

Boundaries in Coaching

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Coaches understand what boundaries are but, at a closer look, we discover the dimensions and underestimated impact of boundaries on coaching partnerships.

With the following examples, you can see how perceptions of boundaries may affect the coaching relationship.

A client says:

“I’m not sure to what extent my coach may share information from our session with my boss.”

“My coach is a buddy; I can speak to him at any time.”

“My coach knows me so well; her advice always works for me.”

A coach says:

“I want my client to succeed/make great progress in the coaching journey.”

“I’m upset that my clients do not come prepared for the session.”

“I’m not sure if my client trusts me, since she’s not open enough in coaching conversations.”

Establishing Boundaries

Most coaches know this area of coaching practice. At the start of the engagement, the coaching contract establishes the ground rules, the roles and responsibilities of the coach–client partnership. Contracting is an explicit way to position and clarify the **professional** aspect of coaching work. A coaching contract establishes clear and healthy boundaries for all involved and negotiates responsibilities and actions.

At the start of the engagement, there's immense enthusiasm and interest from all parties. Coaches characteristically are nice and pay extra attention to building rapport; understanding a client's learning preferences; remaining unbiased, open to listening and feedback; and committed to what works. Clients do the same. As adults, we want to make the best impression and share all that shows us in good light. Everything in this phase usually goes as planned.

Blurring Boundaries

As the coaching partnership furthers, the two personalities unfold. Adding to that complexity are coaching stakeholders who may be known to and have an interest in both the client and the coach. Now, the psychological aspects of a coaching relationship come alive and demand that attention be paid towards implied boundaries.

Here are some common experiences to ponder about:

Knowing Your Own Triggers

For a coach, setting boundaries is about knowing who you are, what is important to you—especially when you partner with clients in their coaching journey, what your description and understanding of being in a partnership is, and what is acceptable (and not acceptable) for you in a coaching partnership.

When you have clarity on the above, you are more likely to honor the boundaries of others like coaching clients. As a coach, get an understanding of your own preferences and biases.

Caring Too Much

As coaches, we have a genuine interest in the well-being and progress of our clients. But do we know when we may be caring too much?

Coaching is about supporting and challenging a client. It's like being on a seesaw. Depending on your client, you'll figure out when and how much of a support or challenge may work. When we communicate or act from the "caring too much" space, we may be stepping into a caretaker/rescuer zone.

Valuing Time Commitments

Have you ever had a client that was always late for a session or maybe a client who takes his boss' calls in the middle of a session? What is your behavior like during a coaching session in relation to time?

If you consistently exceed the allotted coaching session time, for whatever reasons, you are blurring boundaries. Going beyond the session time may convey that you don't value time. It may even create an impression with stakeholders that it's OK to play with the coaching time. Being mindful of timelines serves all stakeholders.

Maintaining Neutrality

You may get drawn into a client's story and loses objectivity. Or, you may feel familiar with the client and see either yourself or someone close to you in the client.

It's easy to get hooked on topics that generate a lot of interest, such as global or organizational politics or sports. It can be tempting to take sides or say yes to something, but when you do, it also means that you are saying no to something else.

Interestingly, even the most seasoned coaches experience it, but they are quick to notice when it happens to them. Many would vouch for supervision to help them see what otherwise would go un-noticed and impact their work.

<https://coachingfederation.org/blog/boundaries-in-coaching>