

## Virtual coaching and mentoring during Covid-19

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Whether we are coaching or mentoring someone formally or simply having informal conversations, coaching and mentoring are vital tools in supporting people at this current time. Everyone is navigating huge changes in working practices and priorities, conflicting demands, emotional strain and changes to relationships. The challenge for those in coaching and mentoring relationships is further complicated by navigating technology and social distancing. The job of coaching and mentoring remains the same, but the map has changed. Face-to-face conversations will always have their place, but virtual coaching is set to increase exponentially and it is vital we all get more comfortable with it if we are to genuinely help clients.

There are many benefits to virtual coaching, including the lack of geographic limitations, improvements to working across organisational boundaries, easier access and often we can use tools and practices impractical face to face. However, we do need to consciously and explicitly address certain elements that in other environments might be taken for granted.

### Building trust and psychological safety

Psychological safety is even more important when working with someone feeling significant levels of anxiety and distress. Creating an environment where a client feels able to open up is also complicated with virtual working. They may feel uncomfortable watching themselves on screen, be uncertain about who is watching or fearful of being recorded. Temperamental technology can get in the way and it may be difficult, particularly in frontline environments, to find safe spaces to dial-in and mentally step away from the day job. Trust is fundamentally built by making someone feel safe - to achieve this we all have different needs. While a foundation of empathy and compassion is central, trust is built based on our behaviours and actions: meeting expectations and keeping commitments, non-judgmental and deep listening, openness and honesty with clarity around boundaries and being prepared to challenge or question someone's views. Here are some practical things you can do:

- **Agree preferred online platforms to be used with clearly defined back-ups.** Ensure you have tested them and can provide some technological support where needed. Your confidence in using tools can make the client feel safer, at the same time your comfort in trying new things can also help the client to do the same.
- **Include in your discussions the impacts of being online.** Being clear about confidentiality and privacy during your calls/meetings. As with all contracting, while you navigate the practical elements, they can be an opportunity for deeper reflection. Consider together how you will manage interruptions, technical issues and their impact.
- **Explicitly set expectations and meet them regularly.** Agreeing the basics around format, timings and communication is even more important in a virtual relationship.

### Consider how you use technology

One benefit of virtual coaching and mentoring is that your physical environment is far more flexible. Technology can enable joint-working in a way that flip-charts or note paper can't do.

You can have more frequent short sessions where desired with no travel limitations, you can record exercises for clients to repeat and share notes more easily. But at times you may wish to minimise the amount of technology you use, to help the client focus inward. Here are some practical things you can do:

- **Use online collaboration tools** to work on tailored resources, whiteboards, file sharing platforms or simply screen sharing. A client can scrapbook, draw and write while you help them reflect.

- **Developing resources for creative sessions can be a reflective process in itself.** Clients can use one of their daily outings or even a walk around their home to curate interesting items to aid reflection. These can be used to explore relationships, context and emotions in a way that disrupts default thought patterns and can lead to deeper insights. Using images to represent current and desired states, or physical objects to relate to people when exploring relationships and context, can be done remotely using your webcam, phone camera or photos to share these.
- **Turning off cameras,** simply phoning or coaching using chat boxes can help some individuals to open up more. Some clients report feeling more able to focus on their internal state without the distraction of another person. Discuss this first and balance with a need to see each other.

### The importance of the pause

In times of crisis and emotional distress it can be difficult for both the client AND the coach to create enough space and stillness for deeper reflection. Often, we focus on the practical and action-oriented elements while skimming over more reflective and insight-oriented work. This can be exacerbated using online platforms – particularly with short sessions. Creating space for pause and silence can help achieve deeper awareness and engage a client's wider resources. Here are some practical things you can do:

- **Short breathing exercises at the start of sessions** can be a good way to let go of the day job, help both the client and coach be more present in the current conversation and access their wisest self. Many examples exist online, but simply focusing on breathing for 3 minutes, while extending the out-breath can help.
- **Discussing how you will bring silence into the conversation** during your contracting and throughout can be particularly effective for clients who are constantly rushing. It can help them to know you are there listening but intentionally allowing some space.
- **Making time for yourself before the session is important.** A short meditation or breathing exercise while acknowledging your own needs and setting your higher intention for the conversation can be very helpful.

### Make the time to connect

Humans generally crave a sense of connection with other people and right now many are deeply lacking this. This may be through home working and isolation or through fast-paced frontline work with full PPE. While we may think building a sense of connection through virtual spaces is far more difficult, it is possible if we take the time to do it consciously. Practical things you can do:

- **Exercises involving play and humour** – it is well established in communities-of-practice research that humour and fun are key tools in building a sense of connection. They are not frivolous or superfluous, rather a way we release tension and build rapport. You can use games, creative play tools and non-derogatory humour within your sessions carefully to improve rapport.
- **Deep listening, or paying full attention goes both ways.** Discussing how you can both minimise distractions helps both model to the client and set expectations around email, notifications and others sharing your physical space.
- **Don't skim over negative emotions or get fixed in action-oriented modes.** At times of uncertainty and crisis a non-judgemental listener can unlock more resourcefulness in a client than an action plan. While you must work within your competency, you can enable your client to spend some time fully focusing on emotions they are otherwise avoiding. Subsequently, grounding exercises, visualisations, mindfulness and other tools can help to leave the client feeling more capable of handling them.

As with learning any new skill it is important as a coach and mentor to be patient with yourself. Recognise the areas with which you are uncomfortable and make time to celebrate your successes. Essentially virtual coaching is a skillset, rather than simply a mode of delivery. Approaching it in this way can unleash all sorts of new ways to transfer your strengths as a coach and mentor in this rapidly growing environment.