Supplement to Get in Your Coaching Groove

Damon Poole

Gillian Lee
Advanced Agile Coaching

As an Agile Coach we have four interaction modes: pure coaching (aka professional coaching), mentoring, teaching, and facilitating. When we are purely in the Coaching mode, we are working to help the coachee move forward in pursuit of their goals. Those goals may be their current goal for a specific situation or their longer term goals. This mini-book focuses on the coaching mode.

That doesn’t mean that one can be a successful Agile coach by using only the coaching mode. Part of our value as an Agile Coach is our Agile expertise. One of the reasons that people engage us is because they haven’t used Agile before or they are moving into an area of Agile that they don’t have experience with.

Moving Out of the Coaching Mode

If we are working with a team that has never heard of Kanban, but may benefit from it, no amount of coaching or powerful questions is going to result in someone spontaneously saying “Oh! I have an idea! Let’s visualize all of our work on a card wall with columns. Let’s also limit our work in progress in each column and pull work through the system. To track our progress let’s use, a, uh, continuous flow diagram. That’s it!”

As Agile experts, we are used to providing value and being appreciated for our Agile expertise. As an Agile Coach, we will still derive some of our value from our Agile expertise, but as we grow our coaching skills, we will also provide more and more value from coaching.

Pursuing the Coachee’s Goals

Our number one priority as a coach is to maximize the coachee’s pursuit of their goals. Goals can be elusive. Problems can be like a tangled pile of yarn. People’s thought processes can seem chaotic. All of our mental energy should be focused on looking for which coaching techniques to apply and then applying them to help them pursue their own process and their own goals wherever it takes them.

As the coachee tackles problems, unravels their mental knots, and pursues their goals, we need to resist the temptation to step in and take over, solve their problems, or try to get them to go in a direction that we think is right for them. We also need to be careful not to knock them off track or slow them down.
There’s No Single Way to be a Perfect Coach

You may have gotten the impression that you should only use open-ended questions as a coach, or never use “leading” questions. And for the most part that is good advice. If you only ever use open ended non-leading questions it is much easier to be neutral and pursue the coachee’s agenda. However, it is the principles and values of remaining neutral and pursuing the coachee’s agenda that are the important point, not the mechanics of how you achieve that. If you need to ask a closed question in service of those principles and values, then do it. You might even ask a question that is technically “leading,” but if for instance it is using the coachee’s own words to help the coachee go in a direction that the coachee has said they wanted to go, then that’s ok. It is only when you are interjecting your own biases, prejudices, and preferences that you will run into trouble, and asking leading questions is one of the easiest ways to do that.

Coaching Triggers

Coaching triggers provide a framework to help you stay in the coaching mode, work from the coachee’s agenda, and remain neutral while maximizing the value we provide to the coachee. A coaching trigger is a specific set of circumstances that arise which indicates the use of one or more coaching techniques. For instance, if the coachee seems to be off-track from their stated purpose for the coaching session, that’s a trigger that indicates using the techniques of interrupting and orienting. On the other hand, if the coachee seems distracted, we should consider using the technique of releasing. Each coaching trigger utilizes
open-ended non-leading questions and the coachee’s own words to help the coachee progress in pursuit of their goals.

Interrupting

Whenever your intuition or best judgement tells you that there is an opportunity to apply a coaching technique, you may need to interrupt the coachee. If you have come across a coaching trigger, but the coachee is productively exploring something, it may be better to wait until they wind down.

In any case, when you are in a situation where you feel that it may be a better use of time to interrupt the coachee than to let them continue, then by all means interrupt them. As you work with a particular coachee, you will gain a better understanding of when to interrupt them.

Interrupting is a skill like any other; it takes time to get good at it. Here are a few methods of interrupting that may work for you:

- Open your mouth and take a breath as if preparing to speak, but then don’t say anything and close your mouth again.
- In as friendly a way as possible, raise a finger and say “if I may?” and give an expectant look.
- Raise your hand to about shoulder height as though you want to ask a question in a classroom setting.
- If you see a chance to interject a short sentence, try something like “may I interject something?” or “I have a thought”.

No matter what, continue listening and make it clear from your body language that you are definitely paying attention. Be gentle. If your attempts to interrupt are ignored, let it go.

Some people have an aversion to being interrupted for any reason. In this case, you should have a discussion with the coachee about how best to interact with them in order for you to provide the most value to them. For instance, they may say “well, I just plain don’t like to be interrupted. But perhaps I could make sure that I pause every couple of sentences to see if you have something to say.”
Spectating

As the coachee careens forward, moving from one thing to another, having epiphanies and chasing new ideas, you may start to lose track of what they are saying or feel overloaded. You may want to ask the coachee to pause, slow down, repeat information, or provide more details on a particular point that they brought up. Instead, move to spectating.

Spectating is the intentional release of the need to absorb everything, understand everything, or follow the twists and turns of the coachee’s journey. You don’t need to do those things. The coachee already has all of the details of their current situation.

By intentionally letting go of the need to absorb every detail and nuance you are freed up to focus instead on looking for coaching triggers. When things settle down and you are able to keep up again, if you feel you missed some information relevant to a possible coaching trigger, you can always ask for a summary.

Spectating may sound like tuning out or ignoring what the coachee is saying. But you can’t just ignore what the coachee is saying. If you do ignore what they are saying, you won’t be able to pay attention for coaching triggers. For instance, if the coachee starts to talk about something that may be unrelated to their stated session purpose and you are ignoring what they are saying, you will miss the opportunity to re-orient them and keep them focused on their session purpose.

Releasing

While you are working with a coachee, you may notice that they are distracted. Maybe you sense that there is something else on their mind besides what they are talking about. Or perhaps their conversation keeps returning to a topic that seems unrelated. Your first instinct may be to try to re-orient them. Instead, consider trying the technique of “releasing.”

Releasing is simply giving the coachee the opportunity to release whatever is distracting them. It might be something that happened that is bothering them or it may be something wonderful that happened that they just can’t stop thinking about.

If you feel like the coachee needs to get a distraction out of the way, and they are already talking about it, releasing may be as simple as ignoring the urge to re-
orient them and spectating instead. You can encourage them by showing interest and prompting them with something like “tell me more.”

If the distraction is there but they seem unaware of it, you can try bringing it out into the open by saying something like:

“You seem a little distracted by something, what’s up?”

“Is there something you’d like to get off your chest?”

Just because they seem distracted doesn’t mean they are. Always let the coachee decide. In this case, let them decide if they are distracted or headed somewhere useful. If they do have something to release, give them permission to do so and sufficient time to do it.