

The Coaching Mindset



8 WAYS TO THINK
LIKE A COACH

By Chad Hall, MCC

The New Zealand Coaching and
Mentoring Centre Edition

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Originally published as an eBook on the Kindle format, this PDF version of The Coaching Mindset: 8 Ways to Think Like a Coach is made available through The New Zealand Coaching and Mentoring Centre as a resource for persons who have completed the Centre's coach training.

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Table of Contents

[What Good Coaches Get Wrong](#)

[ONE: Take a Dumb Pill](#)

[TWO: Go to the Movies](#)

[THREE: Embrace the Primitive](#)

[FOUR: Follow the First Rule of Improv](#)

[FIVE: Get Curious](#)

[SIX: Ask for Directions](#)

[SEVEN: Avoid the Dark Side of Empathy](#)

[EIGHT: Think Like a Kid with a Crayon](#)

[Before You Go](#)

What Good Coaches Get Wrong

Coaching is a fast-growing profession as well as a proven way to boost your ability to lead, manage, and even parent. More people are turning to coaches because coaching works. Or at least it works in proportion to the coach's ability and the client's willingness to work hard and grow.

I learned about coaching in 1999 when I became a staff member of a large denomination. My job was to help churches and leaders be more effective. The problem was that my approach was all wrong: I told people what to do and watched as they didn't do it. Such is the life of a consultant.

When I stumbled upon coaching, I quickly realized this was a different and far more effective way of helping. Rather than tell people what to do, I helped people tell themselves what to do. Rather than deliver my expertise, I drew forth their expertise. Rather than stand by and watch as they did nothing with the plans and goals I gave them, I stood amazed at the progress they made toward their own goals.

Whether you want to start a coaching practice, add coaching to your consulting or counseling practice, or use a coaching approach in your current role, you will add a tremendous amount of value to those you coach. But the value you add will only come in proportion to your ability to coach. Not all coaches are great coaches. Some are not very effective at all, while others are simply amazing.

My bet is that you want to be a great coach. That's a wonderful goal, and one that pretty much anyone who's willing to learn, grow, adapt, and stick with it can achieve.

I've been coaching for over fifteen years now and have even been recognized as a "Master Certified Coach" by the International Coaching Federation. That makes me one of about 700 MCCs in the world. But I didn't start out as a master coach; I started out as a

terrible coach. I did a lot of things wrong and I was a bit hardheaded in thinking that whatever I did was right and however I coached was what “real coaching” must be.

My journey toward being a masterful coach took me through a lot of changes and required a lot of growth. The most significant aspect of my growth was my transformation from doing coaching at the skill level to being a coach at the deeper level of how I think.

As you make progress toward your goal of being a coach, let me offer some advice: doing coaching is one thing (a good thing), but the high leverage shift is not in your doing – it’s in your thinking. You might even say it’s in your being.

Too many times I’ve seen new (and even seasoned) coaches get in the way, do it wrong, and just make a mess of the coaching relationship. More times than not they do it wrong because they think wrong. When I give these coaches feedback, they most often want to know what to do differently:

- what questions to ask
- how best to interrupt
- when to offer an insight
- how to create space for the other person to think
- what to say in response to a client who’s stuck

Those are all good things (when the time is right), but those are techniques. The right techniques in the wrong hands will produce the wrong results. As a new coach what you need most is not simply a change of techniques, it’s to change the way you think. When you think like a coach, the techniques just click, the conversation flows smoothly, and you bring tremendous value to those you coach. Thinking like a coach requires not just a change in what you do, but also a change in who you are. When that deep-level change occurs, the proper techniques and skills come naturally and fluidly.

My transformation to become a masterful coach hinged on a huge change in my thinking. In this book my hope is to help you experience a similar change. This short e-book is designed to help you

understand the coaching mindset, to notice your mindset, and to actually inhabit a coaching mindset so that it becomes a part of who you are, not just something you can do. I'm going to share 7 ways the coach's brain works and help you get your brain working in that same way. Let's get started.



ONE: Take a Dumb Pill

Since you were in kindergarten you've been rewarded for being smart (or at least fooling teachers into thinking you were smart). An unwritten but pervasive rule in life is that smart is better than dumb, and that's often the case. But in coaching, being too smart can be really dumb. Let me explain.

