

Coaching at Work

“pp54-56 – How To...Coach your clients to delegate”

All rights reserved. © This article appeared in *Coaching at Work*, Vol 16, Issue 2, 2021 and has been reproduced in full by kind permission of the publisher. Not to be distributed electronically or made available to public websites without permission from the publisher. For personal and internal organisational use only.

Coaching at Work is a bi-monthly magazine, which is available in printed or digital format. Subscription includes access to all articles published in the last five years; free registration on our global coach listing, worth £50; a monthly e-newsletter, and membership of the Coaching at Work global 42,000 plus Coaching at Work LinkedIn group. There are discounts on subscriptions available to members of the main professional bodies and some coach training providers.

For more information, go to www.coaching-at-work.com

To subscribe, call 01202 087621 or email:
cawsubs@selectps.com

Coach your clients to delegate

Leaders are often promoted to management because they are good at getting things done. But once there, they must learn to delegate that responsibility

By Catherine Stothart

One of the most common issues that arise for leaders I coach is how to become more comfortable with delegating.

Typically, they're promoted because they're good at getting things done and they achieve results. But often the results are achieved by working long hours and doing a lot themselves. As they become more senior, this isn't sustainable – they need to develop different skills to succeed at higher levels, including delegating effectively.

This article outlines some of the approaches I take when I coach leaders to delegate. They may lack skills – not quite knowing how to ask someone to take responsibility, or not being able to flex depending on the person's situation – but skills can be taught and developed through practice. More often, what stops them delegating is either their beliefs about leadership or their fear of trusting others.

So how do I help the client uncover their underlying beliefs and fears and change their behaviour?

Make it work

As with any change, there are three prerequisites (Beckhard & Harris, 1987). For the client to be motivated to change, they must:

- feel dissatisfied with the current situation
- have a vision of how it could be better
- identify some actionable first steps

The Rapid Impact Coaching (Landsberg, 2003) technique enables the client to make these psychological shifts. *Figure 1* illustrates the steps the coach works through with the client. It's important to do them in the numbered order.

The method starts on the left with the client outlining the issue that is causing dissatisfaction. You then move to step 2 on the right with your client and help them express their vision of what they would like it to be. This movement to the right picks up the technique from Neuro-Linguistic Programming of putting the past on the left and the desired future on the right – as most people in Western culture seem to think of it in this way (McDermott & O'Connor, 1996).

In step 3, you come back to the middle to explore the barriers that are stopping the client moving towards their vision. It's important to articulate these fully before moving on to step 4, brainstorming options, and finally to Step 5, deciding on actions.

I usually stand at a flipchart alongside the client as we work through the stages, but during lockdown I've successfully used this technique remotely, using a virtual whiteboard.

As with any coaching technique, the biggest insights come from asking powerful questions at each stage. What follows is an example of the questions I ask at each stage of a client who says they find it difficult to delegate.

“Leaders may lack skills – not quite knowing how to ask someone to take responsibility, or not being able to flex depending on the person's situation”

STAGE 1: What is the issue?

I ask the client to describe the problem and this is where they articulate, often for the first time, their dissatisfaction with the current situation.

Prompts might include:

- How do you know this is a problem?
- What impact does it have on you?
- What impact does it have on others?
- What are the consequences of not delegating?

Fatal flaw

Assuming you and the client both know what the problem is and rushing on to the next stage.

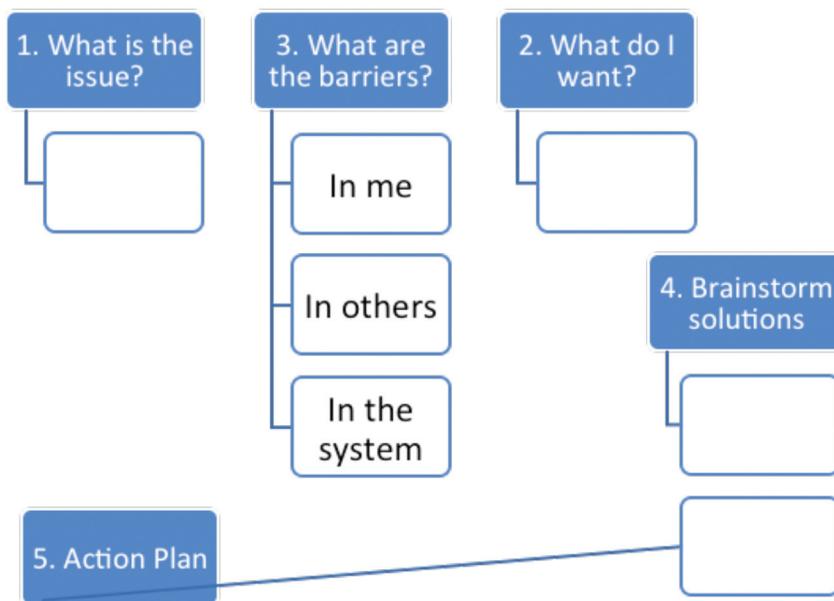


Figure 1: Coaching to delegate in 5 steps

It's really important for the client to feel their own dissatisfaction with the situation, rather than merely thinking that they "should" delegate, so stay with this until you can see they are experiencing the dissatisfaction.

STAGE 2:
What do you want?

This stage is about creating a vision of what it could be like and making the vision tangible.

Questions might include:

- *What do you want to be different?*
- *What would that feel like?*
- *If you were able to delegate, what would that give you?*
- *How would you know you were delegating effectively?*
- *What would you or others be doing, saying, thinking, feeling?*

Fatal flaw

Taking the first thing your client says as their final answer.

