

The role of metaphor in coaching

Article

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The role of metaphors in coaching

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Abstract

This article explores the role of metaphors in coaching and how coaches might both better understand this form and make more effective use to enable clients to better gain fresh insights about themselves and the systems in which they operate.

Key words: *coaching, metaphor, reflection*

What is a metaphor?

A metaphor is a figure of speech that implies comparison between two unlike entities. Many writers use them, for example William Shakespeare in *As You Like It*:

“All the world is a stage. And all men and women merely players”
(Shakespeare, 1599/1959, 2.7.139-140).

A closely related linguistic form is the simile, an explicit comparison using ‘as’ or ‘like’, for example in Marcel Proust’s *Swann’s Way*:

“It was Françoise, motionless and erect, framed in the small doorway of the corridor like the statue of a saint in its niche” (Proust, 1913).

Metaphors typically act as a bridge between a source, which is concrete, and a target, which is more abstract or is less familiar. It is this which makes them so powerful as a tool in coaching, as the client too is struggling to move from their current concrete reality to the uncertain future.

The origins of metaphors

It is hard to identify exactly when metaphors began, but there are examples of metaphors being used by Egyptian and Greek writers in the earliest writings going back to 2000 BCE. Metaphors are also often found in early literature in expanded form, such as wise tales and parables. The metaphor is also popular in fables and fairy stories told to children in most cultures, such as *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Why can metaphors be helpful?

Metaphors arise from a conversation between the coach and the client. Like powerful questions or reflections, they cannot be planned in advance; they emerge from the conversation. As a result, there is no single formula for producing metaphors, nor is there a useful list of metaphors to keep in one's back pocket. Metaphors are helpful for the client, allowing them to make sense of what is happening to them and how they might better deal with the situation. Metaphors can allow the client to temporarily achieve some distance from their situation and what can sometimes be a perceived uncontrollable emotional response.

Metaphors can also be useful in helping clients to enhance their memory, as most clients are better able to recall a vivid metaphor than the details of a back-and-forth discussion with their coach, or a series of verbalised actions. Positive memory affect can be further enhanced by using a range of different sensory modalities. For example, the coach can link the metaphor to a vivid visual image, a smell or a touch. The coach might also link the metaphor to a way of speech, for example a hushed voice or a deepened tone. These can each serve to reinforce the recollection of the metaphor, and thus the change of perspective it offers.

The practicalities of using metaphors

As we have noted, the coach cannot retain a list of great metaphors in their back pocket. The use of the metaphor in coaching requires a complex understanding of the interaction between the coach and the client. Just as a literary use of the metaphor requires the writer to understand their reader, in coaching the coach needs to have listened and understood in order to offer a metaphor which will resonate with the client and help them see their situation in a new light.

When can the coach use metaphors?

Metaphors can be used throughout a coaching session, and even to kick-start a session. For example, the coach may refer to a metaphor used in the previous session, or their reflection on the session. They can be used during the session, as the coach reflects back and reframes what the client is describing, thereby offering a fresh perspective to explore. Finally, metaphors can be used at the close of the session to enable the client, as part of their homework, to reflect on a fresh perspective.

It is worth noting that metaphors are embedded in a unique context, and thus the same metaphor can have a different meaning for different clients. For example, ‘the wedding photograph on your mantelpiece’ can mean for one client a reminder of a day of joy, but for another, whose partner has died, the meaning may be a constant reminder of their loss, and thus trigger grief and sadness.

How can you select the right metaphor?

An important task for the coach is to select a metaphor that is meaningful to the client. This echoes wider work on empathy (Diller et al, 2021), where using self-directed examples to illustrate empathy are seen as less powerful than those which are client centred. On some occasions the client may well substitute their own metaphor to replace the one offered by the coach. This should be encouraged, and the coach should avoid becoming defensive or trying to explain their metaphor. Once the metaphor has been generated, the second task is to help the client crystallise the core elements of the metaphor and link it to their specific issue. Then, the coach should aim to help the client explore the metaphor to reach a new perspective on their situation, and its implications about what to do next.

To be useful, a metaphor should have a number of key characteristics. It should, first of all, be readily understood by the client. This means that the metaphor should draw on the person’s background and interests. Second, the coach should discuss what they mean and illustrate this with an example, to ensure that the client understands the metaphor being used. Also, it’s important for the coach to be culturally sensitive. For example, if the client has a faith, for example is a Christian or Muslim, is a vegetarian or is of African heritage, the metaphor needs to respect or, even better, validate their identity.

However, many clients will spontaneously generate their own metaphors as they try to make sense of their situation. Such metaphors are almost always the best material. In these instances, the coach should encourage the client to describe in more detail what

they mean by the metaphor, and then use the metaphor to explore the situation, helping the client to unpick their dilemma and develop a new perspective.

Conclusion

In summary, metaphors are useful for coaches. They can enable fresh insights as well as inject humour into a conversation. However, they should be used with care, reflect the client's identity and sense of belonging, and always emerge from the unique interaction instead of being prepared in advance.

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