When you think the highest value you bring to your coaching client is your intellect, your brilliance, your awesome problem-solving abilities, your creativity, or your whatever, you get in the way. That's because coaching is about bringing out the intellect, brilliance, awesome problem-solving ability and creativity of your client. Coaching is a chance for the client to shine, not for you to shine.

This is why I often advise new coaches to take a dumb pill. Stop trying to be so smart. Stop trying to solve the client's challenge. Stop trying to figure it all out. Stop trying to connect the client's challenge to your own experience or a book you read or a class you took or an insight you're having. But the truth is that it's hard to stop those seemingly smart activities.

A real problem for us as coaches is that the human brain is an incredible pattern-matching machine. When we see something new, we try to connect it to something familiar, something we've already encountered, something for which we have a category and maybe even a solution. But our awesome pattern-matching ability is not to our client's advantage because her brain is also an awesome pattern-matching machine and our job is to get her brain working, not show off how well ours works.

When we take a dumb pill we tell our brain to stop working the way it normally works. We do this because the coach's brain needs to work differently than the normal human brain. The coach's brain works not to solve, but to facilitate the client's solving. The coach's

brain is not trying to think two, three, or four steps ahead, but to be with the client in the present moment as she thinks.

Okay, so there's no such thing as a dumb pill. But let the metaphor work for you. Imagine turning off the pattern-matching, problem-solving part of your brain so that you don't impede the client and so you can inhabit other parts of your brain.



TWO: Go to the Movies

I find that coaching can be very entertaining. Clients have all sorts of challenges and opportunities and neat stuff going on in their lives and I get a front row seat to their adventure. I find it immensely interesting when a client works through something and gets to the other side. Clients earn a lot of victories and being there to see them do it is fun.

Now I'm not suggesting a coach should be voyeuristic – a disengaged observer getting your own needs met by watching someone else. Instead, I am suggesting that you treat the coaching conversation like an adventure movie in which the client is the star, the hero, the main character, and the one moving the action forward.

Coaches need to think like this because often clients bring challenging stuff into the coaching conversation and if we're not careful we can get hooked and mistakenly think their challenge is an invitation for us to be the star.

Clients can sometimes be in a real pickle. As the coach, you need to think, "Oh this is a tough spot; I can't wait to see how she gets through this!" That's good thinking. You do not want to think, "Oh this is a tough spot how can I help her get through this?" That's bad thinking. Even worse is to transfer her challenge to you so that it becomes your challenge.

I like to think of coaching as an action movie because the action hero always finds a way out of whatever jam he is in. In fact, I think of it as a James Bond, Jason Bourne or Mission Impossible movie where I know the lead hero is going to make it out of whatever predicament he's in because there is going to be another movie. When I watch James Bond, I can relax and let him do all the work of fighting the bad guy, escaping his captors or cutting the right wire to deactivate the

bomb. I can relax and let him do his job and trust him to do it well. He's going to get through this and I can watch him do it.

When I'm coaching, I can take a similar attitude with the client. The client is capable, committed, and certainly going to get through this; it's just a matter of how.

Now the truth is that coaches do more than sit back, snack on popcorn and watch the client work. We prompt and facilitate and engage the client so she can do her best work. But we do so always with the conviction that the client is the hero, that she is capable, and that she will most definitely get through whatever challenge is in front of her. It's our confidence in the client and our conviction in the coaching process that helps bring out the best from the client. You have to believe in your client!

Now you might wonder about the truly challenging, incredibly difficult situations some clients bring to the coaching relationship. In those cases, couldn't they use our "help?" And by "help" I mean our effort, our smarts, our problem solving, our heroics. The answer is "No! Absolutely not." The bigger the client challenge, the more important it is to let the client be the hero. Truth is, it's no more challenging to coach someone who's facing really tough stuff than it is to coach someone on a minor issue. In fact, it might be easier to coach the client who's facing the bigger challenge because the bigger the challenge the more open to new ideas the client is. Really tough challenges challenge our client's old ways of thinking and create the space necessary for growth and change. If the coach thinks the client needs the coach's help and "heroically" swoops in to save the day, the coach will prevent the client from growing, changing, and saving his own day. And that would not be a happy ending.



THREE: Embrace the Primitive

One basic rule for thinking like a coach is to not think too much. As mentioned in Rule #1, don't try to be too smart. This rule is a close cousin to that one. Great coaches keep their questions and their observations primitive. Here's what I mean.

