



This technique draws on the 'Left Hand Column' exercise to invite your coaching client to reflect on a challenging situation where the outcome did not match their intent. It encourages clients to explore what they were really thinking and feeling, but not saying, when they were involved in a difficult problem that involved communicating effectively with others. It helps them to generate options to do things differently next time.



When to use it

When you sense:

- Interpersonal conflict between your client and key stakeholders.
- Your client is preparing to have what they expect to be a difficult conversation.
- Where the impact of your client's actions does not match their intent.
- Where your client feels they are being treated unfairly by others.
- Where your client is struggling to find their influential voice.

These might indicate that your client is unable to voice what they are really thinking and feeling when working with others.



What it is

The technique is based on Rick Ross and Art Kleiner's 'Left-Hand Column' technique. Some preparatory work is required for your client to complete a Left-Hand Column exercise. There are several options of how to reflect on it in coaching.

The technique recognises there is sometimes a mismatch between what we are saying and what we are thinking and feeling. In coaching, it can be used to reflect on particular situations from others' points of view so that your client can choose other options in future.



How it fits

The technique helps to raise awareness of the unspoken assumptions in how we choose to communicate with others. These may be blocking our intent and results in a mismatch with the impact of our words and approach.

Working through your client's case enables them to choose alternative words or approaches to communicate with others. This can be particularly helpful in what they perceive to be difficult conversations or difficult relationships.



How to use it

Invite your client to complete the Left-Hand column template in advance of your coaching session.

The template (see example below) helps your client describe an actual situation, which is most important and relevant to them. Reconstructing what they and others said in the right-hand column helps make the learning actionable. Reconstructing their thoughts and feelings in the left-hand column makes it possible to reflect on how their unspoken thoughts and feelings contributed to the outcome of the situation.

Possible coaching approaches:

1. Individuals can learn a lot by simply writing down their case. So, ask them to reflect on it.
2. Some helpful coaching questions:
 - What has really led you to think and feel this way?
 - What was your intent?
 - How might your approach/words have contributed to the difficulties?
 - What led you to choose not to say what was in your Left-Hand column?
 - What assumptions are you making about the other party?
3. Use Perceptual Positions to invite your client to consider the case from alternative perspectives. For example:
 - The other party.
 - A third position, such as how a 'fly on the wall' would have experienced the interaction.
 - Always finish by inviting them back into their own position to reflect on what they now know.
 - And then invite them to generate alternative approaches they will take in the future.



More ideas

Further reading

Senge, Peter, et al. (1994) *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, London, Nicholas Brealey.



Instructions

How to write a left-hand/right-hand column case for use in coaching.

The quality of your case will have a major impact on what you learn. The best cases focus on moments that illustrate a key theme, issue, or recurring difficulty that you would like to learn to manage more effectively. It can take up to about an hour to write a case.

1. Think of an episode that illustrates a difficult or challenging issue in your work. Please choose something in which you were personally involved and which you would like to learn to manage as productively as possible. State what the challenge was (e.g., setting expectations with a key stakeholder, giving difficult or challenging feedback).
2. Please describe the context briefly: who was there, the purpose of the encounter, what had just happened. Make up the names if you wish to preserve anonymity.
3. Describe what happened by reconstructing key moments in the conversation. Divide your paper into two columns as shown in the attached example.
 - On the right-hand side of the page, write what you and others said. It is not important to remember the exact words spoken. Your best recollection will be fine. **It is essential, however, that you write dialogue, as if from a play.**
 - On the left-hand side of the page, write down any thoughts and feelings that you had at the time and did not say.
4. Please note any concerns or puzzles that still linger about the incident. Write down also what help you would like from others when we discuss the case.



The context for the case:

I was trying to influence my manager to make some changes to the way our commercial contracts were negotiated.

An example

My Thoughts and Feelings	What We Said
	Me: I don't understand why you have a problem with what I'm suggesting.
Frank doesn't like to lose. More hyperbole; more pushing his own view. We've all heard all of this before. If he's right, we're already dead.	Frank: Let me say it again. This will not work. We'll get into trouble eventually.
	Me: Yours is an argument for doing nothing. If we cannot fix this business, we might as well sell it.
He's preying on the CEO's fears. Why doesn't he offer ideas about how we could make this work?	Frank: We've been through this before. We cannot afford the risk.
	Me: I'm not saying there's no risk; I'm saying that doing nothing is not the answer either. Your guys were there when we put the plan together and they didn't see it as that big a risk.
Like hell I did	Frank: You browbeat them. They said you wouldn't listen.

Lingering concerns, puzzles or questions:

Why do we always seem to go around in circles? I cannot influence him. What am I missing?