

Influencing the duration of Coaching

by Peter Szabó, MCC

I see most of my coaching clients one time only. No surprise that my best hope for the future of coaching is for us to become redundant as soon as possible, after the initial session. For individual coaching sessions this means to create a process designed from the beginning to make clients continue on their own in confidence and competence as quickly as possible. And for our profession I have the dream of making our expertise so simple and effective that it can be learned and applied by everyone in everyday support of others.

Coaching processes do not necessarily need to last a long period of time in order to be successful. As coaches we sometimes encounter clients who reach their preferred future within a very short time and sustain the result permanently. So how can we contribute to make our coaching interventions brief and yet effective?

As coaches we might suppose the length of coaching depends on the complexity of challenge the client is facing and on the client's speed of progress. We might be tempted to think the length of coaching is determined by outside factors and we might overlook the amount of our own influence.

This paper provides some provoking food for thought. Suppose the length of coaching were mostly influenced by

- our own understanding of how to be useful as a coach
- our own routine of how to set up a coaching relationship or session
- our own presuppositions about clients
- our own part in co-constructing the story that the client tells us
- our own trust in the client

At the end of a one day workshop which I held on Brief Coaching with executive coaches in New York in 2012 one of the senior coaches reflected: "so then my own understanding of what is necessary and useful has much more influence on what I do in my coaching than the actual need of the client". At the same Executive Coaching Conference David Peterson, freshly assigned Head of Learning and Development at Google, reported his own personal surprise when he was asked by his first internal client to be of support within 40 Minutes. David had come

from a culture of providing elaborated 10'000 dollar coaching programs and had to adapt now to the new "one session, one chance, immediate result, here and now" culture.

I have well over 10'000 hours of coaching and I see most of my clients one time only. I support clients in making just a start, which they can maintain on their own with their own resources without further support needed from my side. My understanding of being useful includes ideas of clients getting unstuck somehow, clients reconnecting with their own resources somehow, clients accessing experiences which worked for them in the past and clients discovering that they are actually much further in progress than they thought.

If you are curious about how this can work, read an example and description of such a solution-focused Brief Coaching Session in the paper "Coaching Reloaded" on the solutionsurfers.com homepage.



Understanding of usefulness as coach

How would you describe your own understanding of being useful as a coach? What are you concretely undertaking or avoiding in order to be as effective as possible in as little time as possible?

Whatever our answer, we will take our own answer as "normal and logical" since it builds on our own construction of how we explain our being of help and useful to the client. It might be challenging to consider that our understanding is "just one possible choice" among many different choices of being useful as a coach. Other possible choices may seem unrealistic at first glance since they do not fit our own paradigm and understanding of how to be most effective in our work.

If for example, a coach chooses to understand that there is a link between the client's problem and it's solution the coach must spend time asking questions like: "what is hindering you or blocking you?" and must explore and try to understand the root causes of the problem so he can develop a solution to the problem.

If in my understanding of usefulness, there may be no link between problem and solution, I can entirely skip exploring problems and instead ask questions like: "If your best hopes are fulfilled what will you do differently then?"

This specific difference in constructing or not constructing a link between problem and solution has a potentially large impact on the length of coaching. If we can start building solutions with the client only based on their best hopes, we are faster and more successful in getting to concrete details of the desired behavior than if we have to identify and eliminate problems first before addressing different behavior.

Anthony M Grant (University of Sydney) recently reported research results on the topic: "The differential effects of solution-focused and problem-focused coaching questions". (Journal of Systemic Therapies, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2012, pp. 21-35)

Another example: If a coach's understanding of successful change involves the idea of continuous effort and hard committed work by his client he must consequently be useful by asking questions like "what do you need to do next? When will you do it? How shall we follow-up on this?" and then he will check up progress and pitfalls at a next meeting with the client.

If in my understanding, change is inevitable and happening all the time anyway, I can be useful by asking: "how will you notice that you have already made progress and do not need to come back to see me?"

This difference between constructing change as hard work and constructing it as inevitable development is impactful as well. If change is hard, then I need to be there as a coach to support the client step by step; if change is inevitable, I just need to make sure that the client actually notices his progress so he does not need me to accompany him through each steps.

So our own understanding of how to be useful as coaches has an influence on the solution building process we undergo (or go through or experience) with the client and consequently largely influences the length of coaching.

