

COACHING TRAPS

Patterns that undermine the coaching relationship, often without the coach realizing it.

Body and Nonverbal

- **A mixed-signal smile** – Smiling while delivering something serious sends an incongruent message. It's often a signal of the coach's own discomfort.
- **A tone that expresses a judgement** – Just because it's stated as a question doesn't mean there's curiosity in it.
- **Performing presence** – Mechanical nodding, reflecting, or mirroring can signal attentiveness without actually delivering presence. There's a big difference between a coach who is truly tracking and one who is operating with a listening routine.

Assumption and Projection

- **Showing up already knowing** – Arriving with a settled read on what the coachee needs is one of the most common and least visible traps in coaching. It can even look like preparation, but it operates as a filter. Less certainty at the outset is where real value resides.
- **The assumed agenda** – There is a difference between tracking where a conversation is going and deciding where it should go. The coachee's opening is a starting point, not a map. What they lead with is not always what most needs to be explored.
- **A suggestion disguised as a question** – *"Wouldn't you benefit from hearing her perspective?"* is a directive with a question mark.

Pacing and Structure

- **Avoidance as Listening** – Letting a coachee provide half a meeting's worth of context without any intervention. A well-timed question early in the opening can focus the conversation, even if it *feels* like an interruption.
- **The Therapeutic Pace** – Therapy has a different contract and pace than coaching. And a different goal. When coaching slows to a therapeutic rhythm: long silences, careful emotional processing, or only clarifying questions, it often signals that the coach is more comfortable holding space than moving something forward. Both matter, but coaching has a directional quality that therapy doesn't always require. Notice when you've shifted registers.
- **The Rescue Impulse** – Moving too quickly to reframe, normalize, or resolve discomfort the coachee hasn't fully sat with yet. The coach's need to make things better interrupts the coachee's process of understanding them.
- **Comfort Trap** – Some coachees are easy to be with. Sessions flow, rapport is strong, and nothing much changes. The relationship itself becomes the product. A coach who isn't occasionally uncomfortable in a session may not be pushing far enough.

Quality of Attention

- **Grilling vs. Relating** – There's a version of rigorous questioning that feels like an interrogation. The questions may be good, but the relational quality underneath them is evaluative rather than curious. The coachee feels examined rather than accompanied. The antidote is genuine interest in the person, not just the problem.
- **The Clarifying Question Trap** – Clarifying questions have their place but a conversation built primarily on clarification never gets anywhere. "*Can you say more about that?*" and "*What do you mean by X?*" are useful tools that can also become a way of staying safe. Curious questions take a position and they reflect something the coach has actually noticed or wondered.
- **Showboating** – Asking a sophisticated question to demonstrate insight rather than serve the coachee. The question may be impressive. It may also be ill-timed, self-referential, or beside the point entirely.