

3 Fixes for a Contentious Coaching Relationship

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While not the norm and certainly not desirable, conflict can arise between client and coach. Most of the time, a coach should be able to prevent friction or disagreements from becoming acute. However, both coaches and clients are flawed and imperfect humans and things don't always go according to plan.

In this article, we'll review a three-step framework to stop conflict from escalating and get back on a productive path. That said, not all problems are fixable (or worth the investment to fix) especially if boundaries are being violated. Particularly problematic clients should not be indulged indefinitely.

Contentious Coaching Relationship Fix #1: Check Yourself

As a coach, your primary responsibility is to help your clients achieve their goals. But you are also a human being and mistakes can be made along the way. Coach Emily Capuria of [Balance and Thrive](#) believes that it's important to remember that *"it's not about you. Beware not to personalize a client's progress."* Keeping this in mind will help you as a coach look at the situation through an objective lens.

Trainer at [Coach Training EDU](#) Brittany Salsman explains her process below:

When a coaching session becomes challenging, the first thing we want to do is ask ourselves ‘where is the difficulty coming from?’ If we find that we are discouraged that a client is not getting to a specific outcome or is not moving quickly enough, this is an indication that we have slipped out of our role as a coach. In this case, a gentle reminder to ourselves of coaching concepts will allow us to release our attachment to or control over the outcome or results and allow us to step more fully into doing our work.

Similarly, Integration Coach Chad Chadwick of Safe Setters notes that in many situations, a coach’s mindset that is improperly set can be a contributing factor to an unproductive relationship. He explains that *“if it is a genuine coaching interaction, disagreements won't arise as a coach won't impose anything on a client and everything that emerges in terms of client action will be agreed. If it isn't, then the coach isn't coaching; they are doing something else.”*

Leadership Coach Larry Buxton also emphasizes that the coach’s role is to coach and to ensure that the relationship serves the client, although he carves out an exception for conflict stemming from potential ethical issues. He also agrees that a client’s failure to follow through on assignments can be at the root of some problems. While it’s understandable that this can be frustrating to a coach, it’s not the coach’s role to be frustrated; it’s to help. These situations provide an opportunity to adjust and improve the structure of the relationship:

A good coach always works in service of the client's agenda. If there is a disagreement on how the client is doing, either party can revisit the coaching agreement and modify it to be of more benefit to the client. If there are ethical issues involved, the coach should follow the ethical standards of the credentialing organization. If a client's plans are not followed through, the coach and client can discuss that in the session and clarify why. A coach can offer and provide accountability, but a coach can't enforce it. More appropriate suggestions with a greater chance of the client's success can be agreed on. The coach should always be asking internally, ‘How can I best serve you well?’

Contentious Coaching Relationship Fix #2 Listen

Fixing a difficult client relationship starts with listening. Relationship therapist Rabbi Shlomo Slatkin of The Marriage Restoration Project advises that *“it’s good to first listen without judgment, then validate, and empathize. After making sure you really understand the issue, you can offer your response as it relates to whatever practical next steps you will pursue.”* Indeed, as Strategy Consultant and Executive Coach Amie Devero of Beyond Better explains, *“the goal is to listen keenly to whatever the issue is and its origin. A coach's mission is to leave the client feeling heard, supported, and enabled by their new tools to allow them to fulfill their own commitments.”*

Active listening means asking questions and probing deeper when necessary. Career coach Michele Olivier of O&H Consulting recommends that that coach and client *“be honest and work together to discover the root cause. If a client is consistently not following through, I*

ask why not? Was it a bigger project than we originally thought? Did they struggle to hold interest in it? Did it bring up anxieties that need to be addressed? Then that's what we deal with."

