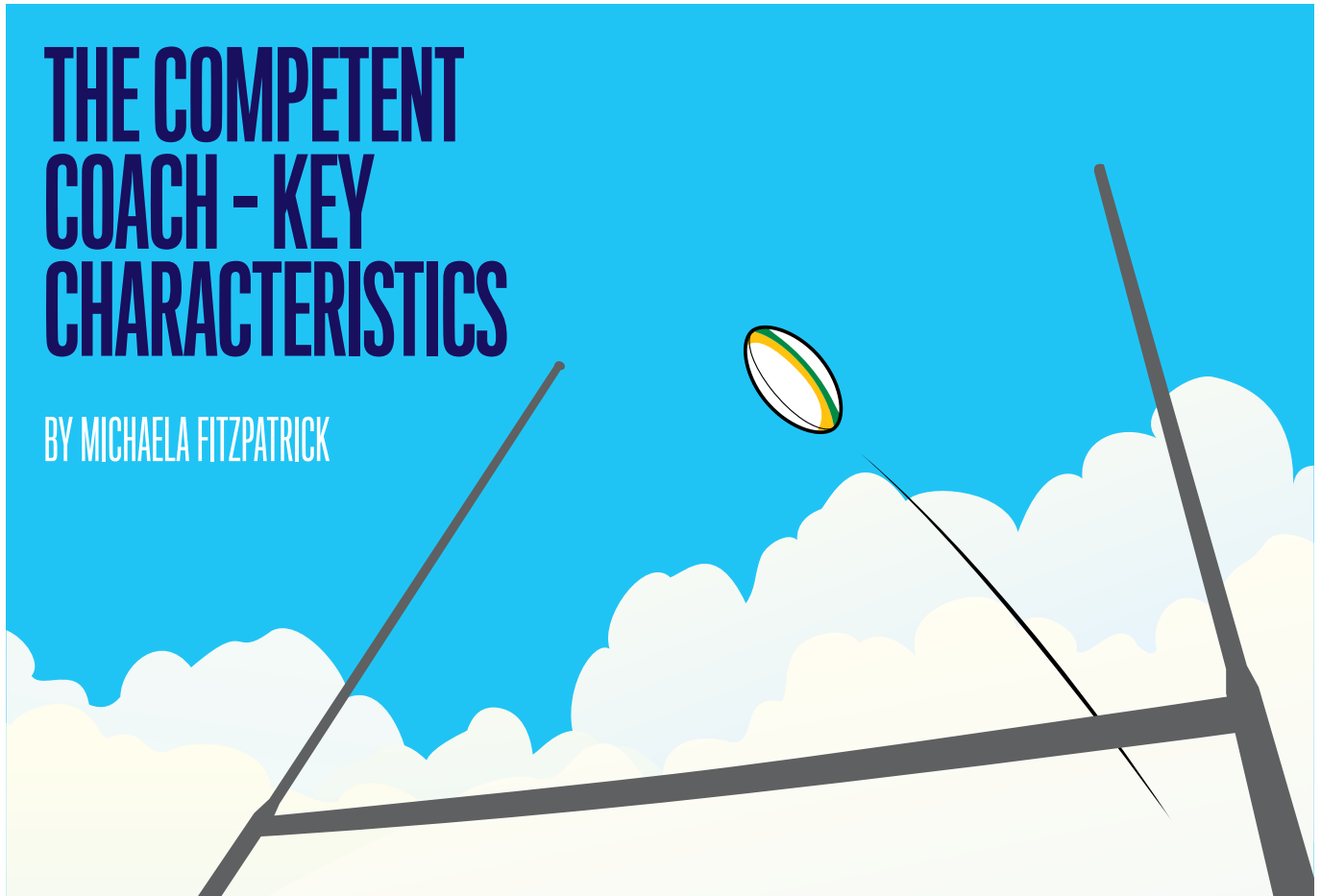


THE COMPETENT COACH - KEY CHARACTERISTICS

BY MICHAELA FITZPATRICK



It seems these days anyone who excels in their chosen field, from top athletes or performers to successful entrepreneurs, has a coach. It stands to reason that the introduction of coaches into the workplace as a tool to enhance performance, productivity and a positive work culture is likely to benefit employees and organisations alike. Coaching facilitates a collaborative relationship and process that empowers the client to make positive behavioural change.