Yes, write it down, but continue to ask

questions to enable them to articulate their vision of how much better it could be. This enables them to surface their deeper desired outcomes.

STAGE 3:
What are the barriers to getting what you want – in you, in others, in the organisation?

I take these sub-headings one at a time and the first one – what are the barriers in you – is the one that usually generates some real 'aha' moments and exposes some of their underlying beliefs.

Typically, the client says things such as:

- *It's quicker to do it myself*
- *I'm the boss, so I should be able to do it all*
- *They are all busy; it's not fair to give them more tasks*
- *I'm more competent to do it than they are*
- *I need to be seen to be leading this project*
- *I can't trust them to get it done on time and to the right standard*

Fatal flaw

Letting the client get away with self-justification.

The client often wants to explain 'why' it's OK to do what they do, but this self-justification undermines their willingness to change, so the coach may need to steer the client away from explaining and focus on simply describing what they think and feel.

Make it work

An effective way to challenge these beliefs is to ask the client about each one:

- *How does this belief help you?*
- *How does this belief hinder you?*

They usually realise that many of these beliefs are not only self-defeating but also unhelpful to their colleagues.

For some clients, I suspect the reluctance to delegate is their fear of loss of status (Rock, 2008) – as if delegating is a sign of weakness. It can be difficult for this to surface to their conscious awareness, so sometimes I ask them questions about their role as a leader and this can lead them to recognise how they can gain status in other ways e.g. by having a reputation for developing their team.

Barriers that they identify in others and in the organisation often include:

- *They think they already have too much to do*
- *My boss expects me to do it, not for me to dump it on someone else*
- *I'm expected to know everything that's going on*

Here the skill of the coach lies in asking questions about how realistic these beliefs are and what would happen if the client didn't tacitly go along with them. Questions might include:

- *How can you help them manage their time or priorities better?*
- *What's the impact on your team*

HOW TO...

“For some clients, I suspect the reluctance to delegate is their fear of loss of status – as if delegating is a sign of weakness. It can be difficult for this to surface”

members of not delegating to them?

- If you don't know something, what's the worst that could happen?
- How could you deal with criticism from your boss?

If one of the barriers to delegating is a lack of trust in others, I sometimes do the 'Trust' with them – an exercise developed by my coaching supervisor, Georgia Parker – as this helps build their vision of how much better it would be for them if they did trust their team members.

THE TRUST LINE EXERCISE

Stick a line of masking tape on the floor, with one end marked, “I trust everybody” and the other end “I trust nobody”. Ask them to imagine this is a scale of 1–10 and stand at the point that represents how much they trust their team.

Ask them to describe what that feels like. Then ask them to move up the line two or three points and describe how this greater level of trust feels – they usually describe more positive feelings. This activity builds an emotional connection to their vision which makes them more likely to be committed to actions for change.

STAGE 4:

Brainstorm solutions

Take each group of the barriers (in yourself, others and the organisation) one at a time and encourage the client to brainstorm possible solutions without evaluating them.

Specific questions depend on which barriers have been identified, but generic questions include:

- What could you do differently to change this situation?
- How could you overcome that?
- What is another way to think about this?
- Who do you see as a role model for delegating – what do they do?

At this stage, clients usually recognise that many of the solutions are in their own hands and that by changing their behaviour, they can change the situation and influence how others behave.

Fatal flaw

Not being open to ideas.

As always with brainstorming, it's important to come up with ideas without evaluating them. The client may believe that some of the potential solutions are not under their control, but encourage them to be open-minded for now – evaluation can be done at the next stage.

STAGE 5:

Action planning

Having brainstormed lots of possible solutions, I ask the client to focus on two or three actionable first steps. Here I focus my questions on what they'll do, how they'll do it and when they'll do it. I might also ask:

- What will happen if you do nothing?
- On a scale of 1–10, how committed do you feel to implementing these actions?

In an ongoing coaching relationship, I ask the client to log what they do, note down the response they get from others and any other results of their actions. We review this at the next session and continue to work on strategies for effective delegation.

Fatal flaw

Going for the easy options.

Sometimes the client may choose easy-to-implement actions rather than ones that will move them forwards towards their vision. So it can be helpful to do a reality check of the proposed action against the vision – to ensure they are directing their efforts to what will help them achieve what they want. And of course follow-up and review of progress at future coaching sessions helps to maintain momentum. **G**

References

- R Beckhard and R T Harris, *Organizational Transitions: Managing Complex Change*, Addison-Wesley, 1987
- M Landsberg, *The Tao of Coaching*, Profile Books, 2003
- I McDermott and J O'Connor, *Practical NLP for Managers*, Gower Publishing, 1996
- D Rock, 'SCARF: a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others', in *NeuroLeadership Journal*, 1, 2008

About the author

● **Catherine Stothart** is a leadership coach with Airbus and a Mastery Faculty Partner at Google. Previous clients include Audi, Make UK, AstraZeneca, KCOM and United Utilities. She also held posts in Ford Motor Company, Mercury Communications and ICL.

She's the author of How to Get On with Anyone: Gain the Confidence and Charisma to Communicate with any Personality Type (Pearson Business, 2018), the result of 25 years' experience working with individuals and teams in business and education. A practical guide to building better relationships, at work or at home, it contains coaching tools she uses with her clients and is based on personality type.

- catherine@essenwood.co.uk
- www.essenwood.co.uk
- www.linkedin.com/in/catherine-stothart-19972bb
- @CatherineStoth1