How to Handle Discomfort in Coaching

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**SPEAKERS**

Zoe Hawkins, Jo Wheatley

**Jo Wheatley** 00:03

The Coaching Crowd podcast is for compassionate courageous leaders, HR professionals and high achievers,

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people who are passionate about helping others to find alignment in their lives through coaching, and do a thinking of training and developing as a coach.

**Jo Wheatley** 00:20

Welcome to the Coaching Crowd podcast with me, Jo Wheatley, and my friend and co host, Zoe Hawkins.

**Zoe Hawkins** 00:26

Hi, everybody, good to be here again for another episode. And this week, we're talking about how to handle a client's discomfort in a coaching session. And the reason we're bringing this to you today is because it came up in supervision a couple of times. And we notice when we're working with coaches who are in the training space, and actually also coaches who are experienced, there can be times when you notice a discomfort in your client through perhaps the line of questioning that you're going through, or you perhaps notice a resistance in your client to a particular topic that they're that they're focusing on. And that can make you as the coach start to feel uncomfortable and unsure about how to progress. So we wanted to cover that for you today. I

**Jo Wheatley** 01:10

think it's important because I see it as a core coaching competency to be able to coach along that continuum of comfort all the way through to discomfort. And I think a good place to start is a bit of self reflection, and noticing for yourself are connecting with what, what I find really comfortable in coaching. What's easy for me, in relationship with my client? And what are the situations that prompt discomfort for me? And do I notice patterns? With my clients around what they find discomfort with? And how does that show up in the coaching session. So So uh, you mentioned resistance that sometimes for coaches, they would feel uncomfortable when they sense resistance with the client. Sometimes I think coaches feel uncomfortable when a client has a strong emotional response to something. So it might be they've had a realisation and tears flow. And that could be as a result of relief or sadness or any range of emotions. And how this shows up in supervision. And as an example is that a coach might come along and say, I work with this client at the moment. And we're having a really great session, and they've been making, you know, loads of progress. But there was a situation that arose in our last coaching session that felt really uncomfortable, and often will start with an inquiry around who was it uncomfortable for? And often the client has to the coach has to really think about that. But what they'll also often share is it felt really uncomfortable. This is what I did, but I don't know if that was the right thing to do or not.

**Zoe Hawkins** 03:02

I think there's this piece around, right and wrong, you know, as you're alluding to there. And also okay, and not okay, you know, when I reflect on coaching and the experiences that I've had, I want to be uncomfortable. Like, that's what I'm paying for, you know, and then if you reflect on like comfort zone, you know, comfort, stretch and panic, I don't want to be coached in my comfort zone, like that's all my space of okay, that's, you know that I've got that that's hands down. But in the stretch zone, you know, I want to be me personally, I want to be on the outer edges of my stretch zone, because that's where the growth happens. That's the discovery. That's the magic. And this is me personally, right? So if I'm uncomfortable about something that quite excites me in a strange way, because I'm like, Ah, there's something there. If it's comfortable. I don't know, there's nothing there for me. So if I'm contracting with a coach, or coaches working with me, you know, we would I would want to talk about this. You know, that's, that's the challenge that I would lay down. But that's not everybody's experience, and it depends on your resourcefulness. So I think where I would kind of begin this thinking for myself is around the contracting around actually, do we cover this, you know, in, in contracting, how about have me and my client had this conversation? Around what level of and I think we've talked about it in terms of level of support and challenge, but I do think it's useful to use the words how much discomfort can you tolerate in this coaching relationship right now, what is discomfort to you? Because if it were me, I'd be like our discomfort is exciting. But for another person, it might be discomfort, I don't like it. I definitely don't want to go to a place where I'm uncomfortable. And then that might be a challenge for you as the coach to say, Well, how do we do this work? How will I know when too much is is apparent or not enough? So I think that's a useful kind of exploration as well,

