

NOTE-TAKING FOR COACHES

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Key Learning Points

- Note taking helps maintain a professional approach to client work by keeping the coach focussed on the task in hand
- Coaches keep notes for professional development purposes such as accreditation and certification
- Good note-taking is a skill and selection of information aids not only the coaching process but also provides cover for the coach if his or her competence is called into question

The Association for Coaching

The AC is an independent professional body formed in 2002 to promote best practice, raise awareness and standards across the UK and Ireland.

It already has a growing membership and has produced a code of ethics and a range of information sheets on everything from choosing a coach to continued professional development as well as offering some highly successful continued professional development events. As one of the lead professional bodies in the UK the AC has a diverse membership of Executive, Business, Personal/Life, Speciality and Group Coaching.

For more information go to www.associationforcoaching.com

Most coaches find it helpful to take notes of client sessions but do not always consider the best way of doing this. Many training courses provide little or no guidance about taking notes and this leaves newly trained coaches to devise their own method and this can be a time consuming and confusing task.

There are many reasons why a coach might take notes and, by the end of this article, you should be in a better position to assess the effectiveness of what you already do. The following list contains what could be regarded as the key reasons for note taking.

As a Memory Aid

Notes provide a quick way of reminding the coach of:

- ◆ What has been discussed
- ◆ Work undertaken and progress
- ◆ Homework assignments
- ◆ Other actions the coach needs to take for the client or themselves prior to the next session

It is not uncommon, particularly amongst coaches who have been trained psychologically particularly from a cognitive behavioural persuasion to tape sessions with a client. The tape is then given to the client as it provides an opportunity for the client to listen to the session again perhaps picking up or reinforcing points made. The Coach may also choose to keep a copy of the tape to help him or her reflect on the quality of the session. If this is the case then many coaches find it more economic to make notes of the taped session reusing the tape rather than face the difficulties of storage. The visually impaired will need to use an audiotape or make oral notes.

To Help Consider Work with Clients

Notes help the coach to:

- ◆ Record the actions and reactions of clients
- ◆ Record the interaction between client and coach
- ◆ Track ideas and interventions used
- ◆ Track those issues to be taken to coaching supervision/co-coaching groups
- ◆ Consider and reflect upon the strategies being used or those for future consideration

To Monitor Progress

This item could have been included under the previous section.

However, it has more to do with objectively evaluating client work in terms of progress being made. Monitoring also includes comments about renegotiated contacts. For example, a client makes contact due to a desire to improve communications with colleagues, has four sessions and still has difficulty with colleagues but reports improved personal relationships outside of the office environment. In this situation the coach needs to consider how to evaluate and document progress?

For Administrative Reasons

Notes can remind the coach of:

- ◆ The number of client sessions to-date
- ◆ Reviews dates
- ◆ Fees paid or balance outstanding
- ◆ Any materials (such as books) on loan to the client

For Referral Purposes

There may be times when a coach either needs to contact an external source on behalf of the client – providing some feedback to a HR department with the client’s permission. Alternatively, the coach may be contacted and asked to provide information about a client to a third party. The rules of confidentiality must be respected and permission for disclosure sought from the client. It is likely that the client notes will form the basis of any response.

For Personal Training or Accreditation

Client notes provide the information required by the coach when case study material or information on client hours/work is required for training, accreditation or certification purposes.

To Meet Organisational Requirements

If you work for an organisation as an associate or coaching consultant you will normally be required to keep notes. If a colleague has to take over a client from you he or she will benefit from clear, precise, and easy to read client information. This becomes particularly important when a

coach leaves an organisation. Some organisations provide a note-taking formula or structure they insist is used by coaches together with providing clear terms and conditions for the keeping of such notes. For example, they may specify whom the notes belong to, how long they should be kept for and how they should be stored.

To Aid the Quality Control Process

For organisations or individuals that carry regular quality control audits, standardised, concise and clearly presented information is essential. An audit is a way of checking the quality of services offered and cannot work properly when an inconsistent system for keeping client information exists.

