The Seven Principles of Coaching

1. Awareness
Awareness is the most common outcome that coaching delivers and many of the benefits the coachee receives from it arise from this. There is a misconception that coaching is about pushing people, or bullying them, or leading them to solutions. The opposite is the case and yet the result is that through coaching, people do move forward, identify their goals and make changes. This is because everything that the coach does is focused on raising the coachee’s own awareness and self knowledge.

2. Responsibility
The core principle of coaching is self–responsibility, or taking ownership of our decisions. We learn better when we discover things for ourselves rather than when others tell us. We like to create our own solutions rather than be told what to do. Think of a child learning to walk. She takes her first few steps then falls over. Would you explain to the child why she fell, or tell her where to put her feet next time? Of course not. The child already has all the knowledge she needs to be successful, all she needs now is support and encouragement. This is one of the roles that coaches take with their coachees. Whatever we do we have an agenda, whether conscious or otherwise, but the agenda is not necessarily our own. Parents may hold ambitions for us that are sometimes more to do with their own aspirations than ours; teachers want us to achieve good grades; friends have multiple agendas, positive and negative and we have agendas for ourselves, which might not coincide with any of the others.
Coaches have only one agenda – their coachee’s. Coaches learn to set aside the judgments and opinions triggered by their individual experiences and beliefs, by using the tools of their profession. The coach is in charge of the process, the coachee is in charge of the content. If the coach gets sucked into the content, he or she is no longer of any use to the coachee. So sometimes as coaches we become interested in the story and then we have to step back and ask ourselves: is this useful or interesting? Good coaching should be useful to the coachee rather than interesting to the coach.

3. Self-belief
Confidence that we can do something is a key factor in achieving it. People develop self-belief by being given the space to learn, both through making mistakes and achieving goals. When employees are learning a new task, what helps them is to be left alone to work things out for themselves, supported by encouragement and role modelling from others. Giving people praise when they deserve it builds their confidence, their belief that they can achieve more and the energy to do it. Like in the analogy of the child learning to walk, half the incentive of getting up and trying again, is to get that powerful mixture of attention and praise. You don’t need to tell the child how to walk, because she will eventually find out for herself; however your encouragement may speed up the process. If you take the fun out of the experience by shouting or scolding, you will slow everything down. Exactly the same principle works in adult relationships, whether in the office or elsewhere.
4. Blame-free
We can’t learn to walk without falling over. In a coaching culture, mistakes are viewed as learning experiences, not reasons to look for scapegoats. Coachees are likely to learn as much from the actions they have not completed as those that they have and the coach is there neither to form an opinion on what is right or wrong for the coachee, nor to measure the coachee’s life against the coach’s own yardstick. The coach is a stranger in the coachee’s own world, which is created by the experiences and influences in the coachee’s life. The only person who can make sense of that world is the coachee and he or she alone can identify the signposts and find the right pathways. The coach adds value by clearing whatever mists might be in the air so that those signposts are legible.
It is inevitable that judgments arise when we are listening to someone talk about their lives. For instance, for the person who has taken on so much that they are not doing anything properly, the obvious solution is to prioritise what they most want and shelve the rest. However at this point in the coachee’s life it may be that the coachee prefers to do everything by halves rather than one thing perfectly. It is neither the coach’s decision nor the coach’s place to have an opinion. The coach is there to help bring about clarity of purpose. Once the coachee can see clearly enough to understand which decision fits best with their “inner world”, they can stop feeling guilty about it and move on.

5. Solution focus
When we dwell on a problem, it gets bigger. When we focus on a solution, the problem becomes manageable and we find more energy to deal with it. Think of a problem you may have – it could be small, like losing something temporarily, or something much more serious. Now think for a minute about the problem, not the solution. After one minute, ask yourself, “What would I like to have happen?” Notice the changes in your mind and body. You are immediately thrown forward towards solutions and even if no obvious answer presents itself, you feel more optimistic and you feel your energy levels have risen. As you think about solutions the problem shrinks. Net result is you have a smaller problem and more energy to deal with it.

6. Challenge
Most of us like to be challenged and stretched within a supportive and encouraging environment. If we aim higher than is absolutely necessary, it is easier to hit the mark we wanted in the first place and quite likely, even higher than that. A coach helps the coachee to step back and see the wood for the trees, encouraging the coachee to look for new perspectives. Coaching is sometimes described as “holding up a mirror” to the coachee. Seeing their lives reflected back enables coaches to see their lives in proportion – often for the first time.

7. Action
Coaching uncovers new perspectives and awareness. In this way, coaches gain new insight, which leads to more options, which in turn lead to a desire to take action and change. Coaches ensure that this energy is channelled into action and a change of habits.