As the client is talking, you are thinking. And a little bit of thinking is okay. But as your stream of thinking keeps flowing you generate more and more complex ideas by connecting things the way you think things connect. In a way, your brain is constantly asking and answering questions en route to what you think is a good question or comment to say out loud.

Here's an example. Let's imagine your client says he wants to write a book, but he's stuck. As soon as he puts that issue into the conversation your brain kicks into gear and you think a series of thoughts. Your stream of thinking might sound something like this:

"Oh, I wonder what he means by stuck."

"Stuck probably means he's not writing even though he wants to and knows he needs to."

"I wonder what's got him stuck."

"I'll bet he lacks time or energy for the book because he's got so many other things going on."

"So it sounds like a matter of prioritizing. I wonder what we can do to help him make this a priority."

After all that thinking you might finally ask, "What can you do to make this a priority?"

The problem here is that your question is the result of too much processing. A far better question would be the first question you asked yourself: "What do you mean by stuck?" That's a better

question because it gets the client processing the issue instead of you processing it. It's a primitive question, not a processed question.

Now the truth is that we do a lot of processing without even realizing it. In our example, you might have done all that processing in a matter of seconds in the dark fuzzy parts of your brain where you don't even know you're thinking. Great coaches train themselves to notice their own thinking and to stop or back up the thinking process so they say simple, primitive stuff that invites the client to process.

Why do we resist the primitive? It's almost like we have a kind of allergic reaction to not being in the know. In most of our conversations and relationships when someone mentions something (a movie, a sports game, a technology device, or an event from the news) we want to already know what they are talking about. In other words, we want to be in the know and we don't want to be out of the know. So when a client says he's stuck, there's something inside us that doesn't want to admit we don't know exactly what he means by that. We mistakenly think asking a primitive question is a request for the client to explain something to us that we should already know. But that's not the case. Primitive questions are powerful invitations for the client to explore something.

A word of warning: don't make primitive questions just a technique you employ. Instead, really get tuned in to the primitive thinking in your brain and coach from there. When you do that, you'll notice the simple questions that are at the headwaters of your thought stream and you'll willingly ask those unprocessed questions. Now, to be honest, it takes some coaches a while to find those headwaters and to spot a simple question. To get you started, let me share a few sample questions:

- What do you make of that?
- How should we get started?
- Where are we in this conversation?
- What about that is really important to you?
- What's a good way to unpack this?
- What's your decision-making process need to be?

As I will mention later, I am not a huge fan of question lists because they can be misused, but I'm going to trust you to use these in the right way: as a way to help you recognize the primitive questions in your own thinking.

FOUR: Follow the First Rule of Improv



Improvational comedy is that brand of comedy in which two or more comedians make up their bit right there on the spot in response to one another and/or the audience. And the first rule of improv (but evidently the fourth rule of thinking like a coach) is to go with whatever the other person just said. In improv if the first person says, “Freeze, I have a gun,” and the second person says, “That’s not a gun, that’s your finger,” then the bit is dead right there. But if the second person says, “The gun I gave you for Christmas! I can’t believe you’d use my Christmas gift against me!” then the scene can continue to unfold in a hopefully funny direction.

In coaching, sometimes we’re tempted to dispute or disagree with what the client is telling us. Some would-be coaches are cut from a certain kind of cloth that just makes them more likely to find fault, poke holes, or otherwise display a spirit of “No.” A coach who exudes “No” shuts down the coaching. “No” gets us nowhere. And the worst kind of “No” is the kind that indicates the client’s topic is not a coachable topic.

Whatever your client says, just go with it. Go with positivity, curiosity and a spirit of “Yes.”

I’m not saying you should always agree with your client or rubber stamp every idea he has, every perspective he holds, or every action he thinks he should take. I’m just saying that a great coach sends the strong signal that whatever the client puts into the conversation can be dealt with well.

I've witnessed way too many novice coaches get this wrong. I remember once when the client opened with, "I'd like to talk about a difficulty I'm having with my grown son." The coach responded by saying "Okay." But it wasn't a simple "Okay." It was a drawn out, condescending, judgment-filled, "Ooooo-kaaaay." You know, the kind of "Okay" a trend-worshipping teenage girl might say in response to seeing a man wear black socks with sandals. The coach might as well have rolled his eyes and said, "That's not a topic, that's your finger."

