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Setting the scene: Could context-setting before coaching begins help to ensure its success?

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Most professional business coaches constantly seek to improve their effectiveness to provide the best value for their clients, both individuals and organisations. But are we missing something? Could we do more before coaching starts to ensure its success? I believe the answer is yes, and that giving greater prominence to context-setting is the key. With a medical procedure, the patient's discussion of symptoms with the doctor is supported by preparatory work, such as scans and blood tests. Why should a business coach aspire to anything less than this meticulous preparation?

Context-setting can be incredibly valuable. It can help to set the framework for coaching, providing information on the client's working style, motivations and others' perceptions. It also allows the coach to support and challenge the client from a more independent, informed and objective starting point. It provides early insights as initial sessions spend less on information gathering, and more on coaching issues. And context-setting can support valuable feedback at the end of coaching. For example, several coaches in one organisation might hear consistent issues, illuminating common insights about the company. Such feedback does not come from individual coaching.

So how do we increase the focus on context? Quality coach training needs to go beyond providing skills for coaching sessions towards helping coaches to understand the wider setting, in psychological and business terms. Depending on the client for information, without independent checking, can lead to coaching biases and the fundamental attribution error, where we wrongly attribute more to the client than to the environment in which they operate. Empirical research in psychology has made it clear that we are all more affected by our context than we believe. As business coaches we must pick up on key influences, from spoken or unspoken expectations about roles, to jargon and reliance on history, through to all-pervasive themes such as a dysfunctional company culture.

At Meyler Campbell we believe it is essential for coaches, external or internal, to be aware of these potential risks. While it is early days in this leap forward in business coach training, we seek to expose coaches to an array of tools to explore the context, complementing and deepening what they are told by the client and organisation and providing a richer view of the client. Existing personal information, such as 360-degree assessments and psychometric profiles such as MBTI and Firo-B, can help the coach to understand more about the client. But it should also be about understanding the business setting.

Each sector and, indeed, each organisation has a unique language, operating culture, history and strategy, all potentially influential in the client's coaching issues. We may interview people in the client's working life, such as managers, colleagues, team members, or even key contacts at a client or supplier. We may also need to absorb business messages about strategy, structure and operating performance. The investment may seem a burden at first, but time saved and increased effectiveness within coaching sessions more than compensate. There are, of course, caveats. All information comes with biases, and the coach must distinguish between these and what adds value.

Internal coaches should be in a far stronger position in terms of awareness of the broader context but may be influenced by the same issues as their clients, making it harder to be objective. And vice versa for external coaches. Greater understanding of context enriches the client experience. We expect this critical area of coaching to evolve rapidly and we look forward to stimulating creative thinking.

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