

All coaching takes place in the context of some kind of power relationship. It is critical that coaches be attuned to how dynamics around power may impact the coaching process.

Power in a coaching relationship can take a variety of forms including:

- **Positional power**
(e.g. a manager coaching a staff person or funder coaching a grantee)
- **Cultural power**
(i.e. a client and a coach are respectively members of social groups that have been historically oppressed and hold relative power/privilege)
- **Professional power**
(i.e.. the role of the helper often carries an aura of authority and expertise, while the role of one seeking help invites vulnerability.)

When these differences in power are at play in coaching, those we coach may project onto us a range of feelings they have towards authority. They may feel less safe, more defensive, less free to express their true opinions and feelings. Or they tend towards various forms of pleasing behavior to gain our approval. All of this gets in the way of the authentic relationship that is at the heart of good coaching.

The following scenarios illustrate how the coaching relationship looks very different depending on the context of power.

Scenario #1

You are a professional coach engaged by a client seeking support. While elements of cultural and professional power may still be at play, the client is coming of their own choice, and is completely free to end the relationship if they are not satisfied with the service they're receiving.

Scenario #2

You are coaching staff as part of your role of supervisor, and you have concerns about their performance. This is the classic example of positional power at play. You have the power to fire the person being coached. You may not choose to exercise this power, but the person being coached cannot help but be impacted by this reality.

Scenario #3

You have been meeting occasionally with a colleague to talk about work and offer informal peer coaching. Significant power dynamics are less likely to dominate this kind of situation.

Scenario #4

You work for an organization and believe it is important to influence someone with more positional power. This person has not asked for our 'coaching.' Upwards coaching is an important skill for those working in organizations, but requires us to self-manage our own history, feelings and behavior around relating to those with more power.

Scenario #5

You are a professional coach seeing a client whose organization has pressured or required them to get coached because of concerns about their performance. While you as coach don't have "official" positional power, the person being coached is not totally there of their own free will, and you are likely to be seen as an "agent" of those who have positional power.

Scenario #6

You are an older white man, coaching a young woman of color in any of these scenarios. Your coaching takes place across potential barriers of race, gender and age. Being in a position of privilege, it is upon you to be aware of the potential dynamics at play and consciously work to address potential barriers toward the trust needed for successful coaching.

The reality that coaching takes place in a context of power should not be viewed as a problem. But because coaching relationships depend on a high degree of authenticity, and partnership, it is critical to develop awareness, sensitivity and skill in navigating potential dynamics around power.

There is no simple formula for navigating the waters of power in a coaching relationship, especially given the wide range of possible scenarios. But here are a few best practices.

1. Awareness

The single most important thing you can do as a coach with regard to power dynamics is to be aware of them. When one has more power in a relationship, be it positional, cultural or professional, it's all too easy to forget that the differential exists. But the person with less power doesn't forget so easily. They may possibly be wrestling with feeling inhibited, deferential, mistrusting or even hostile even while you may be blithely unaware that anything's going on, or wondering why the coaching seems not to be going well. Awareness doesn't solve everything, but without it – you're flying on autopilot. With awareness can come understanding. And with understanding, we can learn to act more skillfully.

2. Presence and deep listening

Perhaps the greatest gift we have to give another person in coaching is the quality of being present with them and to deeply listen. The willingness to listen, without judgment, is an act of profound respect. Most people hunger to be listened to in this way. Our ability to bring this kind of care and attention to one another will, especially over time, tend to help alleviate the barriers that come with differences in power.

3. Addressing the subject of power

When you sense power dynamics are at play, it *may* (or *may not*) be helpful to raise it in some way – either directly or indirectly. For example:

“I could imagine it might be hard for you to feel completely comfortable with me given_____”

“Even though I’m the coach, I trust that you know better than I what you’re needing.”

“Even though I’m hired by your organization, what’s said here is completely confidential, and when I’m with you my commitment is to support you.”

“I wouldn’t presume to know what this must feel like for you.”

4. Modulating your energy and impact

When we have power – whether positional, cultural or professional – it’s easy to dominate situations. Whether we intend to or not, those who experience less power often tend to hold back in interactions with us. So as coaches we want to be especially aware of our impact when dealing with power differentials. This might include behavior such as:

- Slowing down the pace of your words and the conversation
- Talking with less certainty
- Softening your voice tone or pulling back your energy
- Being more mindful than usual about your use of challenge and confrontation
- Ask more questions

Here’s the challenge with all this. While it’s important for us to be aware of possible dynamics around power, it’s not at all helpful to worry about it. We can absolutely provide excellent coaching in all of the scenarios we described. Yes, be sensitive to the power dynamics we have described. Then relax. Most often, your presence, attention, patience and human caring can create the trust and safety needed for the work to flourish.