My aim in writing this book is to help you learn how to coach or, if you already coach, to do so more effectively.

Coaching is a practical activity. If you want to coach well you will need to practise. It is rather like learning how to drive a car. You need to know some basics, such as how the accelerator, brake and clutch work. When you try this out, it feels a bit awkward and you initially have to think hard about what you’re doing. But with practice you become more fluent and drive the car without apparently thinking much about which gear to be in, for example.

I myself can drive a car – but not as well as a champion racing driver such as Michael Schumacher. One of the joys of learning to coach is that it’s a journey that doesn’t end – you can always learn how to coach more effectively or develop the ways in which you interact with your clients.

I encourage you, therefore, to find opportunities to try out in practice the various ideas set out in the book. This opening chapter describes two very useful activities for doing this – working with one or two colleagues to coach each other and working with a practice client. It also sets out a cycle of learning from experience that provides a framework for learning how to master a practical skill – such as coaching.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

In the words of Kurt Lewin, ‘There is nothing more practical than a good theory.’ Here is a brief summary of a theory of learning from experience which underpins my own approach to helping people learn how to coach.
Deep and sustained learning – becoming able to do something you couldn’t do before – only comes through experience. Experience on its own isn’t enough, however. You need to reflect upon and make sense of your experience to create knowledge, and this knowledge deepens when you apply it in practice. The process can be viewed as a learning cycle:

![Learning Cycle Diagram]

The learning cycle above is my rewording in simpler language of the learning cycle set out by David Kolb. He offers this definition:

Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. (Kolb, 1984)

To see if this notion of learning from experience makes sense to you, you might try Exercise 1.1.

**EXERCISE 1.1 THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE**

Think of something that you can do well, a skill that you have developed over time. Consider the various ways in which over the years you built up this skill. See if you can identify two or three activities in each of the four points of the experiential learning cycle that helped you develop this ability.

In the chapters which follow you will find exercises inviting you to reflect upon experience, to consider how you might use an idea, or to try something out in practice and see what happens. I hope that, as you create your own understanding of what works for you and your clients, you’ll modify the ideas set out in the book and assimilate your own version of them into your practice.
COACHING PAIRS OR TRIOS

Here is an exercise that is widely used on coaching skills programmes. It’s a great way of practising and improving your coaching skills. I use it extensively on the Certificate and Diploma in Coaching which I run at the University of Warwick.

To do the exercise you’ll need one or two other people who also want to develop their coaching skills. It can help too to work with different partners, which might be easy to arrange if you are on a formal coaching skills programme.

It is important that each of you has a real issue that you are willing to be coached on – the exercise is far less useful if you merely role play imaginary situations. A real issue is one:

• which matters to you;
• which is current – rather than a problem you had some years ago or might hypothetically face in the future;
• where you are central to the issue – it’s not a problem that a friend has;
• where you are not sure how to proceed – if you know what you’re going to do, the exercise doesn’t work;
• which isn’t something that’s bothered you for years and years – that would be too difficult.

I’ll describe the exercise on the assumption that there are three of you working in a trio. Each person has the opportunity to coach, to be coached and to observe a coaching session. If you are working with just one other person in a coaching pair, then there is no observer in the exercise.

## EXERCISE 1.2 COACHING TRIOS

### Step one: 30 minutes

Agree who will be coach, client and observer first time round. The coaching session will last for 20 minutes. This will be followed by a 10-minute feedback session.

The observer acts as time keeper. Please limit the coaching session to 20 minutes – the objective is to practise and learn about coaching, not to complete the session.

Before the session starts it is useful for the observer to ask the coach about what areas of their practice they want feedback on. The coach might also indicate if they’d like a time signal from the observer – for instance, five minutes to go.

(Continued)
The coach then manages a 20-minute coaching conversation with the client on a topic chosen by the client. The observer is silent during this (apart possibly from a time signal).

The observer then facilitates a 10-minute feedback session, including feedback on the areas requested at the outset by the coach. Note that the client will have valuable information from their experience of being coached. If you are working in a pair, then you will need jointly to review the session without the help of a third party.

