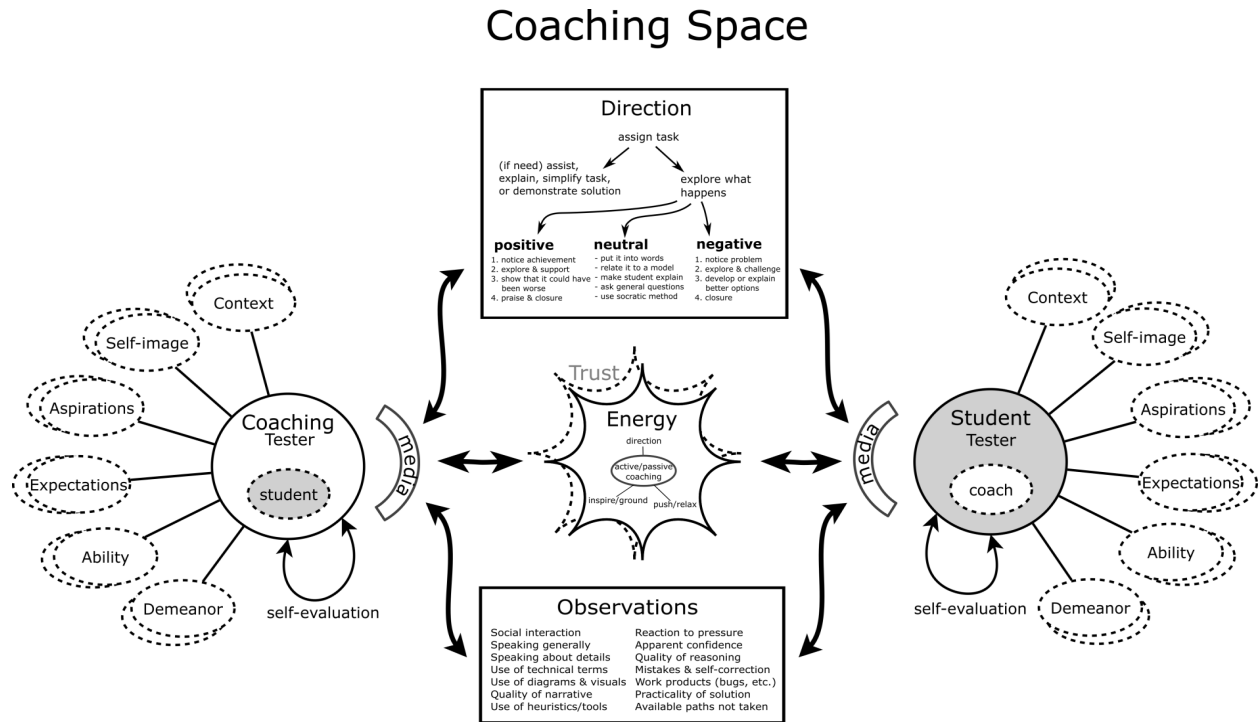


A Guide to the Coaching Space



by James Bach and Anne-Marie Charrett

The Space Itself

The coaching space diagram depicts an arena within which coaching happens. This arena consists of at least two people—the dyad of coach and student—and the elements of a coaching session wherein they interact. The diagram is a tool for use by coaches to reflect upon their experiences and methods.

Coaching groups is a little more complicated in some ways, but the dynamics of the dyad still substantially apply.

Notice the half circles marked “media.” This reminds us that though we may coach face-to-face, increasingly we are obliged to coach distributed teams: which means coaching over the phone or via text or even email, leading to special risk of distorted communication.

The coaching space is a physical space, as well as an emotional space, as well as an intellectual and social interaction.

Coach and Student

The coach and the student role mirror each other. Each has similar qualities that bear upon a coaching relationship. As a healthy coaching relationship evolves, it becomes a peer-to-peer relationship, where either side can take a coaching or student attitude depending on the situation. We might also imagine two testers, each coaching the other on different areas of expertise. Here are the important elements highlighted by the diagram:

