

## CONTRACTING IN COACHING: LEARNING THE HARD WAY



It took me years—and several sticky situations—to really grasp the importance of contracting in coaching. When I was newly qualified, I was so interested in mastering my own coaching skills that I didn't really pay much attention to what I had learned about contracting. If I am honest, I saw contracting as something to be rushed through so that I could get on with what I thought of as the “real work” of coaching.

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Mezirow (1991) identified that critical reflection and transformative learning occur when we are faced with a disorienting dilemma. A major disorienting dilemma occurred with my first three clients. I had one session with each of them and to my horror, not one of them came back for a second session! When I recovered from the shock, I realized that they had not felt safe with me or with the process. I hadn't taken enough time to contract about expectations, roles and responsibilities or ways of working. I had been in a hurry to do what I loved (coaching) and not taken time to set a solid foundation upon which we could begin to do the work. I had not fully appreciated what a big step it was for my clients to sit down with a “stranger” and begin discussing their lives, relationships, hopes, dreams or fears and how important it was that they felt safe before they could do that. Since that defining moment, I have maintained that setting the foundation IS the real work of coaching, without which trust, rapport, safety, boundaries and clarity will not be established.

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My upfront contracting improved overnight, but I continued to learn the hard way about other aspects of contracting. A mix of impostor syndrome and people-pleasing tendencies led me to have poor contracting about time. On a few occasions, I extended the length of a session on impulse and without negotiating with my client. On reflection, I did this when I felt that I had not given “good value” to the client. I thought I was being generous, but I was giving confused messages about my own value and my boundary management, and I was not respecting my clients or their time. One client told me afterwards that he had been late for another appointment because I had extended his session and he had felt unable to leave. Another client was left worrying about whether she would be charged for the extra time.

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On our coach training programs, we say that “who you are is how you coach” and I think that “who you are is how you contract,” too. The ability to create a safe, supportive environment that produces ongoing mutual respect and trust is a core competency for all coaches. This will be achieved by the coach committing to the development of their own self-knowledge and by learning to understand what aspects of themselves get in the way of contracting with confidence.