

Four Coaching Scenarios

Chapter 4: Coaching

When we want so badly to help clients, we often find ourselves preaching, lecturing, pushing, cajoling, and prodding. When on the receiving end of all that pressure, clients do what humans do, they push back. That's why the more we argue for change, the more clients will argue against it. Paradoxically, it's only when we relax, when we allow non-change, that our clients become more ready, willing, and able to do it.

But how do you relax and allow non-change? Check out the following coaching scenarios. They'll show you how to use questions and curiosity to facilitate the change process, not sabotage it.

SCENARIO 1

The Change Talk Wedge

When someone is expressing ambivalence about change, you start by reflecting on why they might not decide to change. It sounds weird but often leads to proposing their own solutions.

Your client is ambivalent or resisting change. Don't condescend or patronize. Be sincere here and compassionate.

YOU: "Wow, it sounds like you have a lot on your plate. I can see how tough it is to schedule exercise time." **OR** "I know it can be hard to resist those homemade brownies. They're so good."

Tap into your own busy-ness or love of brownies to offer genuine empathy. Then wait. Be quiet and patient. Let your client speak first. When they do begin talking, they'll likely start telling you why they should change. This is "change talk" and it's a great step. It means they're not arguing against change, but for it.

CLIENT: "Yeah, I do have a lot going on. But I really should get to the gym. I know I'll feel better." **OR** "Honestly, I don't think I need three brownies. I'd probably be happy with just one."

Once you hear them suggesting change on their own, you're getting somewhere. Using their language, simply reflect and gently imply a next action in the form of a question. Look inquisitive.

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YOU: “It sounds like you’d feel better if you went to the gym?” **OR** “It sounds like maybe one brownie would be enough for you?”

Now wait again. They may be silent for a bit. Eventually they’ll likely keep talking about what they want and how they can achieve it. Let them lead the discussion. Once you feel like they’re ready for a next action, go there.

Your client shares a few ideas for what she wants.

YOU: “Given all this, what do you think you’ll do next?”

Notice how you’re not playing expert or guru. You’re simply using questions to lead them through an articulation of the challenge, then to arguing for change, and then to their own solutions.

SCENARIO 2 **The Continuum**

You can use this after listening for change talk. This can help your client move up the continuum of behaviors from worse to better without taking an “all or nothing” approach.

The client has decided, through Scenario 1, that they want to eat less fast food. But they’re not confident that they can give it up totally.

YOU: “Okay, so it sounds like you want to eat less fast food, but eliminating fast food entirely feels like too much, which makes sense. What could you do to just move a tiny bit towards your goal instead of all the way? What would that look like?”

Notice how you’re suggesting the possibility of a third option between “all” or “nothing.” And empowering them to come up with the option themselves.

At this point clients often propose something smaller than “no fast food ever” but something still too difficult to do consistently.

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CLIENT: “Well, what if I went cold turkey and ate no fast food for the next two weeks?”

YOU: “Okay, no fast food for the next two weeks. You know, I think that’s awesome. But that feels like a pretty big challenge. What about no fast food for just a few days this week? Say, three of the days? Or maybe some days you pick another thing from the menu that’s slightly better? What do you think?”

Although you haven’t confidence tested yet, you have a gut feeling that the change is too big. So you might shrink it a little and see how they feel about it.

CLIENT: “I can totally do that, coach—9 out of 10 on the confidence scale! I’ll make Monday through Thursday my ‘no fast food’ days. Or if I go to [insert fast-food restaurant], I’ll get the chicken wrap and a salad.”

This sounds promising!

YOU: “That’s a great idea. I’m wondering how I can help? Would you text me at the end of each day to let me know you were successful? Even better, send me a picture of the meal you chose to eat instead!”

At this point you layer in some accountability. And you make a fun “what did you eat instead” game out of it.

SCENARIO 3 The Crazy Questions

If someone is struggling with ambivalence, resistance, and change, it can be really effective to ask some unconventional questions they may not expect.

YOU: “For starters, it sounds like [reiterate what they just said about their understanding of the problem they’re struggling with]. So I’m going to ask you two crazy questions. I know it’ll sound really weird, but humor me.”

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CLIENT: *Raises eyebrows*

YOU: “Question #1: What is *good* about the nightly gallon of ice cream? In other words, how does it help you or make you feel better in some way? And question #2: What is *bad* about giving up the nightly gallon of ice cream? In other words, what will be the biggest bummer in that? What might you have to lose?”

Notice how you’re probing for more information about what purpose the “bad habit” serves in their life. And why they might be so attached to it.

At this point, you should be listening closely. They may talk about stresses in life, pressures, and the reasons why they find comfort in the things that are ultimately unhealthy for them. Let them get it all out without judgment.

YOU: “Wow, yea, it sounds like there’s lots going on there for you. I think I’d want to eat ice cream in that situation too!”

Now you normalize and empathize, first arguing ever so slightly in favor of not changing. This helps prevent you from judging the behavior and causing them to push back against you even though they want to change in the first place.

CLIENT: “Thanks for saying that. But I really should find a better way to deal with this.”

See how they proposed change, not you?

YOU: “Well, tell you what. There’s no rush to do this. When you’re ready, do you feel confident that you could try going for a walk instead of eating the ice cream—at least a few nights for the next two weeks? Or maybe you have the ice cream—but after a walk?”

This is where you can negotiate the next action, confidence test, and plan for the client to check in with a photo that shows them walking instead of eating ice cream.

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SCENARIO 4 The Self-Solution

As discussed above, when we help clients develop their own solutions, they're much more likely to feel confident in them and follow through. That's what this option helps with.

After exploring change and learning about a client's struggles, it's time to affirm, validate, hear, and normalize.

YOU: "I totally hear you and understand what you're experiencing. It's quite normal. Lots of people feel that, too."

Here you leave some space for the client to respond. Whether they do or they don't is fine. Now it's time to see how the client might solve their own problem.

YOU: "It sounds like you already have a good sense of the key issues. Knowing this, if you were the coach, what would you recommend?"

If you feel like they'd be resistant to self-coaching, you can add to it:

YOU: "Of course, I have some ideas here. But I'd like to hear yours first."

Let them work through some concepts. Don't be afraid to ask follow-up questions or help shape the recommendations.

YOU: "Great ideas. I'm wondering, on a scale of 0 to 10, how confident you are that you can do each of them for the next two weeks?"

They'll rank the ideas. Listen for the ones that score a 9 or 10. If none do, help shape up solutions that they feel really confident they can do.

YOU: "Awesome, it sounds like we have a winner here. At this point do you mind checking back with me in a few days to share how it's going? What day and time is best for you?"

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Set a time for follow-up and hold them accountable to it.

In the end, notice how each scenario demonstrates the power of good questions, compassionate listening, and change-oriented dialogue. Always remember this: When a coach argues for change, clients argue against it. So don't argue for change! Instead, get clients arguing for it themselves. Bonus points if you help them propose their own solutions too.

These activities and worksheets are taken from the book **Change Maker**: Turn your passion for health and fitness into a powerful purpose and a wildly successful career by John Berardi, PhD.

Check it out at: www.changemakeracademy.com/book