

Using meaningful coaching for maximum results

Tina Mertel

Tina Mertel is a professional coach and facilitator based in New York, NY, USA.

Abstract

Purpose – This paper is for coaches (or those who coach) to consider: how their own values affect the coaching interaction; and how customizing their communication to align with the client's values can create better results. The paper aims to address these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper references the strength deployment inventory and relationship awareness theory as the suggested methodology in understanding one's values.

Findings – The paper advocates that, no matter which coaching system or methodology is used, that a focus on values is important to the success of the coaching interaction. Values are integral to the coach and the client, and should be given attention in the coaching process.

Originality/value – This paper looks at the impact of values on the coaching process.

Keywords Coaching, Motivation (psychology), Communication

Paper type Technical paper

The impact of values on coaching

Many models of coaching are available in the marketplace. Where coaching was most often linked to sports, it has developed into its own industry, profession, and leadership skill. It has become commonplace that coaching is a competency included in many performance development plans. With so many options available, and the pressure on employees to be a successful coach, how does one know their coaching model is best? If you are challenged by the many models in the marketplace you may wish to refer to the International Coach Federation (ICF) as a resource (www.coachfederation.org). The purpose of the ICF is to advance the art, science and practice of professional coaching.

No matter which model is selected, if values become the key "packaging" of the coaching, the success of the interaction is enhanced. How do you currently deliver your coaching? Most likely it is through your learned habits, skills training, and values.

Identifying our values as a coach also help to identify those of your client. It gives you a view of the palette of values one may have on their own painting of the world. Without this, you may be swayed by your values unconsciously and wonder why your client does not respond, or even why they have ended the coaching relationship. Certain values may have you excel at some coaching competencies and not others.

It is common that we assume we know how to communicate, after all, we have done it all our lives . . . how we construct sentences, our intonations, how we describe things, our word choices. We think we are understood. Yet the definition of "understandable" happens both from the sender and the receiver of communication. By looking at the value set underneath communication, we discover the meaning from which the person sees their communication as "understandable".

As noted psychologist, Viktor E. Frankl stated:

This article is from a draft of the author's book, *Meaningful Coaching*, to be published by Personal Strengths Publishing in 2010. © Personal Strengths Publishing 2010.

Awareness of values can only enrich a person. In fact, this inner enrichment partly constitutes the meaning of his life, ... (Frankl, 1955, p. 150).

And continues:

This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning. There are some authors who contend that meanings and values are 'nothing but defense mechanisms, reaction formations and sublimations.' But as for myself, I would not be willing to live merely for the sake of my 'defense mechanisms,' nor would I be ready to die merely for the sake of my 'reaction formations'. Man, however, is able to live and even to die for the sake of his ideals and values! (Frankl, 1959, p. 105).

An approach to assessing one's values

A variety of values exist in the world. One approach to discovering one's values was identified by Dr Elias Porter. Dr Porter developed a theory of people's values (termed Motivational Value System™) based off of Erich Fromm's (1947) hypotheses in *Man for Himself*. This theory is called Relationship Awareness®, and is delivered through an assessment called the Strength Deployment Inventory® (SDI®).

Relationship awareness theory is a motivational theory that addresses the motives that are behind everyday behavior when we are relating to others. Like Freudian theory, it assumes that there is meaning behind all behavior. By shifting our focus from only looking at behavior to looking at the motive behind the behavior, we can gain a clearer understanding of ourselves and others.

Relationship awareness theory identifies seven general themes or clusters of motives. In looking at these clusters, we notice that certain behaviors are associated with each cluster. The behaviors, however, are not unique to any particular cluster. For example, one of the clusters has to do with a desire to be altruistic and nurturing. People who are motivated by this desire tend to exhibit behaviors that are seen by others as being helpful. Helpful behavior, though, can be exhibited by people who have other motive clusters. The difference is one of frequency. People who are motivated by a desire to be altruistic and nurturing are likely to behave more frequently in ways that are helpful to others than people who have other motive clusters. There is also more consistency over time in exhibiting helpful behaviors by those who are motivated by a desire to be altruistic and nurturing[1].

