

The desired future is now!

Discoveries from my briefest coaching Daniel Meier, SolutionSurfers®

For more than 12 years I have been busy as a coach, specialized in keeping coaching sessions short and effective even though my clients visit me only once or maximum three times for a one-hour session. After this short period of time they are already on the right track, which means that they do not need a coach anymore for achieving their goals.

However, I did have a conversation last recently which lasted no more than six minutes! This was even for me surprisingly short.

In this article I would like to describe this conversation and explain my discoveries as a coach. This experience was for me the manifestation of brief coaching's further evolution. A pioneering experience which I think may determine how coaching is going to develop. I see more and more signs that coaches are seeking for new alternatives in order to enable coachees to make permanent changes without the need for ten or more sessions. And this phenomenon also meets companies' needs as they put a question mark over rather long coaching programmes.

But let's get back to the shortest coaching conversation I have ever experienced.

Case history

There is actually no case history in the classical sense. I was invited to deliver a 4-hour workshop at a telecommunication company. Internal advisors, coaches and HR managers were interested in getting introduced to the „Art and Technics of Brief Coaching“. During the workshop the participants were given the opportunity to complete a coaching exercise in pairs based on real cases. However, due to the odd number of participants, they could not pair up and the boss of a bigger division stood there alone in the end. She grabbed the chance and asked me to coach her. I agreed slightly surprised.

The conversation

So we sat there in a corner of a seminar room. As is often the case, the client already began to talk even before I asked a useful question.

Sara: „Thank you for your time, I am looking forward to the „professional“ coaching with you (laughs). I have just spent six months here in Switzerland; I re-located with my 10-year-old daughter. My husband commutes. He kept his position in Darmstadt and he is only around at weekends. And I am worried about my daughter. Even though she found her place here at school, I noticed that she just hangs around. But I want her to develop further.

Coach: „Ok, I can understand that. Hm, before you go on: Could you please tell me what your best expectation is regarding this conversation?“

Sara explains further how her daughter rejects any recommendations she gives her as a mother. She does not want to hear about any swimming lessons. She would enjoy playing tennis; she suffers from asthma though. She would enjoy stitching; there is no stitching course in their village though. Therefore, her daughter just hangs around and is often alone in the room listening to music or watching YouTube videos. In the eyes of Sara the goal of this coaching session was to find out what she could do in order to motivate her daughter to find a hobby which would bring her together with other children and also develop her further.

She would be very happy if her daughter gained some self-confidence and was willing to learn more with attending extracurricular activities. She is worried that her daughter has difficulties in meeting new friends. Sara thinks that she has done her best. She even talked to the teacher but nothing worked.

And yes, after a long day of work she is also tired and not always patient enough. It did happen sometimes that she was too strict or talked a bit loud to her daughter.

I still remember that I was particularly touched by this situation. Here was a rather tough manager of this international company sitting in front of me who manages a division with 50 employees. She easily works 10 hours a day. And what she wants to discuss with me is such a private topic.

The smartest thing I could think of was to appreciate this. I cannot reproduce the exact wording but I said something like this so I responded: „It really fascinates me how much attention you pay to your daughter, how much you care for her as her mother and that you want to do everything to ensure her well-being. Not only to ensure her well-being but also that she can build upon her talents and opportunities. It is surely not easy and I also think that it cannot be taken for granted in this new situation you have just found yourself in.

I can only assume the pressure you are under, here in your position at the company however still it is your daughter who comes first.“

And while I said these to Sara she almost started to cry, searched for a tissue and took a long, deep breath.

Me: „Would it be OK if I ask another question?“

Sara nodded.

Me: „Hmm – how hopeful are you right now that your daughter is going to develop in the very direction you are wishing for her and that she will become an educated and self-confident young woman?“

Sara had to dry again her tears and said the following: „I... I am very much hopeful!! I mean, she is so stubborn and with this stubbornness so self-confident! She reacts clearly and consequently against any ideas I am proposing. This is actually a clear sign of self-confidence. (Smiles)

And last week she organized a handicraft-afternoon with two friends. And she also has to get along with the nanny as I am a lot in the office. I am very much confident that she is developing herself further. And I think, yes, this is good enough. I think the best I can do is to trust her more.“

At that point I asked Sara if she needed anything else but she just waved with her hands, smiled and said that she was really relieved.

6 minutes. What happened?

OK, maybe we were just lucky. It would be a possible and not a bad explanation at all. You can always use some luck.

But what do we do as coaches if we do not want to rely on luck only? At the moment there are two aspects which fascinate me a lot and they both become important in this case.

1: The assumptions, the coach makes, influence not only the length but also the effectiveness of the coaching session

And when I write about assumptions I do not really mean hypotheses regarding the topic or the problem or the blind spots in the knowledge of the client. I rather mean the assumptions in regards to the way people develop themselves and how I can assist them on the way as a coach. If I was convinced as a coach for example that changing one's attitude is a complicated and long process which can be done step by step, then I would start solving Sara's case from a completely different approach. Then I would create an action plan together with her which she could implement step by step. In such a way she would come closer and closer to her goal.

With these assumptions, however, we stay in the situation which the client described as problematic and within this reference framework (or reality framework) we try to find a possible solution.

On the contrary, in Brief Coaching we have gained lot of experience with the assumption that we do not solve problems (or we do not support the client to solve problems) but that we invent solutions.