Ben Furman has written a highly enlightening book "Picking the pocket of the naked", that examines dif-

ferent constructions about being helpful and client's kind cooperation with our professional presuppositions of usefulness.



Set up, contracting and opening question

If in his opening line, a coach says something along the lines of: "It is my job to support you on the way to make the necessary changes to reach your goal" he will probably offer a package of 5-10 sessions or several months of weekly coaching calls. And clients will usually go along with what the coach considers necessary.

If I say "I hope this will be useful for you somehow, there are no guarantees about it. All I can guarantee is that I will do my best and I suppose you will too and then we will see how this turns out useful." Consequently I will offer one session at a time and then see if the client considers it necessary to come back or not. I can treat every session as if it was the only one I have available. Since I do no free "intake session", I charge from the first (and often only session) and I offer clients to pay my bill only if the session in fact generated added value for them after the session.

Again clients will go along with this set up and make most of it. Actually more than 50% of my clients do not need to return for a follow-up session.

Why not experiment a little with the opening questions, which we ask at the beginning of a session:

- What do you want to talk about today?
(Topic of the conversation)
- What has brought you here? (History of the development)
- What are your best hopes as a result of our session today? (Direction of the goal)

See how the opening influences the length and effectiveness of the session. (In case you are wondering, I have a strong preference for the last question)

Presuppositions about the client

In his workshops, Sir John Whitmore offers a lovely exercise for coaches. Pair up facing each other and decide who is the coach and who is the client.

Without saying anything, the coach just faces the client for 1 minute and thinks one of the following things:

- the client is the problem
- the client has a problem
- together we are on the way to solve the client's problem

Then in pairs discuss how the different silent presuppositions influenced the client and the quality of the interaction.

In my own solution-focused understanding of usefulness, I experiment with different presuppositions about solutions rather than problems. Within both frameworks there exist different nuances of presuppositions:

- this client brings his own fitting solution to the session
- this client is on the way to discover that he is further in progress than he thought
- this client has, in the past, already started to accomplish what he was hoping to accomplish as a result of the session and therefore needs no coaching

The more “time consuming” our presupposition about the client, the more time our interventions might consume.

The challenge is to accept that our presuppositions are merely our own construction of reality and might have little to do with the need or situation of the client. Yet they influence the necessary time to successfully accomplish our job in coaching.



Co-constructing the story of the client

Would you have imagined that the very story the client is telling us differs depending on our own reaction to what we hear? From an interactional viewpoint what is told by the client is mutually co-constructed between coach and client. Clients adapt to the coaches reaction. Depending on what parts of

the client's utterings are picked up or neglected by the coach, the client may choose to let the story take a totally different direction.

There is interesting research showing how we influence the coaching conversation through much more than our coaching questions. (Beavin-Bavelas J., De Jong P., & Korman H. (2008). "How co-construction happens – Formulations in SFBT, CBT and MI". Paper presented at the SFBTA-conference Austin, Texas November 2008)

If for example, a coach shows interest (by verbal or non-verbal expression) in obstacles, worries and challenges of the client, the client will adapt to what seems important to the coach and will consequently add more detail in his story about these problems.

If on the other hand as a coach, I show interest in what works already or what gives hope even partially, the client will add more detail about these hints of a solution to his story.

Whether the client tells mainly a story of hope or despair is influenced by what the coach thinks he should know more about. He therefore co-creates by his more or less obvious signals of interest and acknowledgement, which is picked up by the client.

The way the client constructs his story during the conversation will influence his or her confidence, speed and success in coming to solutions. From a solution-focused Brief Coaching perspective the famous Steve De Shazer quote applies: “Problem talk creates problems, solution talk creates solutions”. The longer and the more detailed the client elaborates forward moving forces towards his preferred future, the more easily and likely it becomes, and within a shorter period of time.

Trust in the client

At the first European Coaching conference in Grindelwald in 2001, the coaching pioneer Timothy Gallwey was asked questions about how to deal with “such and such” clients and what to do in “such and such” coaching situations. Instead of giving an answer he simply asked back with the same simple question: “Suppose you would truly and fully trust your client as the expert for coming to his own fitting solutions: what would you do then?”

In a beginners workshop about solution-focused coaching, I was coaching a participant for demonstration purposes. Asked about what needs to happen in the session, the client answered: “I need to get to the root cause of my problem with my grown up daughter so we can have a good relationship again.”