These clusters are called motivational value systems. There are seven identifiable styles of relating to others when things are going well for an individual. Four of these are primary types of strengths and three are blends of the primary types of strengths. For purposes of this article, we will focus on the four primary value systems with their associated color-code, these are known as: assertive-directing (red), altruistic-nurturing (blue), analytic-autonomizing (green), and flexible-cohering (hub: combination of all red, blue, and green).

How might your own value set affect your coaching? Here are a few examples:

- **Blue.** Tend to focus more on the client's feelings, and how their actions may impact others. May show more support and appreciation of the client. May avoid having direct communication thinking it will do more harm than good.
- **Red.** Tend to focus more on actions the client is or is not doing. May miss picking up on moments of insight from the client that are not clear and direct. May challenge the client too frequently or with too much force.
- **Green.** Tend to focus more on the information and data relayed from the client, may miss subtle changes in emotion or intonation of voice. May lack empathy or showing of empathy.
- **Hub.** Tend to be more social, and playful which may be distracting. Tendency to tell tangential stories. May be more flexible than is needed.

“Knowing your values bias will help you in allowing the client’s process to emerge.”

Incorporating values into coaching

Knowing your tendencies based on your values, you can now self-correct as you coach. You can powerfully choose what to do the moment as you sense your bias in action, examples of choices include – creating a break in the call, being transparent and sharing the bias, discontinue the bias and continue coaching, apologize for the bias at the end of the call and see what there is to “clean up”.

Staying “off the court” and unbiased can be likened to a judge who must remain impartial until evidence shared shows the next steps. Your client is the one who comes with a solution – they are asking for a coach to help them discover it. Knowing your values bias will help you in allowing the client’s process to emerge.

It may feel more comfortable for you to be matched with clients who have your same value system. As coaches, we too need to stretch to have better working relationships and work with those who may or may not match our values. But you do not need to completely forfeit your value system, after all it is a reason you became a coach in the first place. Do you now see for which values you became a coach?

Here are some possible reasons:

- *Blue*. To support and help others.
- *Red*. To coach on what you often do best – getting results and accepting challenges.
- *Green*. To validate my own belief in the process of coaching with a methodical approach.
- *Hub*. To exercise flexibility and work with a variety of clients.

The reasons why you became a coach, are helpful to your professional description of your coaching intent, or your professional mission in coaching. Where it can have a negative impact is if it interferes with the client’s agenda during your coaching. Some warning signs when it does may include: you seem to notice clients becoming irritated or unusually quiet, a shift in the rapport with your client occurs, and yes, some clients choose to discontinue. Some clients may stay in the coaching relationship but not receive the breakthroughs that propel them to their goals because the coaching is focused on your values rather than theirs. Without seeing your bias, you are “being” your bias.

In my client interactions I have customized the delivery to meet the client’s value system. Sometimes the recognition of the client’s values is immediate, sometimes it occurred mid-session, or after a few sessions. Ideally one would administer a values-based inventory, such as the SDI, but if not, there are ways to detect their values. By asking the client such questions as:

- “Why is it important for you to get your goal by this date?”
- “So that I better understand you, if you got your goal, what would it bring to you?”
- “Tell me more about your motivation to get your goal.”

Then as coach, you listen for values imbedded in the client’s answers. Examples are:

- “If I got a promotion to Director of Customer Service, I could better support all aspects of our customer service delivery system. I care about our people and I seem to spend time with many individuals in the department and I think this position would support the value I bring from my people interactions” – Blue.

- "If I could really get the position of Director of Customer Service, it would give me a sense of accomplishment, it would provide me the recognition that I have met the challenge I set for myself when I started this position" – Red.
- "I am motivated by doing the right thing. I've seen our organization fail in a number of ways due to the systems we have in place. I've done my research and I think with my focus on detail and systems-thinking, I can create a seamless, efficient, customer service department" – Green.
- "Why I want the position? I'm excited by the possibilities. I can use my people skills, and my degree in leadership. I think we can create great results by working as a team. I would incorporate teambuilding training regularly to assist the department" – Hub.

Once you have detected the client's values base, you can begin to notice your own language, does it match your client's way of seeing the world?

No client interaction is similar, the client examples that follow are just that . . . examples. As a coach, your client interactions will have their own characteristics. The intent in sharing these stories is to share the power of speaking to values that may or may not be your own.

