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## SELF-ANALYSIS CAN BENEFIT OUTCOMES

# DO YOU SOMETIMES BECOME IRRITATED BY A CLIENT?

CINNIE NOBLE



In a recent peer group meeting one of my coach colleagues asked—in a sheepish sort of way—“Do any of you ever get irritated with a client?” It was comforting for her to hear many people in our group of eight answer in the affirmative. Our ensuing conversation was about our reflections on such situations and how to handle them when they occur. This article discusses a method I shared with my colleagues that I learned when developing a conflict management coaching model. It describes a way to get in touch with our reactions when we become provoked under these or other circumstances.

To begin with, some coaches stated that there are times they react internally when clients appear to lack commitment, or regularly come late to the session, or seem to resist coaching or the coach. In these cases, we discussed ways we name and frame what we are observing or intuiting when statements or actions appear amiss or dissonant. We agreed that doing so in curious and non-judgmental ways usually opens up the coaching conversation and helps surface things not being said.

What is more challenging for some though is when they perceive clients’ comments demean coaching or themselves and they become defensive. A few examples provided include when clients make comments—with a sarcastic edge in their voice—such as “I didn’t think coaching would take so long”, or “I don’t get

coaching. Can’t you just tell me what I should do about this?” “Aren’t you supposed to help me?” The coaches who shared concerns about their reactions to questions and comments of this nature also stated that they tend to lose their presence and get caught up in judgment, at these times.

## RESEARCH ON CONFLICT

During the research I referred to earlier, I discovered, experientially, a trajectory that many of us travel along once we are triggered. Its essence is that when we react adversely to things that people say or do—or don’t say or do—we are perceiving, at some level of consciousness, that they are undermining, challenging or threatening something important to us. In other words, when we become defensive we are defending things about ourselves that we hold dear, such as one or more of our values or needs or aspects of our identity.

Having internally reacted to a perceived challenge we typically then, proceed along the trajectory by making assumptions about the other person and the reasons for her or his provoking words, attitude and actions. This further contributes to the impact. Even if we do not express what we are feeling we still experience internal dissension, which often has repercussions on the relationship and our connection.

Consider the following example. Marta finds herself reacting to her client Joe who exclaims in what sounds to her like an accusatory tone, "I didn't think coaching would take so long." If she reacts defensively to this statement and how Joe conveyed it, Marta may be perceiving that he is disrespecting and questioning her expertise and competence. Or, she may experience that comment as undermining her chosen field of work. As a consequence, Marta may make assumptions about Joe, such as viewing him as uncommitted, discourteous, lazy or disrespectful.

The impact on us of perceived affronts and the way we respond depend both on how deeply we perceive the other person's words, actions and attitude, and how strongly we believe our assumptions about their intent. The thing is, if these elements of conflict are left unexamined we may lose our perspective and begin to relate to our clients in counterproductive ways.

## HOW TO EXAMINE THE CONFLICT

Whatever it is that provokes us about a client (or others, for that matter), it helps to conduct a two-step self-analysis as shown here:

1. Identify the specific trigger point (action, words or attitude that provokes us) → name

the value, need and/or aspect of our identity we perceive as being undermined → identify the impact on us → state the assumptions we are making about the other person's motives for what she or he said or did; and

2. Ask ourselves some 'possibility' questions. What questions can we ask to gain further insights that help prepare us to engage the client in a conversation that may confirm or disabuse us of our assumptions. (And, in any case, the questioning helps distance us and center our own thoughts and feelings). Examples of questions may include, "What is it I don't know here?", "If my assumptions are incorrect, what other reasons may there be for this person's comment?", "What expectations of coaching may be unfulfilled for her or him?", "What may I be doing or saying that she or he may be reacting to?"

As we move to a place of reflection with these types of questions, we are better able to explore our assumptions and their validity. We may come to realize we are attributing negative intent that the other person does not own. In the above scenario, for instance, maybe when Joe said "I didn't think this would

***"Before you begin a relationship with someone, make sure that your relationship with yourself is where it needs to be."***

~ Author unknown ~



Irritated...(continued)

take so long”, he is worrying about his own competence. Or, perhaps he is frustrated and expected more of himself – or of coaching. Or, maybe he had an unshared timeline in mind. Or, maybe Marta had not been as clear on the usual duration of coaching and the process.

When interactions occur that have the potential for challenging our connection with our clients and others, such as when we become provoked by things they say or do, it is an opportune time to explore the source of tension before determining how to best proceed. Exploring the sequence and questions suggested here provide a self-reflective way to examine what triggers us when we become provoked and why. They also serve to focus our thoughts to gain increased understanding and ability to clarify cues we could otherwise misinterpret and lead to unnecessary rifts in our relationships.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Cinnie Noble is a lawyer, certified coach, mediator, Peer Resources Network member, and a pioneer of the specialty conflict management coaching. She is author of two coaching books: *Conflict Management Coaching: The CINERGY® Model*

([details](#)) and *Conflict Mastery: Questions to Guide You* ([details](#)). Cinnie also conducts trainings for which Peer Resources’ subscribers receive a discount. For more information on CINERGY®, go to [www.cinergycoaching.com](http://www.cinergycoaching.com).

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***“There’s a place deep within us that wants to feel fulfilled. It wants to know that my life has made a difference. That I’ve left his place—this planet that I’ve lived on—better than when I arrived. That someone’s life has been profoundly touched because of my existence. We all want that. It’s not about age or about finding yourself.”***

~ Wayne Dyer (1940-2015) ~  
Best-selling self-help author and mentor to thousands  
Mentored by Sri Guruji Pillai  
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