In the feedback session, avoid revisiting the content of the conversation, tempting though this may be. Rather, focus on the coaching process and on what the coach did well or less well, or on what they did that was helpful and what was less helpful. It’s valuable to look at both positive and negative aspects.

**Step two:** 30 minutes

Swap roles so that everyone now takes on a different role. This will ensure that each of you has the chance to be the coach, the client and the observer.

Repeat step one.

**Step three:** 30 minutes

Swap roles again.

Repeat step one. This step isn’t applicable when there are only two of you.

The coaching trios exercise provides an opportunity to learn at all four points of the learning cycle:

- to engage in the experience of coaching or being coached;
- to reflect upon your experience, or to observe how someone else coaches;
- to make sense of your experience and to refine your own views and theories of how to coach well;
- to try out your ideas or to experiment with some of the concepts you are reading about.

The trios exercise is akin to having a driving lesson. And, just as you wouldn’t expect to be able to drive after just one or two lessons, you can repeat the exercise a number of times to develop your capability and confidence.

In the chapters which make up the rest of Part One we’ll cover the basics of coaching and explore the three key skills you need to manage a coaching conversation. You may wish to wait
until you’ve read these before trying out the skills in a coaching pair or trio. Or, you might wish simply to dive in at the deep end and then review your experience in the light of the ideas introduced in these chapters.

**HELPING A CLIENT TO LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE**

One of the main benefits many clients gain from coaching is that they learn things. They may, for example, learn how to:

- acquire a skill;
- develop a new behaviour;
- modify an unhelpful habit;
- change how they think about an issue;
- perform more effectively.

Through the conversations that a client has with you and through the actions they take outside the coaching room, they learn. As we go through the book you might like to consider how different ideas relate to helping a client to move around the experiential learning cycle. Table 1.1 offers some illustrations of how a client might visit each of the four points, either within a coaching conversation or outside the coaching room. As an exercise, you might like to add some more examples.

**Table 1.1  Coaching and the four points of the learning cycle**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Within a coaching conversation</th>
<th>Outside the coaching room</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>The client may think about what’s emerged for them in a coaching conversation long after the session has ended.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making sense of</td>
<td>Sitting in a meeting, the client has an ah-ha moment where they suddenly realise what’s going on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing differently</td>
<td>The client experiments with a new approach or tries out a new behaviour back at work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>The client’s day to day life between coaching sessions is providing them with fresh experiences and challenges every day.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PRACTICE CLIENTS**

The other activity that I encourage you to do to accompany your reading of this book is to work with one or more practice clients. A practice client is simply someone who is willing to be coached by you over a number of sessions – say, between four and eight meetings. The
benefit for them is that they receive free coaching to work through some of the real issues they face in their work or day to day life. The benefit for you is that you have a valuable learning opportunity to develop your skills and approach.

On the Certificate in Coaching at Warwick participants work with a practice client in terms two and three – that is, after they’ve first explored the basics and taken part in a few coaching trios with other participants. Similarly, I recommend that you don’t start work with a practice client until you’re familiar with the material explored in Part One of the book.

If you do work with a practice client then you are likely to encounter some of the practical and ethical issues that we look at in Part Two. You will need to discuss with your practice client questions of where to meet, how often and for how long, and maybe you’ll learn from first hand experience that half an hour in a busy coffee shop at lunchtime isn’t ideal for coaching. You will also have the opportunity to work through issues such as contracting, reviewing progress and ending the relationship. You’ll need to think about whether or not you will take notes during a session, what if anything you’ll write up afterwards and what you’ll do to prepare for the next session. And you may have to think hard about issues of confidentiality and about whether you are working within appropriate boundaries. Wrestling with these kinds of questions as you encounter them with a practice client will help you to develop your approach to coaching and to clarify for yourself some of the practical and ethical questions involved.

To underline the importance of finding opportunities to try out and refine your coaching skills in practice, I’ll close this chapter with a quote from an American coach, Tim Gallwey, whose ideas on coaching we’ll look at in more detail later in the book:

Coaching is an art that must be learned mostly from experience. (Gallwey, 2000)