Episode 84 final

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**SPEAKERS**

Zoe Hawkins, Jo Wheatley

**Zoe Hawkins** 00:03

The Coaching Crowd podcast is for compassionate courageous leaders, HR professionals and high achievers, 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** 00:21

Hello, everybody, and welcome to the coaching crowd podcast with me, Jo Wheatley, and my friend and co host, Zoe Hawkins.

**Zoe Hawkins** 00:28

Hi, everybody. Great to be here for another episode. And this week, we're talking about what does challenge look like in coaching? And this question arose from our island seven coaching qualifications when I was giving a learner some feedback around increasing the level of challenge that they bring into their coaching conversations. And this person asked me that sounds great. I'm just not sure what that looks like, or sounds like so we talked through some examples, go some more outline around it. And I thought, wow, that would be a great podcast episode. So here we are bringing that insight to you today. So, Jo, what does challenge look like in your coaching conversations?

**Jo Wheatley** 01:06

Oh, diving straight in there. I think it really depends on who the client is, and what they've come to the coaching, programme or conversation for. So as you probably all are used to saying by now, it starts with contracting and understanding your clients experience of their world. So when we talk about contracting part of that conversation is about permission. So how do we need to work together in order to be able to support you to achieve your goal, and you might have a discussion about the degree of support versus challenge, there may be some areas of a coaching conversation that the client is happy to be challenged on and really wants to be challenged on. There may be other things that they talked about where they wanted to be treated a little more gently than others, some clients will come and they will share maybe in their pre kitchen questionnaire or in the contracting conversation that you have, that they want you to be, you know, how clients say brutally honest, and I'm always like, really brutally. That's an interesting choice of words there. What will that do for you? What will that get for you? And I think there is also part of this, which is about how does the client challenge themselves? And how can you as the coach support them to challenge themselves in new ways.

**Zoe Hawkins** 02:27

And coming up another level, actually, in terms of why we challenge in coaching, and I see challenge as almost being the pair of eyes that your client doesn't have, you know, so we can only see our own behaviour, thoughts and actions, and all of that through our own view of the world through our own model of the world. And I think what you pay a coach for is the is the challenge is the ability to see what you can't see like your blind spots, or calling out patterns, perhaps of self sabotage, or just things that the client might be saying that don't seem to fit with the values that you've previously aligned to in, in a coaching conversation. So I think why we why we challenging coaching is for growth is to really help the client to accelerate the rate at which they can achieve their goals or the way that they are moving forward. And so I know that when I started coaching that that challenge took a while to build, it takes courage, I think to challenge your clients. And I think outside of a coaching conversation, I certainly remember in my corporate days, like when I had to give feedback, for example of people who were unsuccessful at interview, I used to hate those conversations, you know, providing clients with feedback on things that they could do even better, but it just felt so awkward. And I think many learners will bring that into the coaching space and bring it into that I can't deliver difficult feedback. Because you know, I might upset somebody, but if you bring it back up to why we challenge it's because your client, certainly if you're a commercial coach your clients paying you. That's what they want. You know, that's, that's what you are there to do. So I think it's just useful to hold that perspective, as we go into this conversation on what challenge looks like because you are challenging in service of your client, you aren't challenging for challenging sake, you aren't challenging just because, like it might be useful to your client, you're challenging your client on the aspects of what they are saying and what they are doing and how they are thinking in order to support them to achieve their outcome quicker, faster, in a more refined way. So that I think is really useful context.

**Jo Wheatley** 04:49

Yeah, and even in the chemistry conversations I have with coaching clients when I describe my style, I describe my style as warm and challenging. So what The importance of that really is, for me, the warmth, the warmth is about creating that safe space and creating the foundations for a relationship where the client can be authentic, you know, without that fear of judgement and feels able to talk openly and honestly, and really make full contact with their experiences in the moment and, and elsewhere. And that then creates the confidence in the client to engage in a relationship where I, as the coach, have permission to be able to challenge them, I'm not going to challenge them on every single thing that they say in the conversation, even if I don't think that everything they're saying is maybe aligned to their values, or what they said in the last session. So that's where energy management comes into play, I think, because if I was to, you know, interrupt the client, because I thought that what they'd said wasn't, you know, aligned. And then I kept doing that, probably, that's going to interfere with the relationship that we have the flow of the conversation. And so the judgments that we're making as coaches in moment by moment is maybe we wait until we've heard something a few times until we share something as a pattern, which could be experienced by the client as a challenge. Sometimes I might say to a client, are you ready for some challenge? Or are you ready for some more challenge or next level of challenge? Or can I share a challenge with you? So there are little ways that we can ask for permission, obviously, as we go through conversations, and then what comes up from that is, if you're listening to this, and you are a coach, what's your reg around challenge? What are your beliefs about yourself and challenging? And we were talking before, they weren't me about how, if you're somebody that isn't comfortable with being challenged on certain things yourself? Will that impact the way that you might challenge your clients? Yeah,

