



How to coach 68 CFO's from 40 different countries in 4 h?

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We enjoy a challenge. Even more we enjoy a challenge with a positive outcome!

Our first impulse when we got this assignment was to set our expectations quite low. After all only 4 hours with 68 Chief Financial Officers and Senior Management from Europe, Middle East and Africa (40 countries) gives no scope for meaningful, individual coaching.

Then we remembered we actually had 68 coaches available – even though they perhaps didn't consider themselves as such. Our second impulse, therefore, was to trust our participants and significantly raise our expectations.

The platform

The project for this international service provider was initiated by the HR Director in Bucharest who was hosting the annual 2 day meeting of national and group EMEA finance leaders. Although all working for the same business, the group was extremely diverse in terms of cultural background, age, experience and exposure to management training. There were large contingents from the UK and France as well as representatives from such diverse locations as Finland, Russia, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa (just to name a few!).

The core of the meeting was presentations on corporate results, initiatives, budgets and networking.

They also wanted to build on their previous year's discussions around how to become more influential business partners and focus on business (not only finance) solutions. We were asked to help them with this by running a workshop for the first afternoon focused on improving their communication and influencing skills.

We were chosen over several other providers because of our experience (read 'grey hair' ☺) and our practical approach (read 'Solution Focus' ☺).

For preparation we had several calls and discussions with both the HR Director and the EMEA CFO based in London, around 2 days for concept design and material preparation. We

also attended the first part of the meeting in the morning to get a feel for the group and its dynamics.

Our approach

We wanted to design a program to facilitate useful coaching conversations around the topic and where we would introduce several 'micro tools' on the subject of communication and influence. Since none of the participants was familiar with the concept of coaching, one of our key contributions was to provide them the questions to ask themselves and each other.

Our basic design objectives were for each participant to:

1. Have time and space to think and listen attentively!
2. Consider questions to help clarify their desired outcome, goal, and future perfect.
3. Decide for themselves the situations they want to manage more successfully, and what benefits and outcomes that will bring.
4. Become aware of what is working and what might be useful to do more.
5. Build confidence and discover qualities and resources in themselves and colleagues through talking about (and hearing) success stories.
6. Decide and commit to small action steps, to do more of what is working or to try out something new and enlarge their options for action.

We wouldn't normally use PowerPoint slideshow, but for this project we decided to sacrifice the greater intimacy we get without it for two main reasons.

First, for this size of group we thought it especially important to provide a clearly signposted structure and path and PowerPoint offers an easy and familiar way to do this.

Second, as we were posing many carefully thought out questions in a specific sequence, we decided PowerPoint helped deliver these consistently and without the fuss of, for example, handouts.

The program design

1. Setting the context and building contact

The group CFO and sponsor of the event introduced the topic and set the workshop into the larger context of the organisational goals. This created the frame for the next 4 hours.

We knew our approach was quite unusual for most of the participants so we were very explicit about how we are going to work and what will be the structure for the afternoon.

Our Principles

- We focus on what works, not what doesn't
- We look for solutions not problems
- You have the answers - maybe are not aware of it

We invited them to try out the proposed exercises as an experiment and afterwards to decide whether the approach was useful for them or not.

2. Platform building.

Although the business context was set by the group CFO, for a successful coaching conversation each individual needs to define for themselves what will be a successful outcome. To start to encourage conversations rather than isolated thinking we invited participants to interview one another in pairs around the following questions:

Platform

Suppose this session will be really useful to you.

- How will you recognize it was worth for you to spend these 4 hours?
- How might others notice it has been useful to you?

3. Micro tool 1: Positive Power Influencing

Responding to the specific request from the sponsor to present new tools and approaches we briefly introduced a model of influence to give them a structured overview of four different styles. We illustrated these styles with examples drawn from some of the presentations we heard during the morning session.

The intention was to create awareness for the possibility of different options for familiar situations rather than in depth understanding and practice with different influencing approaches.

4. Future Perfect

We assumed what it means to be influential and how people see themselves acting will be very different from person to person, so we asked participants to share with their colleagues their individual vision of being successfully influential in their own working context.

We designed the questions to leave enough space for everybody to define for him/herself how they want to interact, what will be their desired outcome and attractive scenario of a preferred future.

Future Perfect

- *How will you recognise when you have reached your full potential in influencing people?*
- *In what situations? And with whom?*
- *What difference will it make for:
... you? ... the business? ... other people?*

5. Discover Forerunners and Resources

"Find out what works and do more of it!" as Steve de Shazer said.

One way to find out what works is to analyse success stories and the power of telling stories (in this case true ones) is well known.

We invited the participants to share with their colleagues (in small groups) when they influenced somebody successfully and to describe in details how they managed to do so. By talking about their individual successes the participants got aware of their own successful approaches and learned from their colleagues what worked for them.

Share Success Stories

and

"Positive Gossiping"

After listening to their colleague's success stories the participants were invited to "gossip" about their colleagues in an exclusive positive way. We modelled this by 'gossiping' about the sponsor.

It is always a beautiful experience to see and hear how the atmosphere changes within minutes. We saw more open, smiling faces, lightness and joy in the group. As well as getting aware of their own qualities, skills and competences, the participants' confidence also increases and it creates a more open and trustful working climate which is a great basis for the later conversations.

6. Micro Tool 2: Listening

The quality of the listening determinates the quality of the thinking. Therefore it is more than 50% of a conversation. When I want to reach good results in a conversation the quality of the listening has a major impact.

We used a very simple and fun listening exercise (person A talks for 3 minutes. For the first half, person B doesn't listen and the second half they do listen. Then A and B explore the impact on the speaker).

This exercise had a double intention to demonstrate listening as a necessary skill in better understanding better my conversation partner and also as an essential coaching skill.

7. Micro Tool 3: Questioning

During the workshop the participants experienced the structure of the solution focused approach and the dynamic of solution focussed questions. Now the participants were introduced to examples of solution focussed questions that might be useful when leading conversations in order to find good business solutions.



8. Peer Coaching:

Before starting with the final peer coaching exercise we reviewed the workshop by letting the participants interview one another on what useful ideas they had discovered up to now, what insights they had and collected these ideas so they were visible for everybody.

Once this harvesting of insights was displayed we gave participants the opportunity to work on their specific situations where they would like to make some progress and at the same time harnessed the power of 68 coaches together in a room.

Each participant got a set of solution focused coaching questions and they coached one another on their individual issues they wanted to improve in.

They left the workshop with committed actions written down and an agreement in place to support one other person by reminding them of their commitments in the next days and weeks.

Our experience and insights

From our own observations and experience, this day was a big success. This was underlined by feedback we received from the client combined with a request to repeat the workshop in both their Asia/Pacific meeting in Beijing and their Americas meeting in California.

For us there are main insights

- Our confidence and ability to do what we do is directly influenced by our own clarity about what is important to us and standing by our approach - which is perhaps somewhat different to what is expected by many corporate clients. The approach works and is a breath of fresh air for 99% of those more familiar with a problem-oriented approach.
- With such a large group it is impossible to monitor and understand the content of the on-going conversations taking place during the workshop. And this is ok because we don't need to know. It's enough to see and hear that the conversations are useful for the client. This means tuning into the level of concentration, quality of listening and reflective thinking that is visible.
- Giving participants time and space to think, discuss and listen to each other is a huge gift in finding useful answers to their issues and tangible mutual support to define steps in their desired direction.
- We are never short of resources when we trust the wisdom, skills and qualities of those we're working with. By breaking down the idea that we are the 'coaches' we discovered a room full of coaches.

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