

Trust Issues: Overcoming Psychological Barriers to Effective Coaching

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Citation:

STOKES, Paul and WHYLEY, Carole (2025). Trust Issues: Overcoming Psychological Barriers to Effective Coaching. Coaching Perspectives. [Article]

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Title: Trust Issues: Overcoming psychological barriers to effective coaching

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It is common in coaching practice to refer to creating a safe space for personal development. In the following, we challenge the notion of the safe space by examining some recent research on trust and trusted space within coaching. Implications for coaches and coaching will be spelt out at the end of the article.

Coaching as a “safe place”?

It has become common to talk about psychological safety, as well as the idea of risk, within coaching conversations and relationships. Psychology remains quite dominant as the base discipline of many coaching training programmes, and it is understandable that safety and risk are prominent terms. However, too much focus on safety and risk can lead coaches to feel that they are largely responsible for the safety of their clients and can encourage them to either adopt a conservative, risk-averse approach to coaching interventions, for fear of damaging their clients, or assume safety, and risk harm. This view of coaching can be a problem for two reasons:

- 1) Clients are seen as vulnerable people who need protection, rather than skilled, capable individuals who have things to contribute to the coaching process
- 2) It neglects and minimises the importance of challenge & stretch in coaching relationships, which might involve taking on those issues & challenges

To explore some of these issues, some research was conducted from a coachee’s perspective by way of a small scale, in-depth study using semi-structured interviews with eight participants. The following explains the findings and what conclusions we draw for coaching in this context.

A Trusted Space

As we argued above, the ideas of psychological safety and a safe space can be problematic for coaches and a more useful term is that of trusted space. What clearly emerged from the analysis of the data was the idea of a threshold for trust in the coaching space. In other words, coachees made judgements about whether there was **sufficient** trust in the process and the relationship to enable effective coaching conversations to take place. These judgements were influenced by three questions that coachees were asking themselves

1. How open/guarded do I need to be here?
2. To what extent am I likely to be judged (negatively) by the coach?
3. To what extent do I feel that the coach is ‘there’ for me and empathises with me?

Short Example

In one of the interviews, the coachee referred to the fact that it was important to them that their coach had a background in a different sector, as then they felt they could address their issue with less fear that the topic would be viewed as a ‘betrayal’ to the profession. In other words, the coachee trusted that their coach would have sufficient neutrality and objectivity not to judge them negatively.

It was clear from the interviews that these three questions were ongoing and constantly revisited throughout all the coachees’ coaching relationships and sessions.

Trusted Enough

On the basis of the above, we propose seeing the effective coaching space as being one where there is sufficient trust to enable good enough coaching conversations to take place. If a coachee believes that that they would need to be too guarded within the conversation, then this is likely to result in the coaching either not taking place at all or being terminated early. This view moves us away from seeing the coaching space as either being 'safe' or 'unsafe' to one where trust is on a continuum, but with a threshold of where there is sufficient trust to enable the coaching to continue. We argue that it is not that helpful to think of trust as being either 'all or nothing'. The coachee's perspective is key to this judgement and expecting a coachee to bring their whole self to coaching is probably not a realistic expectation. Nevertheless, there has to be sufficient trust in the process and in the coach for the coachee to go ahead in the first place.

Short Example

In one case, the coachee, an HR business partner, was working with a less senior internal coach. It emerged, through the initial discussions, that the coachee felt they had to be more guarded in the coaching relationship due to the possibility that they might encounter the coach at a future stage as part of their HR role. As a result, the coachee, despite having a good relationship with the coach, could not sufficiently trust the coaching space and it was agreed the coaching would be discontinued.

Can a Trusted Space be Trusted?

In summary, we are proposing that the trusted space in coaching has the following elements:

- **Trust in coaching is dynamic** – participants are continually making decisions about their degree of trust in the other person and the process, by 'dipping their toes in' and evaluating the response. These decisions are down to the client's perception of three main factors and their dynamic interplay:- their relational bond/connection with the coach, the coach's judgement and the coach's prioritisation of them in the process
- **Trust is temporal in nature** – decisions about how trusted the space is and for what purpose are made at certain key points e.g. pre-chemistry meeting, during the chemistry meeting, during and after coaching sessions
- **Trust can be unconsciously and consciously given** – clients can either actively look for reasons to trust the coaching space e.g. shared values/experiences and/or will react unconsciously to become more open or guarded, depending on how they perceive the conversations.

Hence, the answer to whether a trusted space can be trusted is - 'it depends'!

So What for Coaches?

We conclude here by drawing out some of the questions & implications for coaches of this work:

- 1) **Should coaches make judgements on the level of trust in the relationship?**
Inevitably, coaches will make their own judgements on the degree of trust and it makes sense that they should. If they notice that the coachee is guarded, steering the conversation to 'safe' areas then these might be signs that there is insufficient trust on the part of the coachee and that it might be time to address this.

- 2) **Should coaches be looking to get people to open up and be less guarded?** Most approaches to coaching encourage disclosure on the part of the coachee in order to give the coach something to work with. However, this work raises the question of whether it is ethical to do this, given that the coachee may have good reason for having low levels of trust at certain points and may need to be guarded to be able to stay in the relationship.
- 3) **Should coaches be non-judgemental?** The findings from the research tell us that coachees trust the coaching space more if they believe that their coach is suspending or withholding judgement and that they feel that they can rely on the coach to hold them in positive regard, be there for them and empathise with their situation. On the other hand, challenge and constructive feedback, often deemed as criticism, also have a place in coaching. Therefore, coaches may be advised to consider how they authentically **convey** the suspension of negative judgement and empathy on the one hand, whilst giving themselves permission to challenge and question the coachee on the other. They may also want to consider, given the temporal and dynamic nature of trust, how their supporting materials and communications outside of sessions work to enable coachees to make their judgements on the trusted space.

In summary, our work suggests that dealing with these 'trust issues' is vital to the success or otherwise, of our coaching relationships. Coaches could consider doing the following in their coaching relationships:

- 1) Contracting explicitly around the dilemma of wanting to be supportive of the coachee, whilst offering appropriate challenge and feedback to do the work
- 2) Finding ways of noticing clues that might suggest that trust levels are low or not enough to do the work
- 3) Getting feedback on how non-judgement and empathy are being conveyed to coachees