**Zoe Hawkins** 07:02

absolutely. And I think it's a great thing to be building your self awareness around those topics, which feel sensitive to you, because you are likely to steer clear of them, when you start working with clients. And I guess that moves into, you know, related to challenges your ability to reflect, both in action and on action. So your reflective practice skills, because what you you challenge on the things that you see, and so you need to be able to see it, to challenge it. And the deeper your reflective practice skills, the more refined you are at being able to spot patterns, Spot themes, listen out for language, particularly language, I think that's used by clients, seeing inconsistencies between what a client might be saying how they're feeling, what they're doing. Like, those are the things that you're going to be sharing with your client is observations that can be challenged. And if you can't see that, then obviously, you're not going to be able to share it in the first place. So I think before we get to, what do you challenge on in coaching, you really need to develop those reflective practice skills, because that's really going to support you and be able to see things in your client. So if we give some examples around the sorts of things that I might challenge yours, if I've had a client say in their first session, that balance is really important to them, you know, and we have a whole conversation around their value of balance. And then in Session Four, let's say for example, they're sharing with me that they are making decisions to stay back late, and work overtime, and then they're grumbling a little bit about, you know, that that not being helpful to them, then a level of challenge is to say, well, it's really interesting. In Session One, you shared with me how important balance was to you. But here you are telling me how you're making a decision to stay late. And you're upset that that's not feeling good. Like, tell me more about that. You know, like those things may not be easy to hear, but they are examples of how you hold the mirror up to your client. And you are basically saying, This is what you're telling me? Let's review that together. Like what does that mean to you? And it doesn't, you're not doing that with judgement, you're not doing that to shame your client. You're doing that to help them to connect the different parts of their their story and their experience to take another look at it to see what what else is in the way.

**Jo Wheatley** 09:24

So when it comes to feedback at the end of the session, you can or even partway through the session, you can ask the client, what's the most challenging thing that I could ask you right now? Or what was the most challenging question I asked you today? How are we doing together in terms of the balance of support and challenge in in the sessions that we're having? When it comes to you know, what can you challenge on and when you might start in the beginning when you're doing the alignment or the refining of the client's goal for the coaching programme. So when we think about comfort, stretch and panics Owens, ideally, the client's goal is going to be somewhere in their stretch zone. Because if it was comfortable and easy, they would have already done it. And they probably don't need your support as a coach, if it's something that's stretchy for them, which means that they've really got to think about it, maybe there's they've got a gap in terms of their knowledge or their beliefs or their capability or perceived capability at the moment. That may be why they want support from a coach during that, that period of time. So you can check out with your client, you know, How challenging is that goal for you, you know, if you were to plot it, and how does that feel for them? And what if they were to stretch it out there or move it? What other examples are coming up for you. So

**Zoe Hawkins** 10:40

I think challenge can also be empowering. So as much as you may challenge on where there may be gaps and inconsistencies, you might also challenge around strengths and talents. So for example, if a client comes and they're walking through their actions with you, and they say, when I've done this, and I've done that, and I had this conversation that I've been putting off for some time, you might say it sounds to me like you're you're using some courage there. Or you might say it sounds to me that actually you're applying you're learning really well from this, like that's positive challenge to get your client to think oh, yeah, do you know what actually I hadn't? I hadn't made that connection. So I think that's really important to bring. And of course, reframing is a level of challenge as well, isn't it? You know, so if you hear your client using sweeping generalisations, I can only think of stuff from my daughter at the moment where everyone is mean, and everything is unkind. But if we translate into the work environment, you're gonna have things come up around, I always use the working late, I'm always the one who's working late, I'm always the one who's doing the tidying up in the office, like whatever it might be less than out for those, because those are really important to challenge because when you hear a generalisation, your client has a fixed position. And so you can simply come back and say what always or every time, like, tell me more about that? Well, not every time but a lot of the time, okay. And then you've got a window in which you can do some level of work. So I think your skills to be able to pick up on your client's language in the moment are really important for being able to be challenging as a practitioner and a coach.

