

Coaching reloaded – assumptions of a Brief Coach

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Abstract:

Brief coaching offers a distinctly different angle on the growing knowledge base about the field of coaching. Coaching can be highly effective even in one single session and produce sustainable and lasting results with no automatic need for an ongoing coaching process. In a market where 10 session packages or 6 month contracts are the rule, what Brief Coaching offers stands out. Brief Coaching implies a dramatically different understanding of how to be most useful as a coach. A case example of a single session coaching is described. It outlines the interaction between client and coach and presents 10 central assumptions that guided the coach's contributions in this specific case. The paper reflects on how these assumptions may have influenced the briefness of the conversation and the lasting result for the client. The paper is also commenting on commonly held assumptions which are different from the ones a brief coach draws on.

Five good reasons to remain sceptical

Have you wondered how best to be useful as a coach when you may have only one session? I trust the described practical experience with Brief Coaching can provide you with valuable hints.

Some of what you are about to read may come across as strange, surprising or even naïve to coaching practitioners not used to brief coaching. Therefore I suggest that you stay reserved about the paradigm change in coaching that is offered here. There are at least five good reasons to maintain a stance of healthy/wise scepticism:

1. If what you have been doing as a coach so far has been working well for you and your clients, then just do more of that. There is then no reason to become uncer-

- tain or to adopt another construction of coaching reality. On the contrary as long as you are doing your coaching work with secure conviction and success, chances are that you will continue to be useful with it (Wampold, B.E. 2001).
2. Any method or technique contributes only a small portion to the success of a coaching session. The presently most solidly based scientific meta-study on helping professional conversations (Duncan, Hubble, & Miller, 2001) shows that the used method (technique, explanation model) just adds 15 per cent of the success. Focusing on factors like client resources (40 per cent relevant to success) and the coach/coachee relationship (30 per cent relevant to success) is much more relevant for the achieved results than the method applied. So put aside any scholar disputes about the “most useful way” to coach. SF Brief Coaching may not be it either.
 3. Steve de Shazer, the founder of the SF approach, withheld from making statements about the field of coaching. In a conversation with the author shortly before his death, Steve de Shazer stated: “All our empirical findings come from studies in therapy. In therapy we have sufficient scientific evidence to both the briefness and the sustainability of results. Concerning the use of SF brief conversations in coaching I have no experience and therefore I cannot say if it might be useful for coaching clients.”
 4. Brief Coaching offers neither a theory nor any explanatory models. In this respect it does not meet the common expectation of a scientific approach. At best it offers a theory of no theory. Steve de Shazer preferred to describe the findings of what proved to be useful from his conversations in simple words instead of trying to explain why this might be so. He feared that if he came up with theories and explanatory models they might be considered as “true”, rather than just work in progress assumptions (de Shazer, 1984).
 5. And yet another important reason to remain sceptical:

to work in an SF manner demands a radical paradigm change. You are invited to change the focus of your noticing as a coach. Brief Coaches concentrate their perception on details of preferred futures and on building solutions. This way of looking at the clients' requests totally differs from all traditional approaches of solving the problem. The difference between the two perceptions is as dramatic as viewing the earth as round or flat.

Consequently, this paper describes one of many possible constructions of a coaching reality – one of many possible ways of how to be helpful as a coach. Feel free to try out some of these assumptions within the solution-building perception. And remember to carefully observe whether your new assumptions are really useful to your client or not. If what you do works do more of it, if it does not work, do something different.

Case example: Brief Coaching assumptions

The following single session coaching with a client of mine describes typical considerations and assumptions of a Brief Coach. I have chosen 10 of my assumptions which seem most central for the briefness of this coaching conversation.

I have deliberately chosen this specific form of case description. In his book “Words Were Originally Magic”, Steve de Shazer (1994) discusses the influence of assumptions made by the therapist on the usage of language in the conversation. Another book by our colleague Ben Furman, “Pickpockets in a Nudist Camp” (1992), describes from a systems perspective how clients willingly adapt to whatever assumptions therapists make and thus happily co-construct a reality that fits the therapist's assumptions.

