



Sherpa Strength: The Newsletter of Executive Coaching

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Coaching Tips

Keeping true to your role as an executive coach...and nothing else

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Have you ever crossed the boundary between being a 'friend' or 'consultant' versus an executive coach?

If you answered 'yes,' to the above, I'm willing to bet you've put yourself into a bind more than a few times. I'm going to keep it simple: When coaching, you have to be a 'coach' and nothing else. Becoming a 'friend' or a 'consultant' can leave you in a hole you might not ever get out of.

You are not a friend. You are a coach.

I've been coaching the CEO of a multi-million dollar company. More than once, he asked if he might take me out to lunch after our coaching sessions. I declined. After the second invitation, I explained that going to lunch might blur the lines between my role as a coach and a new role as his friend. His success as a CEO was much more important to me than his friendship. As a compromise, I *did* offer up a celebration lunch after the completion of our engagement. He was fine with that.



To be clear, I'm not saying that you should never have lunch with your clients. However, if one of your weaknesses relates to 'having to be liked', then I would throw up a caution flag.

First and foremost, you are a coach. You are expected to constantly take your client out of his comfort zone, push him, and challenge him. I've too often seen a coach start off strong during the first couple of weeks with a client, only to have their effectiveness quickly taper off. That can happen because both the coach and the client became too comfortable with one another over the weeks.

Don't lose your focus. Keep true to your role as a coach and it will pay off for you and your client in the long run.

You are not a consultant. You are a coach.

A client walked into a coaching session in a rage. In a public setting, she screamed: “I can’t believe you told me to do this ‘professional appearance exercise!’ It was stupid! It didn’t work! I looked like a fool!”

What happened? The prior week, the coach had turned consultant, and offered advice rather than getting the client to acknowledge a weakness first. The coach felt appearance was something the client should work on right away. His client was not even aware she had an ‘appearance’ issue. It turned out the coach ‘owned’ everything about the exercise. The client did not. The coach’s consulting blew up in his face. Two weeks later, the client quit the engagement.

This case is real. The problems caused by consulting are not always this extreme, but the consulting role ruins an engagement more frequently than you might think. Generally, when you tell your client what to do, give answers, and make suggestions based on your experience and perspective, you are consulting instead of coaching.

Coaching focuses on allowing the client to discover, become aware, create understanding, and allowing them to ‘own’ her steps along the way. Your client may fail, but it won’t be because of you. It will be because the client decided they just couldn’t take the steps necessary to change.

Key Reminders to Help You Stay In Your Role as a Coach

- Remember the ‘Ground Rules’ that you always set at the beginning of each engagement. They are right up front, in writing, in your Sherpa Client Journal. Don’t hesitate to bring them back out if you think you need to re-establish your role. It will be good for your client. It will be good for you.
- Keep to your one hour time slot: Have a clear end to each session. Leave the last 10 minutes to review where you have been and what your client’s next steps will be.
- If possible, leave *after* your client leaves: Make it your time to recap the engagement. It serves as a clear break between you and your client as well.
- Review the “Evaluating a Client Session” checklist on page 275 of The Sherpa Guide. It provides some key ‘top of mind’ items for you to be aware of when coaching.

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