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# Coaching Others: How a Mantra Helped Me Evolve



By Annie Peshkam , Associate Director, INSEAD Initiative for Learning Innovation and Teaching Excellence (iLITE)

## **A mantra was the inflection point for realising my effectiveness and becoming a sought-after coach.**

I am a local guide of sorts with inside information. Management educators rely on me to look after their learning. They enlist my expertise on their teaching development route, and we trek together sharing anxieties and frustrations along the way. The goal: the most enriching and rewarding teaching experience.

The people I coach are remarkable. All are experts in their fields, many of whom display mastery over their subjects and teaching. A learning scientist by training, my prior experiences had not placed me one-on-one with such an audience.

Yet, on the self-assurance scale, I remember starting at a healthy point—confident in my skills to listen and provide feedback. With each session, though, the task became less black and white, greyer, and more intricate. The instructional part I understood well, it was the complexity of

the coaching part that I had not anticipated. The same is true of many managers and business leaders who find themselves having to coach individuals, in addition to leading them as groups.

It was during these perplexed and questioning moments, one year ago, when I spontaneously heard an uplifting mantra begin to play in my head. What was never part of my personal repertoire before became a useful mechanism to make sense of my value and take my place as an effective coach.

### **The mantras began**

I had a strong urge to transmit the philosophy of learner-centred teaching, the strategies and techniques rooted in research and practice—knowledge of which can accelerate teaching development. But with each meeting, I found myself, more and more, caught up in professors' anxieties or nervous excitement, frustrations or eagerness to learn, abhorrence for student behaviour or a sincere joy from making connections. Myself, moving with them from one emotion to the next, uncertain if I was, in fact, the source of all the heavy turbulence.

Sitting on the train last year, while trying to understand my strengths and limitations, what triggered my nerves and when I derived the most joy when working with clients, the following three mantras suddenly emerged.

#### *"I'm knowledgeable"*

The first of my mantras began like this: "You know what? I'm knowledgeable. I'm knowledgeable. I'm knowledgeable! There, I said it. I can't believe that repeating this phrase is actually uplifting. Look, you have specialised knowledge and a useful set of skills, you should rely on your own insights, and think critically to revise them. There's no need to wither away if the going gets tough. Wait. Hang on. Phrasing thoughts as negations isn't helpful. Rewind. Stick to, 'I'm knowledgeable!'"

#### *"My client feels"*

I very quickly realised that I wasn't the only one experiencing emotional unease. The second mantra began. "Despite the fact that I'm knowledgeable, my client feels," I thought to myself. "He feels. She feels. Educators feel anxieties, uncertainties, questions with each course and new set of students. They wouldn't be teachers if they didn't feel to a small degree. When they push back in our sessions, it is normal. It's only an

indication that these uncomfortable feelings exist. Remember, you're the sounding board that will help address these uncertainties, and help overcome them with the right strategies."

*"All my clients are well intentioned"*

Immediately, I found it easy to recognise that my clients have every intention of learning, even if their nerves and frustrations hide this very fact. Enter the third mantra. "The person is well-intentioned. The person cares. The person wants to improve. Knowing how to teach is one thing and putting it into practice is another. Teachers just don't always know how to make the link. That's what I'm here for."

And, there it was, "I'm knowledgeable. The person feels. The person is well-intentioned"—the recurring loop now softly humming in my ears while I admired the morning sun through the condensation of the train window on my way to work.

### **The coach and mantra evolved**

Like many new professors starting out, my (inner) ratings started well, and took a toll. But, in time, they rose again. The unconscious dynamics that play out for many young professors, I was playing out myself.

Each successive coaching session contributed to the passage back-up. With every meeting, the fog cleared: *I* didn't matter, and therefore, nor did my perception of "knowledge". My instructional coaching sessions were only helping to reveal to the person in front of me the conceptions and misconceptions that helped and hindered *his* or *her* teaching. Whether or not I was effective was crucial to his or her development—it was not the first need I was called on to fulfill.

Each new professor, educator, leader of the management education journey faces the deep anxiety of performing for the people in front of them. Teachers and leaders, and coaches on the journey with them, can, all too easily, get caught up in the individual performance.

I hear the calendar alert from my phone – five minutes until the next meeting. I note that I always look forward to a session now. What's changed? I hold the simple assumption that each professor, every now and again, wants me to guide them on a better route, using finer equipment to reach the best teaching experience.

Now, more often than before, I only hear the following two mantras: “The person feels. The person is well-intentioned.” Just like young professors who say they start having positive experiences with their students when they “let go”, or leaders who see their employee’s performance improve, the realisation emerges that I have found my marching hymn. The inflection point was when I took myself out of the complex equation of sharing anxieties with my clients and put their anxieties first.

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