Training Versus Coaching

Training involves the transfer of essential knowledge and skills to enhance an individual or group's ability and performance. Within this role, the trainer is the subject matter expert, charged with the task of

providing content, process and answers. Coaching's objective is similar, in that it facilitates learning and development, however it's primarily concerned with '*unlocking a person's potential to maximize their own performance.*' (Whitmore 2002)

The aim of coaching is not to provide answers or solutions akin to training, rather to enable the client to discover their own. It is '*a collaborative, result-orientated and systematic process whereby the coach facilitates the enhancement of work performance, life experience and self-directed learning*' (Whitmore, 2002). Whitmore's renowned Grow Model provides an excellent framework to understand and facilitate the coaching process. Within this, the client is helped to identify wants

(Goal), where the client is at (Reality) potential routes to achieve desired results (Options) and agreed strategies to manifest these. (Way forward).

Key Skills of a competent coach

Although the Grow Model can facilitate remarkable behavioural change, this framework will be rendered useless in the absence of a trusting, engaging relationship. The client will not participate in the process, express concerns, explore obstacles, or cooperate to devise solutions if they are disconnected from their coach. It is therefore crucial that their mentor demonstrate the competencies to create a safe, supportive and collaborative relationship that enhances growth and development. A competent coach will

need to possess the following key skills to facilitate this.

An ability to build a working relationship

The coach needs to demonstrate empathy and acceptance for their client's predicament, as well as a genuine interest and desire to help them achieve their goal. It is vital that they are encouraging, supportive, respectful and applies effective communication to create a safe space, as these are the foundations upon which a trusting relationship is built.

Excellent Communication Skills

Communication forms the basis of all relationships and has the power to enhance or destroy them. It is therefore essential that the coach express themselves in a clear, open and respectful way that engages clients and builds awareness around processes, roles, goals, and strategies to achieve these.

Communication is only deemed effective when the listener perfectly understands the message intended. Planning and preparation is key to facilitating this. Simply asking oneself 'What do I want to say and what's the best way to say it?', or 'How would I like it said to me?' can mean the difference between a destructive or constructive conversation.

Observational and Active Listening Skills

Communication is a two way process. An essential element to facilitate this is the ability to listen. This not only demonstrates interest and respect, it helps us to gain deeper insight. Active listening relates to tuning in on all levels, observing verbal and body language and identifying possible inconsistencies between these. For instance; 'I noticed you said you are fine with that outcome, but you seem frustrated and disappointed' shows genuine interest and support, as well as providing an opportunity for the client to process experiences.

Active listening also involves reflecting that you are present. This can be achieved through verbal language, by saying 'yes, ok', or by summarising what you heard and checking for accuracy. Equally important is expressing presence through body language. Keeping it open to convey support or making eye contact and head nodding to demonstrate interest.

Effective Questioning Skills

Coaching facilitates the client in finding his own solutions thus 'helping them learn rather than teaching them' (Whitmore 2002). One must therefore be asked the right questions, ones that promote self discovery, insight and awareness. The type of questions asked will evoke various responses. For instance, 'What scares you about making changes?' may help the client to process and overcome self limiting beliefs and behaviours. 'How will you and your team benefit when you are able to...?' can motivate to make changes, whereas 'What specific steps will help you to achieve...?' will help establish concrete action plans.

Ability to set clear objectives and measures

Steven Covey states 'We must start with the end in mind,' It is only then that we can identify clear goals and collaborate to design tasks and actions towards them. Goals need to be specific and measurable. Useful questions to ask to connect to these are; 'What specifically would you like to know or be able to do by the end of our work together?' or 'How will you know when you have achieved this? What changes will have happened for you and your team?'

Encourage and support

Replacing ingrained behaviours can be challenging, thus leading to frustration and resistance. The coach will need to be patient and plan for how to manage this, as well as express belief in the client's ability to make changes. It is equally important to be supportive of

mistakes, which are a natural part of the learning process and identify learning opportunities within these for instance 'Having realised that action took you off course, what can you do differently next time, to remain on course?'

Constructive challenging and feedback

Although the competent coach will validate, acknowledge and support, they must also hold their coachee accountable and challenge in a way that encourages insight, discovery and action. When giving constructive feedback, be specific, respectful and separate the behaviour from the person. For instance 'You mentioned that you are committed to managing your time more efficiently and will be on time for meetings, yet I have noticed you were 15 minutes late for our last three, what are your thoughts on that?'

To motivate and empower another to transcend limitations and excel requires knowledge, skill and an ability to establish process, structure and strategies. More than that, it involves the capacity to connect on a human level - to convey to our client that we have got their back, that we believe in their ability to change, grow and be more! The competent coach, through careful skill selection and demonstration, can help their client to achieve remarkable results.

References

- Covey, S. 1989, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Free Press, New York NY.
- Whitmore, J. 2002, *Coaching for Performance*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, Boston MA.

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