**Jo Wheatley** 05:01

I think the risk in coaching is that coaches can shy away from experiencing a dynamic of discomfort. So it may be that the client is uncomfortable with the topic that they're exploring or their emotional response to it or where they are in relation to their goal, they might also feel uncomfortable in the relationship with the coach. And that might be temporary, or it might be something that hasn't improved or something where it has deteriorated. So there's, there's a lot of complexity there and options of things to be able to explore, and we can't kind of visit all of those things in the podcast today, but I think there is a you know, there's an art as a coach to getting comfortable with, with discomfort in a coaching session. And that could be around the coaches own level of comfort with challenging their clients. And sometimes that will show up, the coach will say, I didn't want to upset them, or I don't want to upset them. And so as you were saying, so, uh, you know, how can you get comfortable? One of the ways is to contract for it, you know, how do you how do you want me to be if you feel uncomfortable at any point in our conversation, but there's also a follow up question, which is, how would I know? And how will you know, if you're uncomfortable? Is it possible for a client to grow? Without experiencing some sense of discomfort?

**Zoe Hawkins** 06:32

And what is discomfort? How do I know what discomfort looks like and feels like to a client? Because I think discomfort might be a collection of different emotions, you know, so, if I'm experiencing something is challenging, does that mean I'm experiencing discomfort? If I'm finding something hard? Does that mean it's discomfort, you know, I think it's worth understanding a little bit more around what uncomfortable means to your client or, or the experience that you're having together. And one way to do that, if you're noticing that coming up in a coaching relationship is to take like a pause and a timeout, which might be something along the lines of, I'm sensing a different energy from you today. Should we just take a moment to talk about that, you know, is this line of questioning Okay, for you, you know, what is it that you're experiencing that is, you know, shifting the energy here. And, and sometimes it might be about readiness, you know, the client might might say, you know, I know, this is something that I need to work on. But I'm not sure I'm ready for that right now. That might be what you're picking up on, which is great, because then you can re contract together and decide, okay, so where do we go next? You know, which part of this conversation remains useful for you. So I think that's, I think that's an important piece is to, to name it, bring it up, talk about it together. Often the ignoring of it is about the coaches discomfort. And not maybe maybe it's not having the words or the strategy or the skills to bring that out in the coaching relationship in a place that feels comfortable, or it might be the fear of what am I actually going to unearth here. I think sometimes what I see is that coaches go to self critique, where they notice that a client is becoming uncomfortable. They think that they aren't doing something well enough. And as you said, Jo, and supervision, that becomes about reassurance and but it's, it's often more complex than that, isn't it?

**Jo Wheatley** 08:35

Hear me in the example that he gave of the client saying, you know, I'm not sure that I'm ready to kind of go there. You can also, you know, one way is to re contract if you're sensing that, that is a no, this just really, this really isn't the right time for me? Or is to stay in the discomfort of that, shall we? Shall we talk about readiness? You know, there's a whole topic there around what's the client's belief around what evidence they would need in their mind in order to confirm to them that they are ready to take that next step. And, you know, perhaps one of the things that the client needs to embrace is getting comfortable with feeling uncomfortable, you know, in new situations, taking new action. And so what's the role and responsibility of the coach to model comfort with discomfort, you know, how may that impacts what the client is able to access or get comfortable with or tolerate? And I think toleration is, is something that's really important here, like, what can the relationship between the coach and the coachee tolerate in terms of discomfort in whilst it is healthy and useful for them? not tolerating, you know, like any unpleasantness or anything like that. But you know, we've been talking recently about when people come on training and when we ourselves have been on training with others, and, you know, the projection that can occur from, you know, when people are learning things on to those that are facilitating it, you know, so they may be uncomfortable with themselves frustrated with themselves. And that can get projected on to the trainer. But obviously, if you think about it in relationship with coaching client, the client can project some of that on to the coach. And so does the coach have a level of awareness of all of those elements and in terms of the relationship dynamics that can occur. And of course, when you're starting out as a coach, there's so much stuff that can feel uncomfortable, you know, like supporting people with things you've never supported them with before feeling as you were saying, so like, outside of your comfort zone. And we've talked a lot, I think, on the podcast around, you know, how do you ground yourself into the resources that you have,