By creating the desired future consequently and detailed, in which the problem is solved, we achieve a new possible framework. We invite the coachee to capture an attractive solution image, in which the problematic situation has been solved, without even knowing how we could ever get there. We ask often questions like: „Imagine that during the night a miracle happened and the problem has been solved. How would you notice that the next morning?“ In the next step we invite the coachee to explore everything that already exists, to explore the experience which the coachee already has with that captured solution image. So we clearly work on creating a new reality and focusing the attention on what already exists.

2: The desired future has already begun

Nevertheless, what happens if we do not take any further step at all? This is the assumption I made in the above illustrated example; the assumption that the desired future already exists. You do not have to do anything (no need for an action plan), you only need to realize that the desired future has already begun. In western cultures we are keen on working with terms like „past, present, future“ and these help us to create order in our life. According to several Asian philosophies the three tenses make a fusion: only the present exists, the Now! The future can only evolve in the Now, based on what has been.

Therefore, the future has already begun and the progress should not be stopped. Why would we wait for tomorrow or for the day of the wonder if we could already act according to our wishes?

In the above mentioned example with the case of Sara the assumption helped me that everything is already on hand.

1: I valued what I heard about the resources of the client. And they already exist. Right now. Nothing has to be given or done for that. And this fundamentally differs from „paraphrasing“ or „active listening“. With my assumption that the future has already begun, I listen differently as a coach: I pay less attention to the context and I do not try to repeat any of it. I listen for statements of the coachee which indicate the desired future: in this case the resources which Sara illustrated in her description.

2: I asked about her optimism here-and-now. Not in two weeks' time or after she has done this and that. Now! Maybe this is enormous trust in the client that this optimism already exists and that there are enough signs in her life which boost this optimism.

And thereby we create new options to choose from. Assuming that the future has already begun, new opportunities arise: forget about action-orientated „plan the next step“-approaches (often coming with the unacceptable question: What can you do next in order to reach your goal? If the coachee knew that, he would have never turned to a coach...), step away from trying to understand the formulation of the coachee's question, and move towards inventing new frameworks for the reality. Concentrate on exploring signs which tell us that the desired future has already begun. If we look carefully we find what we were searching for.

Time Management

I would like to add a second example, that illustrates these thoughts. It is about a coaching-session with a financial director. When he called me he explained rather detailed how urgent he needs help as things are getting out of his hand at work. So we made an appointment straight away for the next day. And I still remember how unsure I was if I could help as I did not know much about the different time-management systems.

His goal was to regain control over his agenda and to find an efficient technic for it. So we had a clear vision. Then he began to explain in which difficult situations he finds himself with new projects: a colleague who has just quit and a pending reorganisation. And I have to admit it was all a bit confusing for me.

If I had the assumption as a coach that we ought to analyse the situation further in order to find a suitable planning system (assuming that the question has anything to do with the solution), then I would have asked questions to clarify the situation.

With the assumption that improvements should not be hindered and that the future has already begun, I listened and planned to interfere differently. First of all, I was interested in his ideas about the desired future. After listening to what he has said so far I did not hear anything about the desired future but I did get acquainted with his problematic situation, still I knew hardly anything about the desired future.

I said the following: „Thank you for the detailed description, I can now understand how you get under pressure and now it is also clear for me how overwhelming this can be for you. And I am very much impressed about the power with which you wish to regain control. But before we move on I have a central question: What would be the result of our conversation that would be beyond your dearest hopes? And I really mean your dearest hopes.“

Manager: „That I go through this difficult phase with certain ease and that I get home again at decent times with a clear mind!“

Driven by this answer, which exceeded the design of a time-management strategy, I gave it another go:

„And now let's suppose that we would even exceed these dearest hopes of yours. How would you notice that?“

Then a silent moment followed.

This was one of those unique moments when the coach thankfully notes that something very important is happening; when we have the honour to witness a fundamental discovery which changes the world a little bit.

The manager said: “Then I had new hopes that we could stay together with my wife.”

In the following second part of the coaching session we were to discover what already gave him hope; which happenings and signs boost this hope in his every day life. And this was good enough.

The only one follow-up meeting

During the follow-up meeting that took place around 4 weeks later, the coachee could tell about improvements already but he was still not confident enough. Of course, after such short period of time! It surprised him that he could already see lot of signs which gave him more hope and which he did not contribute to at all - as he said. So lately they were invited by friends and had a hilarious great night out. Once his wife cooked dinner and got them some wine - what usually only happens on special occasions. And a friend told him during a sport event how difficult times he is having with his relationship. The manager felt very happy (and was also ashamed for that, as he said) because the problem of his friend seemed to be much more serious than the situation in his own relationship. And when he got home after this event he hugged his wife spontaneously.

He could draw his attention more and more to things, which gave him confidence and hope. And like this, he began to realise that the desired future has already begun.

Oh and by the way, the time-management system during our follow up conversation has never been an issue and I have to admit that I also did not mention it. I simply assumed that after all these years of professional experience, experience; he is very much capable of controlling this.

Epilogue

And yes, I am far from leading conversations like these all the time. Usually precision work is needed and such breakthrough does not always happen. But sometimes I can be present as a coach when these somehow magical (I know it is a big word) transformations happen. And then I can only be very thankful for these moments.

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