



Coaching leaders into the new territory of their life purpose.

How to Be a Great Client: Practical Skills to get the Most out of Coaching

by Jerome Daley

"So how's your week been?" I asked Jim, my client of about a year. And that was all it took. Forty-five minutes later I threw out an anchor which dug the bottom another five minutes before it caught, and I was able to abruptly end our coaching session. Jim (not his real name, of course) had barely come up for air during the entire monologue. I hung up the phone in a bit of a daze, feeling discouraged and thinking to myself, *I'm not quite sure what that was...but I don't think it was coaching.*

Experiences like these, of which there have been many across the years, have provoked me to ask some hard questions of myself: *How do I need to grow as a coach to better support a wide variety of clients with different personalities and communication styles?* I was taught in my coach training that sometimes the most supportive thing we can do for a client—to help them achieve their own agenda—is to interrupt and redirect the conversation. I know that...but I find it difficult to actually implement. So that's one of the places where I need to grow as a coach. But rather than speak to growth areas for coaches, my goal in this article is to speak to clients.

For several years now, I have toyed with the idea of writing an article on "How to be a Great Client!" Ninety-nine percent of coaching resources are geared toward inspiring and equipping coaching leaders to be great coaches and leaders. That is excellent—and dearly needed. *But what about clients?* Who equips them with the skills and mindsets to maximize their experience as a client? From what I've seen, no one.

Perhaps you are considering hiring a professional life / leadership coach, and if so, you want to know that the time, energy, and money you invest will lead to very tangible results in your life. Perhaps you have already experienced the life-changing impact of being coached...and you want to upgrade the results going forward. Or maybe you're not in a formal coaching relationship, but you are in a work or ministry environment that rides upon effective communication and collaboration with others. The following guidelines will help you get the most out of your investment.

1. Prepare for each coaching session. Don't rush into your coaching session straight from other appointments without any forethought. Otherwise, you'll spend the first half of your session just trying to get your head in the game.

Invest the effort ahead of time to know what you want to get out of your coaching session. Most coaches utilize a "Session Prep" form that allows clients to answer several questions ahead of the session; motivated clients will take advantage of this—and get more out of their time as a result. Occasionally, the best of clients come to the session without a clear objective; when that is the case, the client needs to be prepared to actively engage the coaching conversation toward uncovering an agenda through the conversational process. Of course, the coach will help draw it out as well.

One more thing: Don't be surprised if the agenda you bring into the session winds up changing during the conversation. Often, we start out thinking we want one thing...only to uncover the bigger, more important agenda midway through the session. So you have to balance focus with flexibility.

2. Expect to do the work of learning. Even though most coaching clients theoretically understand that coaches don't give advice, sometimes they are not prepared to fully engage the process of defining the objective, identifying obstacles, brainstorming options, and making a final decision. You may hear it said that "a good coach is a lazy coach"...and it's true, in the sense that if the coach steps in to do the work for the client, the coach robs the client. The coach must be fully engaged as well—but only the client can do the "work" of learning.

At the same time, it's important to understand that the creative space in coaching is found between coach and client. The interaction, the provocative question, the effort to articulate heart responses, the building of one idea upon the next...the "magic" is found in the partnership.

Finally, don't ask for your coach's opinion on a matter until you have fully engaged and explored all the possible options you can find first. Then ask for input. The exception to this principle is if you are being mentor-coached in your coach's area of content expertise; that modifies the dynamic and includes an educational component within the coaching context.

3. Pace the conversation for dialogue. In the example at the beginning of this article, the client has shifted from leading the conversation to monopolizing the conversation. Clients with good emotional intelligence (EQ) pace the conversation well, allowing regular, natural pauses for the coach to interject an observation or a question. This conversational flow unlocks the power of coaching and activates the creative space we discussed earlier.

Coaching is often described as a "dance." Using this metaphor, it is the client who "leads" and the coach who "follows." Yet the result of a well-matched dancing pair is something that is co-created by both partners. If the client makes no room for the coach to participate, it's no longer a dance; it's a drag.

4. Invest in other friendships; don't "buy" a friend. No one person can meet all the interactive requirements of a person's life. If you are married, your spouse may be (and hopefully is) your primary conversational partner for processing life. And yet, no matter how great the marriage, we need other friends, other relationships and perspectives to provide the larger community and context for our lives.

A coach is often another vital link within the relational web of your personal and professional growth. Just don't make the mistake of vesting your coach with the responsibility of providing all the relational interaction you require. That will frustrate both you and the coach.

5. Take notes. As your coaching session progresses, have paper and pen handy to jot down key takeaways and "a-ha" moments. Capture your brainstorming ideas on paper for later reflection. And, of course, write down all action steps that are developed in the course of your coaching so you can follow through later. If your memory is anything like mine, you can't trust it to hold all the valuable discoveries that pop up over the course of a session.

6. Schedule time to implement your actions. Immediately following your coaching session—or at least by that evening—take the time to review your action steps with calendar in hand. Then block out specific days and times when you will follow through on the actions and reflections called for in your session. Don't expect that time will just make itself available between now and your next session. Coaching is all about living

intentionally, and for most of us, this requires either a paper or electronic calendaring device to help us make good on our intentions.

These are just a few of the ways in which you can become a highly-skilled client and get the very most out of your coaching sessions. Even outside the formal coaching construct, you can apply these principles in any intentional relationship to reap greater reward. Remember, your professional coach has put a lot of time into learning his or her skills. Now you have some skills of your own! As life-long learners, we all continue to hone our abilities to connect effectively, coaches and clients together. *Oh...and if you run into Jim, tell him he can hang up now; the session's over.*

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