During the following case description you will become witness to the fast and flexible learning ability of my client. Very much in line with my own coaching assumptions, she soon discovers that she is already much further in making

progress than she originally thought. Also she willingly co-constructs easily sustainable solutions and resources that she can access on her own with no need for further coaching.

A. Contracting

The request comes from the head of HR of a large industrial supplier. The coaching should be for Helen, a highly capable line manager reporting directly to the CEO. She is currently heading two departments and additionally is in charge of an urgent strategic project. She is under huge pressure and expected results are vital. She is entitled to the best support she can get to succeed.

The agreement between HR and the coach looks as follows:

- The coaching fee is due from the first meeting (no free intake session)
- If the first meeting does not turn out to be useful from the client's perspective, no payment is due
- In case the client finds just one session sufficient, double the fee will be billed since the biggest added value of a Brief Coach is generated in the beginning.

Assumption 1: A first session can create such a useful start that the client is afterwards all set to continue on their own.

As a Brief Coach I tend to deal with each session as if it was the only opportunity that I have to work with a client. At the end of a session it is up to clients to decide whether they prefer to make a next appointment and when or whether they prefer to test out their ideas in daily working life and call again for an appointment only when they require one.

Generally I see most of my clients for one session/appointment only. This is well aligned with my conviction that one, well focused session should be sufficient to offer enough for the person to continue the change in their daily life. My art is to help clients to

generate a useful start for themselves. A start should be enough, but of course the total number of contacts is as much as the client finds useful.

The above assumption differs from a widespread business model in Anglo-Saxon countries where coaches see themselves as supporting commitment and continuity in the follow-through until the initial goal is fully reached. Thus there may be a need for weekly coaching calls and contracts over several months. In German speaking countries coaches often see the necessity for a thorough analysis of the client's situation in order for the coach to be really helpful. A first session therefore serves the purpose of developing a sufficient understanding for fitting interventions to be offered at a later stage.

I suppose that people come to coaching not when they have a goal or a problem but when they feel stuck. So, what they are looking for is not a full solution but to get unstuck. Once they are unstuck they will continue in whatever way makes sense to them.

B. Initial phone conversation

Helen calls the coach to set a date and time for a first meeting.

During the 10 minute call she names at least 5 urgent issues that she would like to tackle. She confirms that her current situation is close to unbearable due to the exceptional workload and importance of expected results. She describes several obstacles and challenges. She briefly mentions that in the last 10 days she has started to be much more determined in her management style, which has brought some relief. But there is still the fact of a new CEO who is not fully operational, the burning strategic project in her lap, plus 2000 employees in the two departments she is currently leading who expect a clear direction and answers. Also she is questioning whether she should get ready for her own next career step.

I assure her of my support and we set our meeting for

the following week.

Assumption 2: Clients bring the relevant resources into the session

I admit that assuming relevant resources where clients might think they are lacking does not seem obvious at first sight. Nevertheless I frequently catch myself listening to my clients as if they already brought the relevant resources to the session. So I took careful note of Helen's short remark about the improvements she started to initiate during the last 10 days. Assuming that this could be the beginning of the solution which she is bringing along, I remind myself to inquire about it more deeply during the first session.

I pay attention to observe what coaches "pounce" on. Depending on our own assumptions of how to be most useful, we tend to listen to different aspects of the clients' presentations. Do we pounce on obstacles or deep underlying fears? Do we take note of the long row of presented topics for future sessions?

As a Brief Coach of course I pounce on Helen's improvements. If clients report improvements it means that they have already started to find workable ways towards the solution. It also means they already bring along the necessary resources to put their solutions into action. Accordingly, there is so much less to do for the coach.

C. Start of the Coaching session

Coach: "What needs to happen as a result of our session today so that your journey to my office will have been worthwhile for you?" Helen repeats her five possible topics and after short reflection she zooms in on something that is closest to her: "Under the given circumstances I need to be much more determined in my leadership role towards the CEO and towards the project team."