For Legal Reasons

There may be occasions when the coach may be called upon by the legal system to outline the work he or she has been undertaking with a client, for example at an employment tribunal. If a coach is required to give evidence in whatever setting it can be very stressful and could be made more so if the coach was unable to answer questions due to poor record-keeping. A skilled and aggressive lawyer could use the absence of such

notes as an indicator of coach's incompetence or failure to give appropriate service.

To Assist with an Internal Complaints Procedure

This is similar to the previous point except that legal actions might not be taken. When a coach is defending his or her work with a client good note-taking skills may provide details on how you behaved providing evidence that due care and attention had been taken. Unlike other professions such as the medical and therapeutic professions there are currently no rules or guidelines about the legal requirements of keeping notes. In the therapeutic arena a client could bring a case long after a counsellor has finished working with them and the counsellor is likely to need notes to remind them of what had taken place.

Although coaching is not counselling there could be occasions where a client might contact a coach or take legal action against an employer that requires the coach to provide an historical record of what had taken place. Although the coach has the right to refuse the client's lawyers might use a court order to force the coach to provide the relevant information.

In addition, there are a number of other important matters that coaches need to consider about note taking listed below.

To Fulfil Requirements by a Professional Body

For example, Item 6 of The Association for Coaching's Code of Ethics and Good Practice states that:

“Coaches are required to maintain appropriate records of their work with Clients, ensuring that any such records are accurate and that reasonable security precautions are taken to protect against third party disclosure. Attention should be given to the coachee's rights under any current legislation, e.g. data protection act”

How to Take Notes

A simple note-taking formula can be used formed around the Acronym

ACT.

A = Actual (*e.g. factual information about the client and what was discussed*)

C = Coach Considerations (*e.g. research required, talking to others etc*)

T = Tasks (*i.e. the client's actions*)

In addition, notes need to be:

- Brief
- Factual
- Practical

Sample Note-Taking Form (place here)

Storage and Security Facilities

A coach needs to consider how and where he or she will store notes and the security of storage. A locked filing cabinet or secure personal storage system could all be suitable.

Although unlikely, it is possible, that coaching notes could be forcibly taken and the coach may need to demonstrate that he or she has not altered or added to them. If this is the case the coach can guard against this by adhering to the following guidelines.

- ◆ Always write in pen
- ◆ Use lined paper
- ◆ Leave no lines or gaps of any sort in the text and draw a line through any space and draw a line through any unused space
- ◆ Put a line through any information you wish to delete, and date and initial it.

Retaining Notes

If you work on behalf of an organisation this matter will have been decided for you. However, if you work as an independent coach you will have to think about your own policy on this issue.

Again the medical and therapeutic fields have guidelines on such matters. The coaching field as a new profession does not. However, it might not be in the best interests of the coach or of clients to avoid having a policy on such issues. In time, the professional bodies that are currently taking

the lead in the coaching world are likely to produce guidelines on such issues. However, it is currently up to the individual coach to do so.

A Basic System for retaining notes

- ◆ Keeping all client notes/information for seven years after the completion of coaching. This includes letters, cards, postcards, email messages, questionnaires, notes of dates, times and content of telephone conversations and copies of any materials used or sent to me by the client.

- ◆ Destroying the client information by shredding at the end of seven years.

- ◆ Keep a small box of file cards separate from any notes, which gives basic details of clients – name, address, telephone number, session times, fees etc. This makes it possible for someone else to contact clients in the event of the coach's illness without breaking confidentiality. Probably more of use for those working independently.

The Data Protection Act 1984

The Data Protection Act relates to information stored on computer and was expanded to include certain types of manual recording systems in April 2000. Any individual whose information is stored on computer has a legal right to see this. In addition a court of law can also demand to see the information. As the Data Protection Act is likely to be amended from time to time it is helpful to contact the Data Protection Act Registrars for more up-to-date information.

Contact

Information Commissioner

Wycliffe House

Water Lane

Wilmslow

Cheshire

SK9 5AF

01625 524 510

www.dataprotection.gov.uk

REFERENCES

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