language.
- **Values and drivers** – words or terms which seem to have particular significance and meaning for the coachee, e.g. when someone says something like 'This is so unfair.' (There is an exercise in Unit 5 that will help you to work explicitly with the values of your coachee.)
- **Assumptions and working beliefs** – often signalled by phrases such as 'I can't ...', 'I shouldn't ...', 'I've got to ...' 'It's wrong to ...' . These are phrases which convey the coachees's working assumptions in a given situation, e.g. 'I couldn't ask her for help'. Spotting these assumptions for the coachee can bring great leverage in to a coaching conversation. (There is an exercise for working explicitly with a coachee's self-limiting assumptions in Unit 5.)
- **The 'bottom line' or core of an issue**. Often after a degree of exploration in which it is not always clear what the coachee is grappling with or attempting to change, the 'bottom line' can emerge. This can help give a session greater focus and clarity and may mean the need to shift the goals for the session.
- **The unspoken**. This may seem a tricky thing to actively listen to – how are we supposed to know what has not been said? Yet it is often the unspoken that is a pointer to something very important for the coachee that may need bringing to their attention – for example when they describe what seems to be a very important issue or situation but say nothing about their feelings about it, or when they talk about an issue that affects their whole team but mention no-one else except themselves. As a coach you need to ask yourself 'What is not being said here?'. This will often provoke an important question for the coachee to consider.

Reflect on these guidelines for listening in Activity 3.

Activity 3 Practise listening!

Allow around 30 minutes for this activity.

Practise listening! Get a colleague or friend to talk to you about something of importance to them for five minutes: listen without notes and pay attention to what it is that grabs your attention – which of the categories above do you tune into and which do you hear less clearly?

There is no feedback for this activity.

3 Summarising and reflecting



Figure 3

Listen to the following audio that will introduce you to the coaching skill of summarising and reflection, and the effective impact both techniques can have on a coaching session.

Audio content is not available in this format.

Summarising

When the coach offers summary or reflection there are a number of benefits:

- The coachee knows they are being listened to – even if the summary is not 100% accurate.
- The coachee has the opportunity to reflect on what they have said – the summary acts as a kind of mirror to them.
- The coach stays on track – in order to summarise you simply have to listen.
- If summary and reflection is done well, rapport is enhanced.

It is an art rather than a science knowing when and how often to summarise, but rules of thumb are:

- when the coachee might be getting a bit lost or confused
- when the coachee seems to be losing energy in what they are saying
- when several subjects are raised simultaneously
- when the coach gets lost or confused!

It is useful to bear in mind you can summarise under the same categories as we use to monitor our listening, i.e. we can summarise facts, feelings, values, assumptions, bottom-line and even the unspoken! Useful summary phrases include:

- Can I sum up here: the key facts seem to be ...?
- Can I just check – it sounds as if you are feeling disappointed ...?'
- It sounds as if the principle of fairness is really important to you – have I got that right?
- It seems like the bottom line here is that you want to make a decision sooner rather than later – is that right?
- I notice you have said nothing about how the others in the team see this.

A word of caution: summary should be just that – a summing up. The danger is that it becomes *interpretation,* i.e. something filtered through our own judgement and presented back to the coachee with a lot of our thinking in it. Summarising by saying 'It seems that

you have identified problematic relationships with two others in your team – have I got this right?' is fine. Saying something like 'It seems you have a subconscious wish to confront other powerful males and I suspect this is firmly connected with your childhood' is *not* OK in coaching! We are there to help the coachee gain insight for themselves, not offer our own.

3.1 How to summarise and reflect

Activities 4 and 5 provide some practical exercises in summarising and reflecting.

Activity 4 Bad listening

Allow around 15 minutes for this activity.

Watch Video 3.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 3 Bad listening and summary



Make a note of some of the things that the coach doesn't do well.

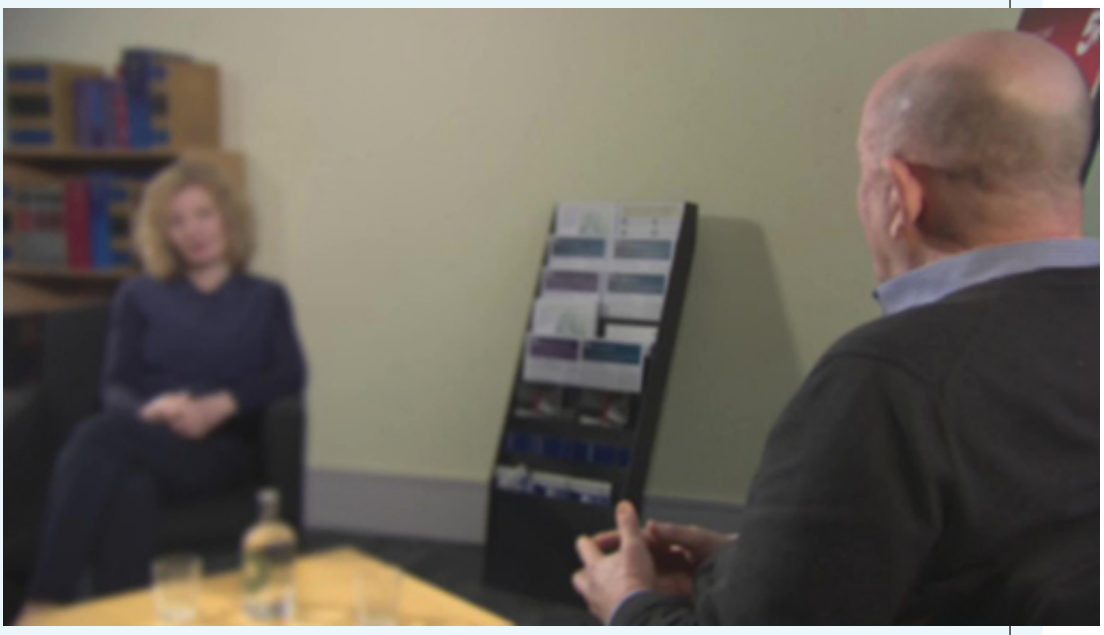
Provide your answer...

Activity 5 Good listening

Allow around 15 minutes for this activity.

Watch Video 4.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 4 Good listening



Make a note of some of the things that the coach does well in listening and summarising.

Provide your answer...

Feedback

As you may have observed in this video, *reflection* is a useful variation on summary. When we reflect we simply offer back key words or phrases that seem significant or on which the coachee has placed particular emphasis. This can often provide a little bit of gentle challenge too, and give the opportunity for the coachee to reflect on what they have said and perhaps reconsider. For example:

Coachee: ‘Wow, this project has been an utter disaster!’

Coach: ‘Utter disaster?’

Coachee: ‘Well, not a disaster as such but there have been a couple of real failings in the process we need to fix.’

Or:

Coachee: ‘I never seem to get any recognition in this place!’

Coach: ‘Never?’

Coachee: ‘Well, never from the team leader anyway!’

The key skill in reflecting is to use the language of the coachee and not to change it or re-interpret it yourself.

Conclusion

This free course has given you a brief insight into some of the principles behind coaching, and we hope it may have whetted your appetite to find out more about the use of coaching as a management technique, to improve performance and wellbeing.

Building good rapport, listening well and being able to reflect back to those you talk to aren't just skills for the professional coach: they are vital to keep professional relationships healthy and sustainable. We hope the course has been useful and interesting to you, and you'll be able to apply some of these principles in your very next conversation!

Acknowledgements

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Audio

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