**Zoe Hawkins** 10:57

I think it's important to look at the theme of your coaching as well, it wouldn't be pleasant to have every single coaching session to be in a place of that uncomfortable energy. It's about balance, like in all coaching, when you want to bring the laughter, you want to bring the joy, you want to bring the fun, you want to bring the serious, you want to bring the deep, you want to bring the uncomfortable, you know, like have a look at the the overall relationship that you're having. And I think that's what I'm hearing, when you talk about tolerate is like when you have a relationship, that is all of those things, and you are there in service of your client. And your client knows that and feels that, of course, you're likely to be able to tolerate that discomfort when you get to those moments of crunch. Or when the client is projecting into the space as you've described there. Of course you can because it's it's part of a journey. But if everything feels uncomfortable, to me, that would signal something's not something's not working there in the relationship, that's not gonna be fun for either of you. So then it's a case of being able to step back and look at what's happening here, you know, is what I'm doing. most useful for my client? Is my client, getting what they need? And working that out together

**Jo Wheatley** 12:11

And rapport's fundamental, isn't it? It's using your judgement as a coach as to, if you're noticing things, when might you bring it to your clients attention. So I, you know, sometimes when I'm coaching clients, I'll have a thought or an idea in my mind as to something that I think might be occurring, but I'll be checking, I'll kind of be checking it out in the sessions, I wouldn't necessarily bring it as the challenge as soon as I have a thought around that. And I'll be assessing a number of different things, our level of rapport, the goal that they want to work on, is it in service of the client? Is it more about me than the client? You know, really checking those these things out? And, you know, sometimes we're in coaching sessions with clients, if I have got that sense of this all feels very comfortable. And you and I have discussed before, haven't we like, sometimes I feel like, Am I still coaching? Like it's so easy? And we think well, what is that information? So I might say to the client, feels like we've got very comfortable in our coaching together? How are you experiencing? You know, the relationship together? And then I'm gonna say you, what have we what have we been avoiding? In the in in these conversations that we've been having like, that would be an example of where a coach might purposely introduce something that might impact the rapport or might be experienced as uncomfortable for the client in that moment. It's like, oh, we're shifting here. I was kind of having a nice time in these sessions. You know, what are we doing here? But if the coach is referring back to what did the client originally come to this for? Yes, they might be making great progress. But is there something else here that the client has either consciously come for or not, but but they might be avoiding?

**Zoe Hawkins** 13:55

I was asked yesterday, and we were facilitating one of the modules on our ILM programme, and it was a group session. And I was asked, How do I tolerate essentially and handle emotional disclosures? And we talked about this theme of the more self work you do. The almost the you experience your clients experience differently. So it's in the context of emotions, this was and there was lots of emotion in this session, you know, people sharing quite a lot of deep stuff. And I was able to hold the collective emotion whereas others were, you know, were kind of not not struggling with it, but noticing it was triggering their own emotions. And so I was asking, How do you do that? And I think there is this piece when we come to the topic of discomfort and acknowledging that it is really important to continue your CPD and to continue to grow and develop and expand your container both of skills incompetence but also of your own journey. We talk about that in the context of emotions and our emotions he practitioner programme that in the relationship you have with yourself. We've done the podcast on understanding self and self development. It's so fundamental to what we're talking about here in what is the coach's capacity for sitting in discomfort? And what is the capacity for challenging and creating discomfort in a healthy way, in the relationship that's

