

# choice

the magazine of professional coaching



## UN- speakables:

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we avoid that impact  
coaching outcomes*

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What topics influence your attitudes and frame of reference around partnering as coach – even those that are invisible during interactions? What subjects do you avoid talking about with clients? What’s unspeakable for clients, so you avoid bringing it up? What topics do you believe cannot be raised in coaching? What happens when the coaching conversation gets too uncomfortable for you or the client? How do you handle the unspeakables (e.g., religion, politics, sex, money, etc.)? Join us as we delve into this uncomfortable but necessary topic.

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# TRICKY TERRITORY

*Navigating uncomfortable coaching conversations*

By Diane Bruno, CLC



**C**oaching is a transformative process that encourages personal growth, self-awareness and positive change. Our primary role is to guide our clients towards their goals, helping them uncover their potential, and develop strategies to overcome obstacles.

However, there are times when coaching conversations venture into uncomfortable territory. This can happen due to sensitive topics, deep-rooted issues or emotional barriers. When the coaching conversation becomes uncomfortable for either the client or the coach, it's a critical moment in the coaching relationship.

Let's explore what happens when the coaching conversation grows too uncomfortable, and how to navigate these challenging moments.

## UNDERSTANDING THE UNCOMFORTABLE

Uncomfortable coaching conversations are common. They can arise for several reasons, and it's essential to recognize the signs. Here's a look at why these moments happen.

**Exploring Deep Issues:** Coaching often delves into sensitive personal matters, which can trigger strong emotions. Clients may confront painful memories, unresolved traumas or hidden fears. When they do, the coaching conversation can become uncomfortable.

**Resistance to Change:** Clients sometimes resist change, even if they initially seek it. They may even fear leaving their comfort

**Fear of Vulnerability:** Opening up to a coach can make clients feel vulnerable. Sharing personal struggles and insecurities may not come naturally to them, making the coaching conversation uncomfortable.

**Trust Issues:** Trust is fundamental in a coaching relationship. If trust is broken or underdeveloped, clients may hesitate to share deeply personal issues, which can impact the process and lead to discomfort. Now, let's explore what happens when the coaching conversation becomes uncomfortable for both the client and the coach.

## WHEN THE CLIENT IS UNCOMFORTABLE

**Resistance and Pushback:** When a client becomes uncomfortable, they may resist discussing certain topics or push back against the coach's suggestions. This can manifest as defensiveness or frustration. As a coach, it's crucial to acknowledge

**Emotional Outbursts:** Intense emotions may surface during an uncomfortable coaching session. Clients might cry, express anger or become overwhelmed. In these moments, a coach should provide emotional support, validate the client's feelings, and encourage them to process their emotions.

As a former funeral director, I have developed my own technique when dealing with dramatic situations. It is important for coaches to hone an individual approach they can store in their wheelhouse for such times when emotional outbursts take center stage.

**Withdrawal:** Clients may withdraw when a coaching conversation becomes uncomfortable. They might become silent, evade questions or shut down. Coaches need to be patient and create an environment where the client feels safe enough to re-engage.

**Self-doubt:** Clients may experience self-doubt and question their ability to make progress. As a coach, we must remind them of their strengths and the progress they've already made. Encourage them to recognize discomfort as a natural part of growth and progress.

**Increased Stress:** Uncomfortable conversations can induce stress and anxiety. If a client's stress level rises significantly, it's essential to address it by offering stress-reduction techniques or suggesting that they seek additional support from a therapist or counselor if appropriate.

## WHEN THE COACH IS UNCOMFORTABLE

As coaches, we may also experience discomfort during coaching sessions. It's crucial to address our discomfort effectively to maintain the coaching relationship's integrity and help your client.

**Self-Reflection:** When you, as a coach, feel uncomfortable, take a moment for self-reflection. Ask yourself why you're feeling this way. Is it because the client is touching upon a sensitive topic for you, or is it linked to the client's emotions?

Clients may confront painful memories, unresolved traumas or hidden fears. When they do, the coaching conversation can become uncomfortable.

zones or letting go of self-limiting beliefs. Such resistance can make the coaching process uncomfortable.

**Challenging Beliefs:** As coaches, we often challenge our clients' beliefs and assumptions, encouraging them to adopt more constructive perspectives. This can be unsettling for clients, as it challenges their established views. They may view it as an attack and become defensive.

the client's discomfort and create a safe and non-judgmental space for them to express their feelings.

**Loss of Focus:** Uncomfortable conversations can cause clients to lose focus on their goals and become preoccupied with their discomfort. This can derail the coaching process. In such cases, coaches must gently guide the client back to their objectives and help them understand the value of addressing uncomfortable issues.

Understanding the source of your discomfort is the first step in managing and overcoming it.

**Manage Triggers:** Coaches, like anyone else, can have personal triggers or biases that can influence their reactions. It's essential to be aware of these triggers and actively work to manage them, in order to maintain a professional coaching relationship.

**Seek Supervision:** Coaches often have their own personal coaches or supervisors who can provide guidance and support. If you find a coaching conversation too uncomfortable to manage, consulting with a trusted colleague or licensed therapist is also a valuable resource.

I often consult with my therapist regarding my clients – confidentially, of course – for her guidance and red-flag evaluation.

Coaches need to maintain professional boundaries at all times. If a client's issues evoke strong personal emotions or discomfort, it may be necessary to refer the client to a colleague better suited to helping them.

**Practice Self-Care:** Self-care is essential for coaches. Engage in practices that help you manage your discomfort and stress, such as meditation, therapy, or regular exercise.

## NAVIGATING UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS

Navigating uncomfortable conversations is a fundamental skill for coaches. Here are strategies to help both clients and coaches effectively navigate these challenging moments:

### FOR CLIENTS:

- **Acknowledgment:** Encourage clients to acknowledge their discomfort. This awareness is the first step in addressing it.
- **Breathing & Grounding:** Teach clients deep breathing and grounding techniques to help them stay present in the moment and manage their emotional responses.

- **Create a Safe Space:** Ensure that your coaching environment is safe and non-judgmental. Clients should feel that they can express themselves without fear of criticism.
- **Emotional Processing:** Guide clients through the process of recognizing and processing their emotions. This can help them move past discomfort and continue their growth journey.
- **Goal Realignment:** If necessary, work with the client to adjust their goals to make them more manageable and less intimidating.


### FOR COACHES:


- **Active Listening:** Practice active listening to better understand your client's discomfort. Ask open-ended questions and reflect on what you've heard to clarify and validate their feelings.
- **Empathy:** Show empathy and understanding toward your client's experience. Let them know that discomfort is a natural part of growth and change.

- **Professional Boundaries:** Maintain professional boundaries to protect both yourself and your client. If necessary, refer your client to another professional who can provide specialized support.
- **Self-Reflection:** Continually assess and address your discomfort. Understand your triggers and biases and manage them.

Uncomfortable conversations are an integral part of the coaching process. They signal moments of potential growth and transformation for clients. Coaches need to recognize these moments, acknowledge the discomfort, and create a safe space for clients to navigate through their emotions. Similarly, coaches must address their own discomfort and seek support and self-care to maintain their effectiveness and professionalism.

By navigating uncomfortable conversations with care and empathy, both clients and coaches can continue on the path to personal growth and self-improvement. ●





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