Only when the client has been heard and understood - and equally importantly, feels heard and understood - does it make sense to share your perspective as a coach. Life Coach, Co-Founder & Host of The Biz Dojo J.P. Gaston explains that *"both parties need to articulate their needs clearly and listen, to understand the perspective of the other. In contentious relationships, these two simple items become the breaking point. But it's up to the coach to recognize this, and to help the client navigate these troubled waters together."*

With listening comes remembering everyone's roles, as mentioned in fix #1. Psychologist Carolyn Cowl-Witherspoon Ph.D. expands on this:

To hopefully avoid contentious exchanges with clients, remember that the client is solely responsible for deciding what goals to strive for, and then approving and acting on their selected choices, with the coach remaining in a supportive role. Fundamentally, it is the client's journey, and the client's choice on how to move forward, and at what rate and pace.

Using this sage advice as a leaping point when contention arises can help coaches access their client's expectations. Senior Consultant of Knowmium Robert Kienzle explains, *"with expectations, everyone must be clear on the role of the coach. Clients have to come up with their own solutions and answers most of the time, and the coach is there to guide them to those answers. If we share this expectation from the start of the coaching relationship, sessions can be much more efficient."*

Contentious Coaching Relationship Fix #3 Manage Expectations

As mentioned above, mismatched expectations are often a key driver of conflict that might arise in a coach-client relationship. (Other potential causes, such as the client being an unpleasant person or either coach or client having life stress from outside the coaching relationship that leaked over, have more obvious solutions).

Health Coach & Founder of Health Engineered Max Grossman explains that *"unclear expectations (or not setting them at all) is a great road to frustration for both coach and client. If you're not on the same page, at least one of you will feel like you aren't getting what you were promised or perhaps even taken advantage of. Left unaddressed, this can bubble into confusion, resentment, and risk ending your working relationship."*

Mismatched expectations should generally not occur if coaches are using intake forms properly as part of a structured onboarding process. Nonetheless, if conflict driven by mismatched expectations does occur, it's the coach's responsibility to lead efforts to resolve

it. As a coach, you have far more experience with coaching relationships than your clients (94% of clients have worked with three or fewer coaches during their career) as well as the tools in your coaching skillset to resolve problems.

In this vein, Management Coach Arron Grow of A.P. Grow and Associates emphasizes the need to get specific in terms of roles and responsibilities in order to find the source of the disconnect:

Friction between client and coach can arise when there are unmet expectations. If a client is not getting the results they were hoping for, or what a coach may have claimed as possible, even more challenges may crop up. One recommendation for both coach and client is to clarify expectations. What commitments does the coach provide? What does the client expect to receive from the arrangement? Having these particulars ironed out before coaching begins will help avert problems down the road.

Once it is clear what's expected from both involved, the client and coach can revisit the agreement. Business mentor Elisabeth Jackson of The Afro Coach advises coaches *"to ensure everyone is on the same page, I like to lay out the expectations that a client can have of me, and in exchange, what I expect from the client. This gives us a place to reconnect to when checking in, or when the client or myself feels expectations aren't being met, or boundaries not being respected."*

Career coach Nadia Ibrahim-Taney puts all of these points together into one comprehensive approach that any coach can follow: explains this process below:

When working with a client and we've made an agreement on three goals they want to achieve between now and when we meet next, and they do not follow through on what they agreed to, it is my responsibility as the coach to ask why. It is my role to hold the client accountable and to ask what is working, what isn't working, and what things might need to change in order for the client to obtain success. If the client is unwilling to commit and follow-through, then it is the coach's responsibility to call attention to it and ask honestly and directly if the client wants to continue. If they say yes, it is important to create a coaching agreement to ensure the client knows what is expected of them and conversely, what are the consequences of not fulfilling their side of the coaching agreement.

Conclusion

This three-step approach - check yourself, listen, and have an open discussion around expectations - can provide a roadmap to address contentious situations before they fester or become worse. That said, this framework is most applicable to situations where there are good-faith disagreements about a path forward, not where a client (hopefully not the coach!) is being unethical, unprofessional, or abusive. Such behavior is never appropriate and is grounds for immediate termination of a relationship.

