

INSIGHT GUIDE #21

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

How can we enable our clients to think for themselves?

Coaching clients to think is one thing. Coaching them to think for themselves is wholly another. The part changes the game. It moves the plates and it can turn our coaching inside out. It is worth it, though, because the quality of everything our clients do – everything – depends on the quality of the independent thinking they do first. Every plan, every decision, every action relies on the

moments when our clients think for themselves – with rigour, imagination, courage and grace. Their independent thinking then becomes the basis of dialogue with others, in turn raising the quality of it all. This guide focuses on the ways in which the decision to generate our clients' own finest thinking as far as possible can recast the way we coach.



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Time for thinking

We have to face this first: most clients expect us to think for them, and most of us expect to do exactly that. Neither party says so, but the implicit coaching agreement is, observably, that our clients will think and talk for as long as it takes us to get a beat on their issue, and then we will act. Either we will take a note, or come in with a question of some sort – to clarify, to lead, to challenge, to propose.

The agreement is that as the coach we can distract or interrupt the client's thinking whenever we deem valuable. We don't usually crash into the middle of their sentences (though shockingly some of us do), but it is we who are, nevertheless, the ones that determine when it is the right moment for the client to stop talking and for us to start.

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Is that a problem? You wouldn't think so. Our clients are generally fine with that. That is what they think they are paying for. They want our thinking, our knowledge, our experience, however it is expressed.

We are fine with that, too. Our clients often tell us that they experience our listening as the finest of their lives, and that they find our knowledge and experience, and our 'take' on their issues, ideas and feelings useful – sometimes life-changingly so.

And why not? They have since birth been schooled to devalue their own minds in favour of the minds of 'the experts'. And so have we. Just about the only time we think for ourselves is when we are thinking for others. So as coaches, understandably, we listen to get ready to speak, and then we do.

What is the problem with what is happening here?

Nothing.

The problem is with what is **not** happening.

We are missing gold. We are missing the unthought thoughts of the client. We are missing their unique insight, their crystalline clarification, their spontaneous sweeping away of blocks, their inspired solving of the problem in a way that we could never have thought of.

But does that matter? They are gaining our gold, yes, and that is often rich. But we don't know that it will be richer than theirs, because we don't have theirs yet.

We act, though, as if we do. We proceed to insert our thoughts before they have fully produced theirs. Armed with ours, we close the door to theirs, to insights and ways forward that could have been richer than our own.

Actually, we close the door to more than that. We shut out also our clients' building of respect for their own minds, a form of self-esteem that in turn generates better and better thinking. Thus, we stunt their development as a thinker.



Risk

So when we coach by talking whenever we deem best, we have, without knowing it, taken a huge risk. And we have done so after assessing the risk inaccurately. Ordinarily that is an unconscionable act for a professional.

Ordinarily in a high-risk situation we would be considering this question:

Is the downside from the potential loss here likely to be greater than the upside from the potential gain?

If it is, we would pull back and re-think. Certainly in the investment world any adviser would do that.

The same principle applies here. We need to face the fact that because we cannot know what our client will think next, we cannot be sure that the downside of the loss of their thinking will not be greater than the upside from the gain of ours. And so we do not take that risk.

We continue the particular quality of listening – generative listening – that can produce the client’s own stunning, formerly unformed thinking, which is more valuable than ours would have been.

Help

In that moment when we feel agonisingly certain that our take is needed now, that it is practically a civic duty for us to speak, we can ask ourselves this question:

Do I know for sure that what I am about to say will be of more value than what my client is about to think?

Do we know for certain? No. We can never know that for certain because not even our clients know what they are about to think.

So we have to assess the risk of losing our client’s unthought thoughts in favour of gaining our already-thought thoughts. That is not very hard. Because our thoughts are already formed and ready to go, we can offer them the minute the client truly can no longer generate theirs. But if we insert ours too soon, we will never know what theirs would have been, and what gold will have been lost forever. That risk is potentially monumental.

Changes

Committing to our clients’ own thinking changes us. For one thing, we coach differently. We even redefine the singular purpose of our coaching. The singular purpose is no longer for our clients to benefit from our thinking: it is now for them to benefit from their own thinking, to go as far in their own thinking as they possibly can before they need ours.

The unsettling but profound discovery here is that only they can determine when that is, and so we speak only by invitation – and even then, we first choose questions that will keep them going for themselves. We insert not a morsel of our own take on what they have said; not until they truly can generate nothing more.

That also means changing the contract with them. They, too, have to understand and opt for the potentially inimitable value of the unpredictable product of their own minds, unlocking and throwing open doors formerly secured by the preference for our thinking over theirs.



Most of all, both of us have to change what we wonder about. We both have to decide to wonder how far they can go in their own thinking before they need ours. And how much further than that?

That change means developing the character and sinew of our attention, taking it from reactive to generative. That is an art.

It also means knowing how to ask questions that keep our clients thinking for themselves and that help them unblock themselves when they are stuck. Those are very different kinds of questions from the kinds we create and employ when our purpose is to offer them our take.

We also have to understand and welcome silence, especially long silence, in which the client does some of their most important thinking.

And we have to be willing for an entire session to be breathtakingly valuable and contain not a single shred of our thinking. Not a shred. That takes courage and a commitment to the unleashing of the client’s mind. It also takes distinctive and precisely honed skill.

This, when it becomes our core methodology, joins with our other offerings to construct coaching at its finest.

Henley Centre for Coaching

The Henley Centre for Coaching is a global leader in coaching research and coach training. We are the only triple-accredited coaching provider in the world offering both postgraduate university qualifications in coaching and accreditation from the Association for Coaching (AC), the International Coach Federation (ICF) and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC).

The Centre provides formal accredited coach training through our *Professional Certificate in Coaching* and *MSc in Coaching and Behavioural Change*, and accredited supervision training through our *Professional Certificate in Supervision*. These programmes are delivered in the UK at our Greenlands campus, and at venues across the world.

The Centre provides continuous professional development for coaching professionals through masterclasses, webinars, conferences, and via online access to journals, ebooks and coaching research. These are all delivered through our online learning platform, meaning coaches can connect from anywhere in the world to engage in professional development.

The Henley coaching team consists of leading practitioners and academics who have shaped the coaching profession since the late 1990s. They have written many of the most popular coaching books and they continue to publish in leading management journals and to contribute at conferences worldwide. Their writing, thinking and research informs our teaching and ensures our programmes are at the cutting edge of coaching practice.

The Centre offers annual membership to all professional coaches, providing a virtual-learning environment where the members shape research and practice in coaching. Check out our website for details on how we can help you and your business come to life.



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