Assumption 3: The coach does not necessarily need to know anything about the facts and circumstances of the problem in order to be helpful.

I do realise that this is a tricky assumption. What I do need to make sure is that from the client's perspective I know enough about the facts and circumstances so that THE CLIENT is convinced I can start to be helpful. I trust that Helen will automatically fill me in on what little I need to know. I deliberately avoid asking questions like "what is it all about?" or "how did it come about?" or "what else is involved?" I assume that Helen already very well knows the answers to these questions, probably having thought about them many times or even repeated to others.

Since I also assume that there is no connection whatsoever between the problem and its solution, obviously there is no point in me enquiring about more details of the problem.

Colleagues working within the problem-solving paradigm obviously tend towards a different assumption here. They assume that understanding the problem is a highly useful way to start dealing with it in a most effective way. Consequently they spend more time here, sometimes the larger part of the session.

Instead, I prefer to follow up on Helen's stated goal. I invite Helen to explore how our conversation could make a positive difference, what she might be doing differently afterwards and how this would be useful to her or the company. "Suppose you are more determined, how is it going to be helpful? What might you do then that you are not yet doing now? Who will be the first stakeholders to notice?" It is what I call solution-building.

Coach and coachee briefly reflect how it would make a difference if Helen somehow manages to put more weight and determination into her actions. In the end Helen states clearly that this is a worthwhile topic she wants to start with.

Assumption 4: Clients know best what is useful for their own progress.

Knowing little about the facts and circumstances of the problem can be an advantage for me as coach. The less I know, the easier it is for me to rely on the client's judgment of what is useful to move the process forward. I can trust and accept the client to be the true expert for finding their own solutions. It is something I much prefer instead of challenging the client's view.

I have recently been working with colleagues in France who adopt a systems perspective. They were surprised by the extent to which I am reluctant to take any responsibility in driving the process. To them it seemed striking how I left it up to the client to define not only the content of the solution but also the way to get there.

"Ok, let's put your determination in your leadership role on a scale of 1 to 10. 10 means that you are as determined in your actions as you can be and 1 means the opposite. Within which range are you moving on this scale?" Helen says she moves between 2 and 4. "Sometimes I am better at it but for example last week I was too soft and unclear with the CEO and my request never happened." "I see," says the coach, "and what are you already doing differently at 4 compared to 2 on the scale?"

With growing pleasure Helen starts to elaborate on some of the changes she has successfully managed to implement during the last two weeks. She has started to concentrate on fewer priorities and stopped doing other things. For example she withdrew her participation at a leadership meeting against huge opposition from HR. She forced an internal client to prioritise two urgent requests and declined to pursue the second one. Coach and client discuss how Helen had managed to take such tricky and unpopular decisions and how she had managed to communicate them with determination so that her decisions prevailed.

Assumption 5: Solution talk creates solutions.

This is probably the one assumption that most dominantly influences my being a coach. Whenever I get information from clients about what is missing (problem talk – which happens quite regularly) then it is my first impulse to ask about what is already in place (solution talk). All I really hope for is to create a broader set of choices in the perception of the client. If Helen mostly perceives the part of reality which may still be missing between 2 and 10, then I gently tap on her shoulder and guide her focus to another part of reality which is just as true: everything she already manages to get going between 1 and 4 on her scale. In problem talk Helen is only aware of the gap. After the tap on the shoulder she can freely decide which parts of reality she wants to take into consideration. And the more she talks about what already works well and how she does that, the easier it will be to keep these things up or even increase them.

I know that at this point many colleagues act upon a different assumption. “What is hindering you, what is blocking you from moving higher?” they ask, presupposing that problems can only be solved if you understand and deal with the underlying root causes. The Brief Coaching alternative is to analyse any existing forces pointing in the preferred direction.