As a coach, you have to see yourself as the client's partner. The two of you are in this together. You have to believe that and to demonstrate it. In fact, you will not demonstrate it if you don't believe it.

So don't be a "No" coach – work to change your mindset to be a "Yes" coach. When you go with what the client puts into the conversation, you create a positive emotional charge that helps create a trusting and stable relationship into which the client can take risks and do her best thinking. In fact, psychologist [Barb Fredrickson](#) has researched the power of positive emotions and has found that emotions such as happiness, joy, and acceptance serve to broaden our awareness and encourage novel, varied, and exploratory thoughts and actions. When you respond to the client with a soft form of "Yes," you send the signal to her that she can drop her guard and safely explore what's really going on and what new options are possible.

Great coaches think, "Yes," even when you don't say it out loud. Our clients pick up on the safety we create when we truly think that whatever they put into the conversation will be okay.



FIVE: Get Curious

We humans don't seem to know what to do with curiosity. We think it killed the cat. But we also think curious monkeys named George make for entertaining books and cartoon shows. Curiosity can conjure up notions of naiveté, something strange or unusual, someone who's meddlesome, or someone who's just plain odd.

In coaching, being curious is a good thing because it means the coach is willing to inhabit a space of not knowing. We ask the best questions and invite the client's best thinking when we are curious.

Let's be clear what kind of curiosity we're talking about here. We're not talking about satiating your curiosity. You're a coach, not a reporter for the National Enquirer. You shouldn't treat your client like a source for tabloid gossip or whatever interesting thing you want to know about. That kind of curiosity is coach-centered.

As a coach, you should exhibit a positive, client-centered kind of curiosity. Good coaches think, "That's interesting, I wonder where this is going?"

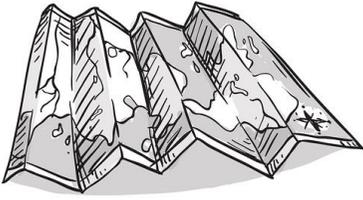
The enemy of curiosity is judgment. A judging attitude says, "I know what this is." It's not that our judgments are always negative, as in "I know what this is and it's bad." Judging something as positive can be just as detrimental in coaching because judging shuts down the learning process. On the other hand, curiosity opens up the learning process.

Imagine your client shares that his son has decided to drop out of school. A coach with a judging mindset might think, "Oh, that's bad. I'll bet that's upsetting," and then ask, "What can you do to change his mind?" But a coach with a curious mindset will think something more along the lines of "I wonder what my client thinks and feels about

that,” and then ask, “What do you think of that?” or “Think back to when he first told you he was dropping out, what was your first thought? ...How are you thinking about it now?” The judging coach assumes what the issue is and races to tackle it; meanwhile, the curious coach invites the client to explore what’s going on, to expand his understanding of the situation, and to create new awareness before rushing to action.

Curiosity might first seem to slow things down, but in the long run it actually speeds things up. By starting slow, we invite the client to get to the heart of things first and to then act based on the real issue. A judging mindset often goes fast at first but then gets bogged down because it tends to specialize in quickly addressing the wrong issue.

So work on remaining curious and on inviting the client to get curious, too. When you tap into the client’s curiosity, you’ll knock him out of autopilot and compel him to get intentional about thinking through things in a fresh, new, and more helpful way.



SIX: Ask for Directions

Have you had that moment in your coaching when you just had no idea where to go next? It happens to all of us at some time. In fact, for some of us it happens way more often than we care to admit. But here's the thing: there's nothing wrong with not knowing. Not knowing is not a bad thing.

What is a bad thing is pretending to know or assuming you know. When we do that, we too often start acting like the smart person in the conversation, the problem-solver, the answer man, or the decision-maker. And when that happens we start making assumptions and we do too much steering.

Imagine your client wants to explore how best to parent her very active 5 year old son. As she describes the situation, your head starts to spin and maybe you think there's no helping this kid or his mother. Your mind starts to race, "How can we move forward? Where should we go with this? I don't know what would help. Speaking of help, I need help!" As the client winds down her description, your mind searches aimless for what to say next.

That's not a pretty picture. A better picture is one in which you, as the confident coach you are, think like a coach and therefore act like a coach. Instead of freaking out because you're not sure where to go next, you calmly, confidently and with great compassion respond with, "This sounds like a really important issue for you. What's the best way for us to get started with it?"

