Lesson 13

Keeping Your Client on Track

Every coaching session is unique, and each client present his issues or goals to you uniquely. Some clients are very straightforward and to the point. Others ramble. Some need space to share or vent, while others do not. As a coach, you must gear your responses and feedback to each client according to her individual needs and the flow of the session.

One of the ways you can best serve your client is to keep him on track to resolve his issue or reach his goal. Your first opportunity to do this will be in response to your client's initial sharing. If the client is direct and succinct, proceed from there. When a client instead goes on and on for a long time, you may wonder if it is appropriate to interrupt.

The answer depends on what and how the client is sharing.

If the client is:

1. **rambling**
2. **repeating herself**
3. **going off on tangents**
4. **staying in his head, intellectualizing**
5. **on a soapbox fueled by judgments and opinions**
6. **boring you**

it is not only your right to interrupt; it is your responsibility.

Your time with your client is precious. You cannot afford to waste any minutes in a coaching session. While as a coach you are not an authority figure or expert, you can exert your influence to keep the dialogue on purpose.

Do not feel embarrassed or guilty for redirecting the client. Keeping the client focused will help her far more than wandering away from the cutting edge of growth.

When I began to present teleseminars, I offered a course for the same group that met once a month for a year. In that program a particular woman had a tendency to ramble. She went on and on, often talking in circles, not sharing much that anyone could respond to. Because my facilitator skills were not mature, I allowed this woman to go on, fearing that interrupting her would be insulting.

During the next teleseminar she began to ramble again. Suddenly other members of the group interrupted her. "Too long!" someone said. "That's enough!" said another. Their sharp comments indicated to me that no one in the group was receiving value from this woman's carrying on. I had been remiss in my responsibility to the group. As facilitator I needed to make the group available to everyone who wanted to share, and keep the conversation on purpose with the topic.

You have a similar responsibility to help your client make the most of his session. You can redirect a client gently and lovingly without being rude.

Begin by validating your client and demonstrating you have heard what she has said:

Examples:

"Thank you for your honest sharing. I appreciate your courage to tell me what you did."

"I understand how difficult that experience must have been."

"You have gone through many painful relationships. I recognize that you are really ready to shift that pattern."

After you have validated her, go on with:

"Let's stop here for a moment and see if we can get to the core statement you would like to make."

"Of the different situations you've described, which one would you like to focus on now?"

"What was the basic message or lesson you have received, or are receiving from this experience?"

"I understand that you have been having a great deal of difficulty with your daughter. Would you like to explore some options for how to improve that relationship?"

"In the three interactions you have described, I sense the common thread that you would like to set clearer boundaries. Would you say that is accurate?"

"Let's stop for a moment. Please close your eyes and place your hand on your heart. Good. Now, let's take three deep breaths together. Good. Now, [name] what is the most predominant feeling you are experiencing? [or] What does your heart say to you about this?"

I have used all of these statements with clients, and they have been well received and appreciated. Even more so when we moved from a venting mode to a solution exploration mode.

In some cases you can jump in when the client leaves a little space, and in other cases you may need to interrupt. Your client may not be self-aware, and she needs someone to guide her out of a tailspin. Your client might even thank you for shifting the direction. If you redirect with kindness, you will succeed.

How long do you allow a client to go on before you speak or offer feedback? That depends entirely on the quality of the client's sharing. Some clients just need to state their position or needs. Other clients need a long time to get something off their chest. Perhaps they have not shared this sensitive material with anyone, and this is their first opportunity to unburden themselves. Listen to your intuition. If you feel engaged, and the client's sharing feels authentic and heartfelt, encourage him to continue. If you feel bored or sense that the client is just repeating a story she has told a hundred times, or just ranting, stop her. Your inner coach knows where the client is coming from. Trust your knowing.

One coaching student had been trained as a social worker. She reported that as a student, she sat in on a session in which another social worker was counseling a client. The client became very emotional for a long time, emitting a plethora of tears as she recounted numerous painful situations. After the session, the senior social worker took the student aside and asked her, "What did you feel during that session?" The student answered, "I know this sounds weird, but I felt nothing." The senior counselor nodded, "You were quite in tune with what was happening. This woman does this every session. It's her act. There is no authenticity behind it."

By contrast, you could have a client share a few honest words and you will be riveted because she is speaking from the depth of her being. If and how to redirect your client is a skill you will develop with practice. Some clients need to be redirected; many don't. You will deepen your sensitivity as you go along.

Be honest. Be clear. Be real. As you stay true to the purpose of your coaching session, you will call your client to meet you there.

Exercise:

1. During your practice coaching sessions, notice how you are feeling while your client is sharing. Interested? Attentive? Engaged? If so, support the client to continue. If not, redirect the conversation so the client stays on track with the purpose of the coaching session.

2. In your personal conversations outside of coaching sessions, notice if the person you are speaking with is on track with the purpose of your communication. If not, gently and diplomatically redirect the conversation to what would be meaningful to both of you.

3. When you are speaking in your personal conversations, notice if you are staying on track with your goal and purpose for the conversation. If not, redirect yourself. When you build the skill to stay on track yourself, your sense of purpose and integrity will naturally flow in your coaching sessions.

Affirm:

I stay on purpose with all of my communication and
I support my clients to stay on track with their purpose.