You will immediately sense my dilemma. In my understanding as a solution-focused coach, getting to the root cause of the problem will not be of any use. Yet if I truly believe in the client as expert, I will follow-up on his suggestion about the root cause because the client seems to think this will help.

If I trust my own expertise more than the client and if I want to demonstrate “proper” solution-focused coaching to the audience, I will follow up by an option like:

“Suppose you get to the root cause of the problem with your daughter and as a result you will have a good relationship again, what will be different then? How will you behave differently then?” With this, I will in an elegant way ignore the clients hint of exploring root causes and ask about the effects of his preferred future regardless of the cause of the problem the client is perceiving.

If on the other hand, I truly trust the client I would ask: “So what are the root causes of your problem with your daughter?” Of course in front of a solution-focused audience this question would be quite an unorthodox question to ask.

I had to make a split second decision of whom to trust. And my gut feeling told me to go with Tim Gallwey’s suggestion of trusting the client.

So I said: “So ...” (in a meaningful way giving space for the client to follow up on his lead, while not expressly repeating the root cause question of the client).

There was a long silence by the client. And I remember how I was dreadfully awaiting a long story about the root causes of the client’s problem. And I remember my doubts about the choice I made and my readiness to stop the problem talk in case it should take too long. But instead of that the client remained silent and after a while he looked at me with a nod and said: “ok I have figured out the root cause, so now I am ready to go on with the rest of the coaching.”

Of course, I had been very lucky that the client kept his root cause elaboration to himself, maybe due to an audience listening. But I was also lucky to have trusted the client. What I feared as a non-useful detour into problem talk in fact turned out to be a most useful shortcut thanks to the client’s expertise, a prerequisite for moving on to new productive behavior in relation to his daughter.

I am quite convinced that in this specific case my usual expert solution-focused question might have lead to repeated drawbacks into the unanswered root cause question by the client, while trusting the clients approach actually saved time to move forward simply and elegantly in the shortest time possible.

Conclusion

Tim Gallwey at the end of his closing conference speech in 2001 urged us coaches: “Please, please, please, keep it simple.”

How can we simply serve the interest and need of the client instead of our own logic.

Tim’s plea to keep it simple could mean to be very conscious of our own contribution in keeping coaching as short and simple as possible.

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As an executive coach, Peter specializes in Brief coaching processes for leaders. In his work he seeks to support sustainable results with minimal intervention.

Peter is co-founder and Senior Vice President of SolutionSurfers with headquarters in Switzerland. SolutionSurfers offers Brief Coach training on four continents and in eight languages.

He is Master Certified Coach with the International Coach Federation (ICF). Peter has been a member of the ICF assessment team for the professional certification of coaches for the last 8 years.

Peter Szabó is co-author of “Brief Coaching for Lasting Solutions” and “Coaching plain and simple”, which are based on the solution-focused approach to coaching. His books and papers have been translated into 12 languages.

Since the age of 50, he is a passionate surfer, making best use of the existing forward moving forces in ocean waves.

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**Outline of plenary input, workshop and paper:
Becoming redundant as coach**

I see most of my coaching clients one time only. No surprise that my best hope for the future of coaching is for us to become redundant as soon as possible. For individual coaching sessions this means to create a process, designed from the beginning, to make clients continue on their own in confidence and competence. And for our profession I have the dream of making our expertise so simple and effective that it can be learned and applied by everyone in everyday support of others.

Coaching processes do not necessarily need to be lasting over a long period of time in order to be successful. As coaches we sometimes encounter clients who reach their preferred future within a very short time and sustain the result permanently. So how can we contribute as coaches to make our coaching interventions brief AND effective?

Our expertise as coaches does not necessarily have to be complicated and brilliant in order to be effective. What we do can sometimes be boiled down to a few simple principles of common sense and understanding. So how can coaches support society in every day application of these principles?

Brief Coaching focuses on existing success factors and desired solutions instead of analyzing and solving suspected causes of a client problem. Experience and research shows that this paradigm shift makes coaching shorter and simpler to apply. In recent years the trend has been reinforced by concepts such as Positive Psychology, Appreciative Inquiry, Positive Deviance and some Neuroscience findings.

Let us take these insights further to create a future of coaching in which we are valuable by becoming redundant after a single session.



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