

10 Common Assumptions to Avoid in Career Coaching

Below is a list of ten common assumptions to avoid in career coaching. Consider incorporating some, or all, in the content of your training of those designated career coaches. Also consider designing role plays which facilitate bringing some or all of these assumptions into the learning content.

1. *Assuming that career coaching is only about career matters - incorporate a holistic perspective.*

It's been said that we take our whole self to work, not just a compartmentalised portion. Fixing a flat tire won't help a car run if it's also out of gas. Likewise, focusing only on career topics won't be as effective if your client (the employee) also needs to address areas such as finances, family, life balance, spiritual, and so on. The focal point for a client may certainly be work-related matters, but avoiding or shying away from other aspects of a client's life may leave us wondering why the client isn't moving forward. If you are not comfortable moving into these areas, simply listen and let them share their experiences as this may be all they require. Alternatively, if it is a strong focus point you may need to refer them to another coach or psychologist.

2. *Assuming that your client is telling you the truth - get at the truth... the whole truth.*

Pride often gets in the way of people speaking the truth. When you have earned your client's trust, the person will often disclose insecurities, concerns, and career-related problems. Also, what the client perceives to be unimportant may be forgotten or glossed over in conversation with you. If you don't **ask probing questions**, you won't know anything beyond what your client tells you. Related to this is the assumption that the first career problem stated by the client is, indeed, the best one on which to start your helping. It may be that the most important need for your help will emerge from your probing questions or later in the course of the coaching relationship. Be prepared to work with your client here.

3. *Assuming your client needs excessive encouragement*

A word of encouragement, praise for a task well done, confirmation of the client's strengths, or acknowledgment of another person's positive comments about the client is certainly appropriate in the coaching relationship. Be watchful, however, that your tone of voice and approach is on an adult-to-adult 'equals' relationship as opposed to an adult-to-child or parent-to-child relationship. Ask yourself if you'd be



comfortable on the receiving end of your cheerleading. Do NOT cheerlead to the point of condescension. If you are unsure, be willing and ready to seek client feedback be that face to face or via a feedback form that may also be anonymous.

4. *Assuming that the client wants to hear about you - do NOT over-talk.*

There will be times when it is appropriate for you to share a recollection or anecdote from your experiences that relates to the client's situation. This can be useful in

moderation. However, coaching sessions should not follow the flow of a typical conversation. This is not the time to share lots of your personal stories with clients. They are expecting you to listen to their stories. The focus should stay on the client, not you.

5. *Assuming that clients with certain skills and education are the same - client solutions are rarely repeatable from one to another.*

Commonalities will be present with certain clients and personality types. However, avoid assuming that because some factors are the same, they are all the same. Keep probing and listening intently - you'll unearth threads that when woven together produce the right fit for each of your clients. Every client is unique, bringing their own skills, life experience and dreams to the session, it is important that you acknowledge this.

6. *Assuming that your client's situation has only one solution - watch for tunnel vision.*

If a client is unhappy in a particular career situation, the most readily apparent solution often centres on getting a similar position with a different employer. In some cases, this is appropriate. However, people frequently settle for second best because they believe there is no other option. Ask, "What are some other options/perspectives that you may be overlooking at the moment?" As a career coach, you have the opportunity to invite them to see the bigger picture... to step into the future as a whole, creative and successful person... to scratch at more than just the surface... to help them find the traction to get out of a rut... to challenge them to combine their strengths, interests, values, and purpose into a different career that will be uniquely satisfying to them.

7. *Assuming you can multi-task while listening to your client - stay 100% focused.*

Nothing replaces un-distracted listening and a 'full presence' with your clients. Listen a good deal more than you talk. Give your full attention so you don't miss important



information or attitudes. This is not a good time to be multitasking. If your client feels you are not totally interested in them, they will be less inclined to tell you all that you need to coach them, and you may miss getting to the heart of the situation. This can be difficult if you are taking note to maintain eye contact. You may consider recording the session (audio or video) with the clients consent.

8. *Assuming that clients will follow through – clarify their intentions and commitment to action.*

Sometimes clients will seem energised about proposed action steps but lack in the follow-through. Question your client's intentions, their next steps, and find out how serious they are about making a change that works. Ask, "When do you plan to do that?" Or, "What support do you need to ensure this happens?" Or, "On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 highest, how committed are you to completing that task?" If clients come back the following week NOT having completed their action items, ask, "What got in the way?".

9. *Assuming that your client has the same ethical standards as yours - don't judge.*

People are full of surprises. Not all values and ethics are congruent with others and there is nothing to say they have to be. Ensure you are ready to be surprised without being judgmental. A respectful curiosity, "Tell me more about that" or "How do those values align with your current work situation?" or "What would need to change in your work situation so that it's in sync with your priorities?"

10. *Assuming the client knows less than you do - avoid thinking "I have all the answers so let me find an opening in the conversation to tell you how to do things!"*

Sometimes we feel that the role of the coach is to tell people what to do – this as we all know rarely works. If you fall into the trap of solving problems or suggesting answers (before tapping your client's creativity in these areas), you rob the client of their opportunity to find their brilliance. If so, your relationship with your clients will be very short. You may know more about the topic of career development than your clients, but that doesn't mean they're not as bright (or brighter) than you are. Before jumping into a litany of how-to's on a subject, say something like, "What ideas have been coming up for you on this?"

Checking out their level of knowledge is time well spent. If the client has run out of ideas, consider prefacing your comments with a statement such as, "May I offer a suggestion? Or, "Would it be helpful to brainstorm around that together? You start, then I'll offer an idea, then back to you..."



Paul Stevens, B.Bus., founded The Centre for Worklife Counselling in Sydney in 1979 following a 21 year career in Human Resources Management and The Worklife Network – a national and international affiliation of adult career specialists – in 1986. He wrote his first published contribution to adult career development in 1981, Win That Job!, closely followed by Stop Postponing the Rest of Your Life. Over 35 further titles, booklets and career assessment instruments have been published since, the latest being A Passion for Work: Our Lifelong Affair and My Third Age: Work & Life Choices.

Paul's dedication to assisting adults in transition has been recognised in many ways – he is Fellow of the Australian Association of Career Counsellors (AACC) and in April 2000 was awarded their highest honour, Life Membership; former Research Fellow in Adult Career Development, University of Wollongong; former Member, Board of Governors, Institute of Career Certification International (ICC International); Member, Asian Accreditation Panel for Career Management Certification (AAPCMC); Fellow Practitioner and World Council Australian Representative, Association of Career Professionals International; Honorary Member, Professional Résumé Writing & Research Association; Board Member, The Career Development Leadership Alliance; Honorary Member, Elite Performers Lifeskill Advisers Association; Honorary Member, Asian Association of Career Management Professionals (AACMP); Director of Studies for the eLearning global facility, The College for Career Practitioners, recipient of the Career Counselling Excellence Award from the AACC in conjunction with its sponsor, New Hobsons Press; and Author and Designer of Worklife's CareerMastery® Virtual Career Centre. Paul Steven's is a regular contributor and author for Six Figures.