In the following examples:

- "indicators" refer to what was said or done during the coaching session that led to a conscious choice of customization in the moment; and
- "customization" refers to the action taken to meet the client from their values perspective.

The blue values client

Indicators

Our first session focused on whether or not she was being a good friend to someone. A striving for better communication and connection to her friend was her goal. At the end of the session she said she wanted to acknowledge my work with her, and appreciated my help. At the start of each call, she would talk about who she was with during the day and how she supported or helped them.

Customization

Thanking her for her focus on her life. Creating intention within her relationships so not to be overly helpful to others. Being "lighter" in my delivery, and at times, prefacing direct communication with an introduction, such as, "This may come off as cold, or uncaring, and this is not my intention, but rather to support you in creating your goals".

The red values client

Indicators

This client in our first interaction told me she needed a coach to keep her on task, and did not need anything else. "I need someone to hold me accountable for doing what I say I'm going to". "I will let you know what I will get done, and I will do it, and I want you to be calling me out on it when I don't." She also indicated she did not want to work for a long period of time, and that she felt she could "knock it out" in 1-2 months. She also shared disappointment in her role at work in not being recognized by others.

"Recognizing values helps you decide what to do and not to do in a session."

Customization

Before our first coaching session, I gave this client worksheets to complete. These centered on what she liked and disliked in her role. I also emailed her a bullet-pointed paragraph on what she wanted out of coaching and what she was committing to. Each session was highly action-oriented, and many more action items than average were co-created in our time together.

The green values client

Indicators

This client would not feel adequate unless he emailed me a weekly update of the spreadsheets of his projects. He wanted to begin each coaching call with what was done and not done since the last call. He described an example or gave a reason for any choice he had made, or would make. At one point I asked, "For whom are you explaining your decision in this moment?" He answered, "I guess I am explaining it for myself". He would rarely interrupt me, and often ask if he could repeat what I had said to ensure he understood the point.

Customization

Hearing the green values of this client, I chose to speak slower and more clearly articulate my coaching. I would declare when I knew I was on a tangent, or would preface a story or example by stating, "I'm going to tell a story here". I became more patient to hear out the client, or simply to wait as he wrote notes or asked to "think" about a concept for a moment.

The hub values client

Indicators

Contacted me after reading about coaching for some time, and finding me on the ICF website. She asked for a conversation to "see if we are a good match", to see what "sessions are like", and "see if she can feel part of something bigger". During our first session she mentioned she did not like it when she was not invited to group meetings, and wondered if she put the team first, more than others.

Customization

The client wanted to work on four projects simultaneously and I would touch upon each in every session. More often, I gave the client two or three options on how we could go. We also focused on a time management tool and other structures for her many activities.

As a hub value system, I am aware of my tendency to describe or narrate in a way that is not "cut and dry". I also have a tendency to question beyond what may be needed in the moment. With this knowledge of what I tend to "overdo" I can capture the moment and readjust if it is not meeting the need.

Summary and conclusion

To support performance development, coaching others to their full potential is a viable option. Many models of coaching are available. No matter which model is selected, recognizing one's values, and those of the client will enhance the coaching interaction.

Recognizing values helps you decide what to do and not to do in a session. By developing an ear for hearing your clients' values, you have the opportunity to deliver coaching that may not only support your clients' goals but also enhance the meaning of their world and themselves.

Note

1. For further discussion of relationship awareness theory and the seven motivational value systems, see: www.personalstrengths.com

References

Frankl, V.E. (1955), *The Doctor and the Soul*, Vintage Books, New York, NY.

Frankl, V.E. (1959), *Man's Search for Meaning*, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY.

Fromm, E. (1947), *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, New York, NY.

About the author

Tina Mertel has been in performance development for 16 years and is based in New York City. She is an ICF-accredited Coach, and Master Facilitator (conducts Training Certification) of the Strength Deployment Inventory. This article is from a draft of her book, *Meaningful Coaching*, to be published by Personal Strengths Publishing in 2010. © Personal Strengths Publishing, 2010. Tina Mertel can be contacted at: info@meaningfulcoaching.com

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com
Or visit our web site for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints