

Interview

Charles Jones has been in RightCoutts' consultancy business for a number of years, and has recently been appointed Head of Coaching. We spoke to him in more detail about what makes a good coach in his business.

What qualities would you expect/look for in a coach who you would consider using in your organisation?

I'd be looking for qualities in four main areas: coaching experience or training and experience in business; I'm also interested in people who've travelled their own journey (which will be linked with training if they go the psychotherapeutic route), and something around gravitas - the X factor, that's a bit more difficult to explain

*Charles Jones,
Head of Coaching, RightCoutts.*

How would you gauge someone's experience and training?

At the moment I'm not bothered about looking at courses and saying these 10 are ok and the other 90 are no good. I'm more interested in saying "OK you've done some training, tell me about where you studied, what you did and the approach you took." I need people as a minimum to have done some kind of training because it's about making sure you've got the skillsets as well as showing a commitment and making a serious investment in your time and development.

So it doesn't really matter what kind of training you do?

I am concerned about courses that don't include any kind of one-to-one supervision of the work the students are doing. This immediately sends an alarm bell to me about how well they're being trained and how used to exploring the issues that are happening in a client relationship. In these cases I'd want to make sure the coach was comfortable with supervision.

I also think you need to have done something like 6 months training. I don't like the idea of 1 month or 2 week type programmes, unless that's off the back of someone who's done lots and lots of real coaching. At the same time I don't think you can do the training at all unless you have done the work.

So there's nothing specific that amounts to a sufficient training, it's about looking at a broad picture of people's development. And the important experience of being supervised in particular, could that equally come out of either training or practical experience?

Yes, there are some fundamental issues in being a good coach that you need to be aware of such as transference. How you come to be familiar with the concept of transference and being able to work with it can be many fold: hopefully if you're doing the right kind of coaching training that concept will be raised; other people will have done it through previous training; some people will have got it through working in the field and talking

to lots of people about it. And I'd like to know that people not only know about, but have actually worked it through. How have they used it positively, how has it informed the work they've done? So this comes onto the point about people having travelled their own journey. I think you need to be pretty self-aware so you can deal with your own issues. That doesn't come from a piece of paper or a certificate, does it?

It seems like you're talking as much about orientation here as capability.

Yes it's attitudinal, it's a state of mind: looking at individuals, looking at yourself and therefore looking at the work you do as a coach, rather than a tick in the box and a piece of paper. I guess we are fundamentally coming from a type of psychotherapeutic perspective. Our executive coaching business started very much from that model and going back 10 years our executive coaches had all been psychiatrists or psychotherapists. We were very very purist about that - it was the only way you could do the work. We've moved a long way off that position but at the heart and core of our values is that to be able to effect fundamental change through coaching you need to understand a lot of these concepts. We're not now saying you need to be UKCP registered with a masters, we're seeing that there are lots of different routes to getting there. Some people make a big step through their own life experiences - bereavement or loss may have led people to reflect, maybe they've read around the area or been through some therapy or had a coach themselves - there's a whole range of different ways you can get there. And then there's something you can see in somebody that tells you they're looking at it from that perspective.

So do you just trust that the operational skills fall out of that attitude, or are you saying that the skills are a minimum and the thing that makes the difference is the attitude?

I think it's both. You have a list of core coaching capabilities on the AC website, and I guess I'm linking in the attitudinal factors. I guess that's also part of the "X factor". So skills are not taken as a given, I'd like to think that if people have done a certain type of course that I can be reasonably comfortable, or perhaps people come with a personal recommendation, or I know about what they've done through the network. Then on top of that you've got the business experience, they've got to be able to communicate in a language which is appropriate to the context in which the coaching is happening, they've got to be able to understand the issues which the individual's going to bring, they've got to know how things like politics and practicalities work because they can be pragmatic and they don't become precious about the coaching intervention.

Precious in terms of the nature of their relationship with the client?

Yes, they're not too purist about cancelling some sessions, or about occasionally making a more directive intervention because they can see where this individual's at in this environment, and occasionally they do need to suggest some solutions. I think that's one of the arts of coaching - knowing how to tread that line. Because this is coaching, it isn't counselling. You've got business pressures you need to deal with.

So looking at qualifications, it seems that a qualification is a door you can open and investigate, rather than a guarantee. Do you foresee a time when that will change, when you'll be able to take a given qualification as some kind of guarantee?

I can't see that happening because I don't think it really works that way, although as things develop I can see there being a top ten list of places which provide qualifications you can be more comfortable with as a starting point.

You've also talked about being able to operate in a business environment. Can you expand on that?

I mean it both in terms of the language you use, and in terms of understanding the words that are used by the person you're talking to. So, yes, you're going to have to clarify occasionally, but you're not always asking for explanations and the dialogue works comfortably. I think there's a real challenge for people who haven't worked in a business environment or who have worked in one specific business environment. Say someone's only worked in the public sector and they start coaching in the private sector, they'll find they're slightly out of tune with the words and language and the way people operate.

So it's about being able to talk the language. How exactly does that enhance the coaching relationship?

First of all, if you're so far off, it's just not going to work. It's about making the person feel understood without them having to go into huge detail. You can get into the work quicker and it's about establishing credibility.

But we can all think of people who can hold real sway in business who use the language of psychology, counselling or coaching a great deal.

Yes, that's true and in those cases it's about being able to switch from one to the other when you need to. And I can also think of other examples of people who are slightly offbeat in terms of appearance or whatever who can adapt successfully to the corporate environment, so there is scope to be slightly off the norm as long as you can show that you can connect with it, that you do understand it and that you can operate within it.

From what we've discussed so far, it's very clear that you could come from a number of different backgrounds and still make the meaningful connection you need to as a coach. But I know that you use people with very senior business experience, what's the attraction of using these people?

There's a lot of face validity here. Some clients specifically want a coach that has operated at a board level, because they feel they need to understand the pressures of the responsibilities at that level. Now you and I know that the work the coach will do with that individual will probably be 5% that kind of thing and 95% personal stuff. But the client is very clearly saying "that's what I want". Your ultimate dream coach is probably someone who has been a board member but has also done all the other stuff. They've done some coaching, some training, they've been on their own journey etc. What extra does it bring to the party? 60% of it is face validity, but 40% is that you can understand the pressures because you've actually sat in that seat. You know what it's like to have a shareholder demanding cost reduction, and you know some of the operational things that have to be done and therefore the enormity of the task. And not only that, but you can also make constructive suggestions occasionally. A good pragmatic coach will float some ideas as well, they won't just be purely person-centred and just reflect back and listen. They'll say, "Have you thought about this or that ...". So they can switch between listening and sharing experience.

So does an HR director make a better coach than a psychotherapist?

Not necessarily in terms of ability to effect fundamental change, but to be able to get into a position to do that .. it's about the ability of the psychotherapist to get see the client's issues and make the client feel that they're seeing the issues. You can come at it from either perspective: if you're a really good psychotherapist you'll need to be able to do the business stuff; if you're a really good HR director or Marketing director, you'll need to understand the psychotherapy stuff. And of course, you might have got the business experience from a consultancy position, it's just having spent enough time around people to understand their issues. I don't mind where you start from as long as you've got both.

Charles, thank you very much.

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