D. Preferred Future

Helen does not want to stagnate between 2 and 4 on her scale. It is her goal to get at least to 7 or 8 (according to her own humorous judgment she would be unbearable at 10). The coach curiously picks up on this forward moving energy: “Suppose you somehow manage to get to 7 or 8 – I do not yet know how, I also do not know whether that is possible under the given circumstances. Just suppose for a moment that you are already at 7 or 8. What exactly will you be doing differently then, compared with now?”

In the 10 minutes that follow, Helen designs a highly detailed and manifold scenario of desired changes and new behaviours on her side. The coach asks her how the project team members will notice these differences, how the CEO will notice in their next meeting, and how her department teams will notice her being at 8.

Assumption 6: Clients have access to their preferred future which they can describe in actions and interactions.

Often clients find it easier to describe their preferred future if this future is hypothetically placed after having overcome obstacles and challenges. Surprisingly, clients are well able to paint a picture of where they want to be even without knowing whether and how they are going get there.

I count this specific ability of clients of foreseeing their future to be one their most powerful resources. In my experience eliciting such detailed descriptions of their own activities in the future raises the probability of the occurrence of wanted activities. Again there seems to be no connection whatsoever between the problem and its solutions. Therefore human beings can hypothetically jump directly to the solution without first solving the problem.

This shortcut makes no sense if coaches assume that problems and obstacles need to be dealt with properly first – during the coaching session and in real life. Obviously this assumption leads to a totally different interaction between coach and client. Other questions need to be asked and other steps need to be taken to ensure commitment and follow-through. This assumption can very well lead to the same result, however, by demanding more lengthy procedures.

Client and coach are both highly aware of the fact that they are talking about an imagined and hypothetical future. Helen knows that she is only situated between 2 and 4 while talking about 7 and 8. Nevertheless this

imagined scenario deploys attractiveness and a reinforcing determination that can be heard in her voice.

E. Forerunners of the Solution

In fact Helen's descriptions of herself at 7 and 8 sounded so convincing and real that the coach asked: "What examples from the recent past come to your mind which were already pointing towards your 7 and 8?"

There are two recent examples which come to Helen's mind; one incident with the project team at 6.5 on the scale and another one with the CEO at 7. "Yes, this is quite amazing. You know what I did? I was just about to answer one of his gentle e-mails when I stood up instead, walked out of my office into his office and just told him how I need his full commitment behind this project or we might as well stop it. That was a 7 and it really made a difference." Helen and the coach carefully analyse the success factors of each example and Helen collects a lot of clarity on how she does do it when she is determined in her leadership role. They also look at what helps Helen to start the process.

Assumption 7: Real examples of forerunners of the preferred future do exist.

Note that I did not ask "are there such examples?" I rather just assumed such examples really existed. The client was just invited to look for them. Talking about self fulfilling prophecies: in my 15 years of coaching practice it has never happened that the client would not detect such forerunners. Even though Helen had rated herself between 2 and 4 just twenty minutes earlier, she now comes up with examples at 6 and 7. It is as if there was a sudden recovery of memories on the solution-side of things.

When it comes to sustainability of improvements, it is easier to maintain a solution which is already working in practice than to develop and maintain new pathways to

improvement. The more lazy way to find what works already seems to be more promising for faster and more sustainable results.

F. Clues of further progress

Client and coach are 40 minutes into the coaching session, and at this point the client grants herself a writing break. She takes a piece of paper and notes down a list of things that go through her mind.

Assumption 8: Progress is inevitable.

I often have clients who take the initiative for preparing follow-through into their own hands during the session. It is usually a good sign that the responsibility for progress remains where it belongs: with the client.

Had Helen not taken the initiative I might have asked her how she and others will notice that she has already started to make further progress. The question presupposes that progress is inevitable. My concern as a coach is not whether progress will happen; my concern is how Helen and other people will notice it. Sometimes useful change goes unnoticed because it seems so natural and subtle. On the other hand new and useful behaviour gets positively reinforced and is more easily maintained when consciously perceived as such. Hence the questions: "How will you notice? How will others notice? How will you notice that others have noticed?"