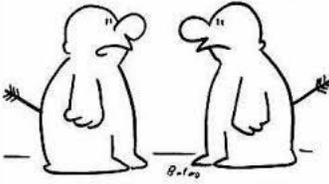
You're able to ask that kind of question because you know it's perfectly okay to ask the client for directions. It's okay because you believe the client is creative and resourceful and can make smart decisions about how the coaching session should unfold.

Now don't get me wrong, sixty minutes of "Where should we go from here?" is not coaching. That's a technique misapplied. That could also just be lazy coaching. We don't want that.

What we do want is to sincerely believe in the client, to trust that no matter what happens in the coaching conversation, it's okay and that the partnership is so deep that we can ask each other for directions.

If you're thinking ahead, you may be wondering about those times when you ask the client for directions and the client responds with "I don't know." That sort of response does not mean the client isn't creative and resourceful and capable of making smart decisions, it just means the client isn't sure where to go next. No big deal. In those cases, it's probably time to make something up, be creative, try something and see if it works. (see thinking rule #8).

There will be plenty of times in your coaching when you don't need to ask for directions (in fact, most of the time). Maybe the client has already made it clear where he wants to go, or perhaps it's super obvious, or maybe your spidey senses are tingling. In those times, go for it and see what happens. But when you're not sure, just know that it's okay to ask for directions.



"I know exactly how you feel."

SEVEN: Avoid the Dark Side of Empathy

Coaching is a relationship and all good relationships need some degree of empathy – the capacity to feel and experience for yourself what another is experiencing. So if a friend hears tragic news, strong empathy would allow you to practically feel as if you were the recipient of the news. There are plenty of relationships where strong empathy is a real asset, helping build the relationship and form a deep bond of trust and intimacy. Coaching is not one of those relationships.

That might sound surprising, especially coming from a Christian coach. But hear me out. Coaches think about empathy with clients differently than we do with others in our lives. The reason is that in coaching we are here to help the other person experience forward movement toward his agenda; everything else is subservient to that goal. And the problem with too much empathy is that it can distract us from that goal.

Too much empathy puts you into the shoes of the client, allowing you to experience the feelings, thoughts, and perspective of the client. While that might sound like a good thing, it's really not because then you don't provide any objective help to the client.

Before going any further, let me say that a client who experiences a true tragedy does not need coaching in that moment. She needs a friend, a listening ear, and maybe some counseling to help her begin to process what happened and take the first small steps toward understanding and acceptance. That's not coaching and such instances remind us that coaching is not the answer for everything.

Most of our coaching relationships are not detoured because we are over-empathizing in the midst of a true tragedy. Rather, they get detoured when a client has a deeply held perspective and we join

her in that perspective. The dark side of empathy is that we can get trapped in the client's perspective.

Let me give an example. Suppose your client is having challenges with his work supervisor. The client is perhaps angry with the supervisor because of a string of altercations and a history of bad blood. As the client begins to describe the situation, too much empathy would trap you in the client's perspective and feelings of the situation. You would see the supervisor as an ogre and the possibilities for forward movement would get severely diminished because you and the client are stuck in "the boss is an ogre" perspective. In the same way the client cannot see a way forward from this perspective, you would not be able to coach him to a new perspective because you would have taken his perspective, feelings, and account of the issue as the truth.

In this situation, your client has access to a truth, but not the truth. He has a vantage point from which he can see things that are true, but he's not omniscient and can't see everything or all of what's true. Given his limited perspective, some of what he thinks to be true may be only half-true or even false. If you join him in his perspective, you fail him miserably. Your ability to remain somewhat objective is one of the greatest gifts you can give your client because it becomes the bridge to greater insight.

Now let's be clear, being objective does not mean you see things any clearer than the client. It just means you are not locked in to the client's one way of experiencing the issue. Remaining objective means you can explore other perspectives and remain open and curious (see above). Your curious stance allows you to be of great help to the client because from there you can invite the client to explore options beyond what his locked-in perspective affords him.

In the example of the ogre boss, if you are able to limit your empathy, you can maintain objectivity and invite the client to explore what else is going on. In essence, you can invite the client to step outside of his circumstance and to look at his feelings, thoughts, and attitudes instead of looking at the issue through them. [Ronald Heifitz](#)

describes this shift toward a broader perspective as “getting on the balcony.” That’s a good image. And to be doubly clear on this: you (the coach) are not on the balcony. Your objectivity merely enables you to invite the client to get on the balcony where he can see himself and his situation more clearly.