**Jo Wheatley** 15:32

very hard to do, if you aren't investing in yourself, because you need to continually grow and expand your capacity for it. And I think the more you do that, the less the less uncomfortable things are, because you recognise that discomfort is one of many emotions that you can sit with and support the client with thinking about an example that cage brought to me recently, which was they were having a reflection that they perhaps couldn't or shouldn't bring their normal level of empathy into a coaching, relationship or dynamic. And so what would that mean? And what would that look like moving forwards, and the context of that, it's when a client is experiencing strong emotions or emotional reaction to the new awareness that they're gaining or reflecting on the progress that they've made, and so on. And often, in those situations, a client will start by saying, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get upset, or I didn't want to get upset, or I didn't realise this was going to happen. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. And I think lots of coaches can, as we were talking about earlier, feel like oh, my goodness, I've gone too far. What have I done to create this situation? I wonder if they're going to blame me, you know, for this, what does this mean for our relationship and, and they almost then foster a discomfort. So if the coach responds in an uncomfortable way, and that may be verbally or non verbally, that is going to have an impact on what the client allows themself to do and experience within that session. And I often wonder to myself, when a client is if they're apologising in that situation, their natural tendency might be to say, no need to apologise. But I think another perspective on that, is that still an interruption to their experience? Because they are feeling the need or desire to apologise at that time? So it's almost like, let them complete that emotional experience. And then the need that they had to apologise and what does that indicate? And how is that important? And what can we learn from that, I think is a separate piece that that you might explore with your cagey. Whilst, whereas if you're able to sit in that and acknowledge it, and witness it, and sometimes it's the power in the witnessing, that is most uncomfortable, perhaps for a coach, but also can be the most powerful. So you don't We don't always have to respond in words.

**Zoe Hawkins** 18:06

Yeah. Yeah. And we don't have to notice all the discomfort. You know, I think that's important as well, like, sometimes you notice the clients uncomfortable, and then you talk about the discomfort and then the client gets more uncomfortable, because you've noticed their discomfort. It's a judgement game, isn't it coaching? You know, you've got to judge where are we at in the coaching room? In the coaching conversation? What sort of progress is the client making? Are they edging towards the outcome that they wanted? Is this a one time thing that's coming up? Or is it coming up in lots of different places? And then where they have noticing as well? Is it yours? Is it mine? No. So there are I think, what we're saying is there are no simple solutions, because solutions aren't always needed. And it isn't a case of right and wrong, because there's a big shade of grey. And I think one of the things that you get from coaching training, is the ability to fine tune your own compass, you know, and your own judgement as a coach, is what you get from supervision, you know, these these, these topics come to supervision for a reason. And it's because they are worthy of exploration, learning and growth.

**Jo Wheatley** 19:22

Yeah, if you think about like the impact of if a coach comes to supervision and says, I felt really uncomfortable and essentially in a session at a certain point or whole session, whatever, with a client recently, if their supervisor says, Great, how does the coach feel and how much that'd be helpful or unhelpful? If the coach that comes and shares it and the supervisor responds and says, Okay, so what was it about that that was uncomfortable for you? Do you notice as you're reflecting on those scenarios, that what impact might that have on where you go as a coach and you can think of probably hundreds other responses that a supervisor might have. And then if you think about it, in the context of the coach and the client, you know, when the client shares things, I think what we encourage you to do as the coach or in a coaching role is to develop your flexibility of responses. So that you're able to take into account all the different things that are involved in, in that dynamic or the interaction that you'll have having. So that you can draw on the one that you think might be most useful in that situation. Rather than being restricted by your own relationship to your emotions, if you like in terms of comfort and discomfort, how can you welcome in discomfort, you know, what, what would that look like? If you think about maybe a client that you have at the moment? What would that look like? How could that help or support the client? And are you able to tolerate that?

**Zoe Hawkins** 20:59

So hope you've enjoyed this discussion today and it's generated some reflective thoughts for you if you're looking to continue your CPD, you know by now you can join our emotions coaching practitioner programme, and if you haven't yet joined as a coach, come and check out our courses at IG company.co.uk. Thank you for listening to the coaching crowd podcast with Zoe Hawkins and Joe Wheatley. We'd love for you to join our inclusive community to learn and grow in the coaching space. Go over to Facebook and search for the coaching crowd to be in good company with other aspiring coaches.