**Jo Wheatley** 12:25

Yeah, and I think you can bring lightness into the challenge as well. So it's also about how do you challenge so how do you use your voice as a coach in terms of matching with the challenge. So as you gave the example there, you know, if you're smiling, as you're saying it or, or you're almost like using your body in a way to show that you're sort of edging in a slightly different direction here, or you pause a little bit in between what you're saying, so the client has the opportunity to say, Oh, what are you going to ask me next, and they can share with you if they've got an anxiety about that. So lots of subtle things that you can do as a coach, and you might also, with the client be observing inconsistencies between the things that they're saying, and their body language or the intonation of their voice. And so you might challenge around that, or, and that might be in the form of offering an observation or just saying, can I just check, I hear you saying this, but I'm noticing that, what does that mean for you? Or have you noticed that? And of course, you do that in a non attached way. So the client can say, oh, no, I'm just, you know, I'm just tired. It's the end of the day. So I'm not filtering anything? Or, oh, do I really do that? I wonder if that's because, and then, you know, they're starting to, you know, make sense of it or reflect for themselves on that in the moment.

**Zoe Hawkins** 13:42

And I think personally, I probably use humour, a fair amount in coaching, as you've sort of described there, like, I remember some times recently, where I've laid some pretty edgy challenge down to my clients and hand it back to them and say, What do you think of that? And they, they've come back with? I don't think I like it. And I'm like, No, I bet you do. And we have a little laugh. And then we sort of deconstruct it, talk about it, talk about the bits that they don't like talk about the bits that they can see and are accessible. So it's really about when you challenge being a partner with your client, letting them know that you're on their side, and that you're challenging them, because you their goals and their growth. And their journey is important to both of you. And I think when it comes from that place, challenges often welcomed, it's the piece that makes the coaching special.

**Jo Wheatley** 14:34

Yeah. And you know, we can challenge our clients as a way to break them out of what we call looping. So looping for us is when a client is so caught up in their story that even when you ask them a question, they kind of lead back into telling you the story. It's very descriptive. Nothing new is maybe being shared by the client. And so I often share the example of a client that I worked with over a long period of time, so We had very high level of rapport. And I'd been reflecting that the client was heads would start looping around a particular thing. And so I use both my body language by leaning back, which was intended to show that there was going to be something different coming next I leaned back, and then that invited the client. And notice that what she did, of course, and he smiled, and he said, What, Joe? And then I just sort of took a moment I said, I've heard you talk about this, in the last three sessions, what are you going to do about it? And then he laughed, and almost kind of like was like, like, you know, it's a senior in exec, very senior person in an organisation probably not used to being challenged, because of the level of seniority that they were at. And that's something to bear in mind as well, in terms of the dynamics between coaching clients. And he really welcomed to the challenge for him, it was very refreshing. And he enjoyed that. And he enjoyed the, I suppose in a way, there's that accountability role that was playing in that particular place, but really just drawing it to his attention. And then obviously, then we then debriefed on that. And we, we kind of went another level down into how, how would this pattern arisen, what were they going to do about it, so you can challenge your client around their commitment to the goal that they've said that they want to achieve? And that might bring a new awareness for them that maybe that goal isn't really the goal they want to be working on, but perhaps they didn't feel that they could or that another goal was really appropriate for it. Or maybe they've got a new level of self awareness, which has meant that they have discovered that actually, they need to deal with something else before they can achieve the original goal that they thought that they would be working on in in the coaching relationship. And with that, sometimes it's about bringing challenge around their commitment to the coaching itself, you know, and that may be from the coach's perspective, the most challenging challenge of all, to be able to bring to the table.

**Zoe Hawkins** 17:09

Yeah, yeah. So I think today, we've given you a flavour of lots of different ways that you can challenge and where challenge is really important for the coaching. If you have enjoyed this podcast, we would love for you to rate and subscribe to the podcast. If you're listening on Apple, you can leave us a review. If you're listening elsewhere, please subscribe if you can, it really helps us to hear your feedback and to hear what you think about the podcast so please go and do that for us. And if you're inspired by this level of challenge our emotions coaching practitioner programme is a great way to challenge clients through the lens of emotions. So come and explore that on our website at IG company dot code at UK forward slash emotions coaching.

**Zoe Hawkins** 18:00

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