Other coaches who usually stay with the client during the implementation phase might ask: "What do you need to do next so you make progress?" In a next session this to-do list can be revised. In Brief coaching I prefer to rely on progress happening anyway. Instead of limiting options down to a selection of committed tasks, I rather open up the number of shapes and forms in which progress could happen, trusting that some of the discussed options will best fit the solution and thus

materialise. The more different clues of progress we discuss the more likely that some will be noticed as such.

Helen's action plan consists of a variety of ideas. They come from details she described talking about her preferred future and her recent highlights. "I know exactly what I need to do!" she says.

The coach asks how they can wrap up the session for Helen in the most useful way. Glancing at the records of her scaling answers (Figure 1) she says: "To be honest I realise that I am much further than I thought even this morning. It is almost embarrassing that I even took your time. I realise that I do not need coaching since I am already well en route."

Assumption 9: Coaches help clients become aware of their already existing solutions.

The above used to be my favorite assumption about what I do as a Brief Coach. Therefore I was quite puzzled by Helen's remark that coaching was not necessary. At first I

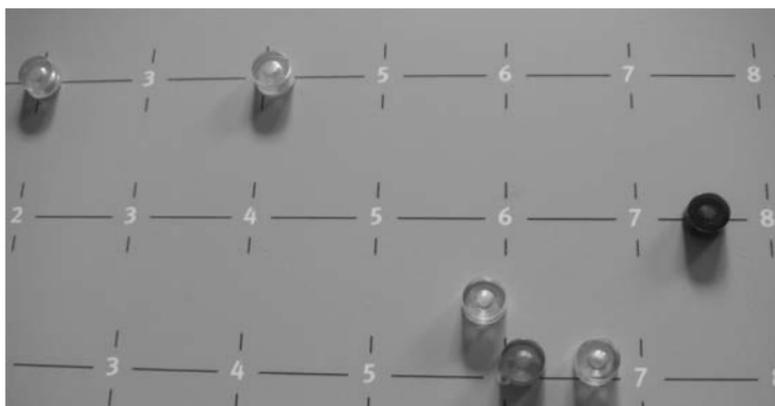


FIGURE 1: Skaleboard® records of Helen's session

- Scale A: Current behavioural range
- Scale B: Preferred future
- Scale C: Recent highlights

thought: "Too bad she did not notice that she only became aware of her being further thanks to my helpful questions." In the following days I tried to comfort myself by saying that probably the best coaching is when clients think they did it all themselves. It took me a while to realise that maybe my self-centered assumption number 9 could be less useful to Helen than her own assumption that she was simply further than she had thought. In the meantime I have started to experiment with a new assumption.

Assumption 10: The coach is merely a witness on the way.

Let us suppose that Helen really was further than she had thought. Suppose she really did not need coaching. Suppose I was merely a witness of Helen being on her way. Suppose I did not need to add or do anything. Suppose whatever became possible during the conversation became possible between Helen and a curious witness.

The best that could happen as a result: Helen attributes all the resources where they belong: herself. This is a promising start for a Brief Coaching session which could lead to sustainably lasting solutions.

G. End of the Coaching

The coaching session ends after 50 minutes. Helen suggests she will call if she would like to have another conversation.

In the months to follow the coach receives two short e-mails from Helen. Three weeks after the session Helen proudly shares a success story with her strategic project. About 4 months later she informs the coach that she has accepted a job offer to become CEO of a company.

Acknowledgements

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learning to be brief and then SF in order to be even briefer. Thanks also to Svea van der Hoorn for editing this text in her acknowledging and enriching way.

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Peter Szabó is a Master Certified Coach and a Doctor of Law. After 15 years in corporate HR management he has specialised in Brief Coaching for executives. He teaches coaching in several post-graduate university programmes throughout Europe and North America. He holds workshops on Brief Coaching for corporations and institutions all over the world. Peter is founder and director of the largest coaching school in Switzerland. He is also member of the International Coach Federation's credential assessment team.

Further reading on Brief Coaching

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