From the balcony your client might recognize his supervisor’s perspective, his (the client’s) own bad behaviors and how he’s contributed to the situation. From the balcony your client might reinterpret things such that his boss goes from being an ogre to being a flawed human being who makes mistakes and can be selfish and is working to make his way through life the best way he can (just like the client). The client can notice and choose to believe all sorts of new things from the balcony, and he gets to the balcony because you think like a coach and don’t over-empathize.



EIGHT: Think Like a Kid with a Crayon

Coaching is both an art and a science. As artists, we have to be fluid and exploratory and willing to take risks in order to be most helpful to those we coach. As scientists, we have to experiment and investigate and also follow some protocols. When we bring both art and science into our thinking, we unleash the creativity and capability of our clients.

Think about it: our world is now full of helpful technologies that did not exist 100 or even 50 years ago. The mobile phone, solar panels, and the internet make life better (at least for the most part). What every innovation has in common is that somebody somewhere had to think this stuff up. And to think it up, they had to *think different* ([thanks for that line Steve!](#)).

Coaches invite clients to think different – to make stuff up, to be creative, to experiment and to get outside the proverbial boring box. As mentioned before, we believe each client is creative and resourceful. However, in order to tap into the client's creativity, we also have to be creative. As the coach, we cannot rely solely on what worked yesterday or last week. We have to inhabit *this* moment with *this* client in *this* circumstance. Creative coaches shun standard coaching questions and procedures in favor of customized questions and processes that fit the unique situation of the moment.

Coaches are almost always thinking outside the lines and off script. Take for example, where we get our questions. Lists of coaching questions can serve a valuable purpose, but one of the things I don't like about such lists is that some coaches lean too heavily on them. When this happens, the coach replaces her own creative ability for cooking up a new and fresh coaching encounter with a pick-from-

the-menu approach. Your client doesn't want formulaic coaching and doesn't thrive when you pick a question from a list.

Creative coaches do more than just ask creative questions; we are artistic in how we think. By the way, I don't mean artistic in the sense of a brooding melodramatic tortured artist. I mean artistic like a kid with a box of crayons. Some coaches use the metaphor of "getting in the sandbox" – that playful and creative space where you're willing to try something and if it doesn't work you'll just start over and try something else.

Playful risk is a wonderful approach in coaching. When the coach is willing to take a risk and invite the client to do the same, fantastic things can happen.

Coaches think like artists, and we also think like scientists. Both are creative in their own way. Scientists experiment, they notice what works and what doesn't work, and they seek to constantly improve. When you think like a scientist, you long to invent and to make progress and to discover.

To be clear, both artists and scientists follow certain rules. The same is true for coaches. Great coaches know the rules (a great start is the Code of Ethics from the [International Coach Federation](#)), and within those broad outlines, the coach gets busy experimenting, creating, and taking risks.

This seems like a good place for an example. Let's contrast boring, boilerplate coaching with something creative. Suppose your client wants to plan the perfect family vacation. The boring, inside-the-box coach might ask, "What have you thought of so far?" or "What do you like to do?" or "What would make it perfect?" By the way, that last question is not a bad one; it's just still kind of tame.

A creative coach might respond by asking what the worst, most horrible, vacation-from-hell would look like. This kind of question gets the client's creative juices flowing and forces her brain to approach the topic in a totally different way.

Another creative response might be, “Okay, let’s try something. Imagine you’ve returned from the vacation, all the unpacking is over and it’s a week later when a friend asks you about your vacation. Without mentioning anything you did or anywhere you went, describe the vacation in glowing terms.” Notice creativity of the boundaries here: stipulating that the client cannot share what she did or where she went puts certain easy-to-imagine aspects of the vacation off limits, inviting her to stretch in her thinking to something beyond what and where. Who knows what she might come up with – maybe she’d describe how close she feels to her family, or how the vacation saved her marriage, or how renewed she feels, or how motivated she is to live life differently.

One word of caution here. Your goal as a coach is not to wow your client with your awesome creativity or to express your creativity in a way that diminishes or makes unnecessary his creativity. Just the opposite: your creativity invites, calls forth, and even demands his creativity.