1. **Dual and contrasting identities.** We use a practitioner style of coaching, as opposed to a style whereby the coach may not be competent as a tester. That means for us the coach has two identities: coach and tester. Of course the student also has two identities: student and tester. Key attributes of student and coach are depicted in ellipses that radiate from each of them, respectively. Notice that they appear “stacked.” This is to remind us of those dual identities. For instance, a coach may have strong abilities as a tester but weak skills as a coach. And on the student side, the coach must remember that a student may be clumsy during a coaching session but actually quite confident on a real testing job.
2. **Models of each other.** The coach builds a mental model of the student, just as the student builds one of the coach. This is to remind the coach that neither side ever knows by direct experience the truth about the other. The coach must make hypotheses about the student and refine them over time, based on available evidence.
3. **Self-Evaluation.** We are always judging ourselves and modifying our behavior. A coach may ask a student to evaluate himself—that’s a standard maneuver. But the coach must watch out for students who judge themselves too harshly and censor themselves or fail in a task just because they have already decided they can’t do it. In that case, it’s important to lower expectations.
4. **Context.** The situation they are in now. This includes their current working situation as well as all of their previous experience. It includes who is around them, how people around them work, the kinds of projects they are on, and the kinds of products they are creating. Anything outside of them that affects their choices or should affect their choices is the context.
5. **Self-Image.** How they see themselves. For instance, if the student sees himself as stupid, he won’t use much initiative in solving problems. If the coach sees himself as a “nice guy” he may not push the student very hard. The coach must help the student build a realistic and positive self-image.
6. **Aspirations.** This is what they hope for; what they are reaching for. Part of a coach’s job is to help the student raise his aspirations.
7. **Expectations.** This is what they demand; what they need. Part of a coach’s job is to lower expectations at first and then raise them bit by bit. Expectations are tied to self-respect. Expectations that are too high will harm self-respect and kill motivation.
8. **Ability.** What they can do and how well they do it. This is ostensibly what coaching is all about. The coach must be able to identify and evaluate potentially the whole spectrum of testing skills in the student. This requires that coach to have some amount of corresponding skill, although not necessarily as much as the student. It also requires that the coach has sufficient coaching skills.

9. **Demeanor.** Attitude and emotions revealed in behavior. This is a crucial thing for a coach to control in himself and to watch in his student. Demeanor is our main indicator of energy, and one of the ways we put pressure on our students or ease that pressure.

Energy

Energy is the key. Without energy nothing much will happen. Much of a coaching session is about managing energy.

What we mean by energy is not some mystical force. We're just talking about the level of motivation and the kind of motivation on the parts of the student and the coach. Positive motivation is eagerness to try things and willingness to fail, if necessary, to learn what is needed. Positive motivation often implies vulnerability, since it is an openness to change. Negative motivation is devoted to protection of something important—an idea, an institution, or often oneself—against a threat that may harm it; perhaps against any change at all. Anger is an example of that, but it doesn't have to be angry to be a negative kind of energy. Energy may not always present itself as an obvious emotion. For instance, a tester may seem emotionally neutral, yet have a puzzling attachment to certain words, tools, or actions.

Motivation of any kind is better than no motivation, but we prefer the positive over the negative because it seems safer and more pliable. (Negative energy means the motivation to avoid something—perhaps fear or pain-related.) You might think that negative energy is always bad, but sometimes it seems to be the only thing to get us unstuck.

Coaches read the energy throughout a coaching session. Managing energy is vital to the coaching process. You may add or release pressure as needed to maintain student productivity, or you may focusing on aspirations instead: trying to inspire the student to greater heights, or perhaps bringing them down to Earth so that some real progress can be made by taking smaller steps.

Notice, on the diagram, that behind energy is trust. This is to remind the coach that well-managed energy, over time, spawns trust in the relationship, which tends to liberate more positive energy. A coach must build strive to build trust with each interaction.

"Follow the energy" is a coach's prime heuristic. We find out where the student's motivation is and work there, first.

The coach's energy is as important as the student's. A good coach operates from one overriding feeling: desire to be of service. We coaches serve our students. If you are coaching without that attitude, this process will turn very sour, very quickly.

Observations

The coach watches the student perform. But what does the coach watch? In short, every work product and utterance. How does the student use terms? How does the student perform specific skills?

The coach must develop and apply some sort of model of skilled testing in order to make the necessary observations. Rapid Software Testing coaches use the Heuristic Test Strategy Model for this as well as the Exploratory Testing Skills and Tactics guide and other references. Or they build their own.

Direction

Direction also manages energy. We've broken this out from the energy section to give it more detail. This is the intellectual core and basic method of the coaching session. The coach assigns a task (which may be a question) and the student responds. As the student responds the coach observes and spots things that are good or bad; problems or achievements. The coach also makes note of neutral factors, neither good nor bad, but perhaps particularly unusual; or even notably normal. Sometimes what a student needs is to know he is normal in some way, or special in some other way.

Discussing neutral observations can help the student discover his own style. Meanwhile, a coach should also amplify and analyze the achievements, so that the student understands clearly why they did well. And we need to analyze and challenge the problems we see.

Because of the energy issue, we may have to overlook a lot of problems and focus on the good, first. This is a pattern called "feed the fire before boiling the water." Every student must to develop resilience in the face of adversity. We believe this is best built through positive early experiences.

Note: If you are approached by too many students, you might employ a "tournament" pattern to deal with them. That means setting new students a difficult problem and letting that discourage some percentage of them. For example, James sometimes asks first-time students to "write 1000 words that describe your method of testing." Most will not submit anything, and the ones that do are demonstrating good energy. Problem solved! But that only makes sense when you are not invested in the success of each and every student. Don't use that approach when you need to maximize the chance that each student will feel successful.

Coaching Space

