



Clarifying: the techniques of Summarising, Paraphrasing, Reiterating and Mirroring

PART 1: SUMMARY

This article explores the use of Clarifying Techniques in coaching: Summarising, Paraphrasing, Reiterating and Mirroring. Carol Wilson, MD of coach training school Results, shares her experience and methodology, illustrated by examples and a case history.

Key learning points:

- Definitions: the subtle differences between each technique
- Benefits: what can be achieved through applying the appropriate technique at the right time
- How and when to use each of the four techniques
- Examples: extracts from sessions, demonstrating the value of the techniques

Introduction

During effective coaching, large amounts of session time are spent clarifying. The coach does this by using the techniques of Summarising, Paraphrasing, Reiterating and Mirroring.

Clarifying a client's words is about getting not just the facts straight. It is a technique that enables not only the coach, but also the client, to gain insight into the meaning and emotional state behind the words.

Combined with powerful questioning techniques, the use of a combination of the four methods of clarifying can be highly effective in moving the client forward during a session.

Good clarifying is an integral part of good coaching. It is the key difference between trying to think through a problem on one's own, and brainstorming the issue with a coach. The to-and-fro process of clarifying enables the client to organise their thoughts and find the space to move forward. Two of the key benefits of coaching are the encouragement the client receives and the consequent boost to their confidence. Some methods of clarifying provide a powerful tool for achieving this.

Another area where clarifying can be of benefit is with a client who is talkative and tends towards story telling. Clients pay coaches to manage the process so that they will get real value during the time available. Yet many coaches struggle with ways of interrupting a client. Any of the clarifying techniques will provide a sensitive way of redirecting the client out of details and forward.

Clarifying techniques are among the easiest for a new coach to pick up: they are already a part of normal conversation and all a coach has to learn is how and when to use each of the techniques for maximum effect.

PART II:

These are the key benefits of clarifying:

- Reassures the client that what they have said is valid.
- Makes the client feel listened to and worth listening to.
- Ensures that client and coach are on the same track
- Enables the client to move forward.
- Enables the client to explore in more depth.

When to clarify:

- The client is showing signs of self doubt.
- The client is processing thoughts out loud or brainstorming
- The coach is not sure what to ask next
- The client is stuck
- The client is getting bogged down in detail.

Sometimes we talk without really listening to what we are saying. When the coach repeats back something a client has said, it is not unknown for the client to congratulate the coach on the coach's bright idea. The client is astonished to learn that it was their own words of wisdom the coach was repeating back to them.

The most common clarifying is done immediately – repeating back what a client has just said. However, it can be highly useful to note a client's key words and repeat them back later in the session. This has a number of benefits for the client:

- Enables the client to see how far they have come.
- Reminds the client of a resource they may have forgotten.
- Reinforces the client's ideas.
- Re-focuses the client's energy on their goals

The technique can be equally effective in a later session. Reminding a client of words they used, say, six weeks prior can be useful: they may be motivated by seeing how far they have come, or be reminded of a means of obtaining their goal that they have overlooked.

Definitions:

Summarising:

The coach simplifies what the client has said before handing it back to them. A client may be thinking a topic through as they speak, using many words. When the coach returns the essence of what the client has said, using fewer words, the client is enabled to focus more clearly and move forward. The coach should concentrate on identifying which are the key words for the client: often these will be words that the client repeats more than once.

Summarising may comprise:

- the last few sentences the client has spoken, or
- an earlier part of a session, or
- a reminder of how far the client has come during the whole coaching series.

Example:

Client: *I could buy a number of small flats to rent out or just one big house and fill it with students. I'm worried about the buy to let market getting over-crowded, with all the new developments being built and everyone seems to be putting their money that way instead of into pensions. But students might ruin the property, and they might not pay their rent.*

Coach: *So the choice is between buy to let flats or a house for students?*

Client: *Actually, there are some other avenues I haven't got around to exploring yet.*

The coach has enabled the client to focus on other options.

Paraphrasing:

The coach will repeat back what the client has said using the coach's own words. This is effective in helping the client to find the words which will enable them to express themselves accurately. The coach's words may not be the right ones, but they may help the client's thought processes, in the sense of asking: "Is it black?" – "No, it's blue". Offering the client's words back as a metaphor (see example on back page) is a powerful way of paraphrasing.

Example:

Client: *I'd like to be full of energy again and wake up in the morning longing to jump out of bed.*

Coach: *Be more physically fit?*

Client: *No, it's more about having the motivation to do things.*

The coach is enabling the client to clarify exactly what the client wants to change.

Reiterating:

Repeating back exactly what the client has said. This ensures the coach has heard correctly, and encourages the client to add more thoughts that they wish to express.

Example:

Client: *I'd like to change my career and do something more fulfilling.*

Coach: *You'd like to change your career and do something more fulfilling.*

Client: *Something where I can make a difference to people.*

The coach is helping the client to process their thoughts in order to identify their current reality. Each reiteration will allow the client to reach a new stage in their thinking.

Mirroring:

Repeating the client's exact words back to them. This creates rapport and is reassuring for the client. Hearing their own words coming from the coach makes the client feel that what they have said is worthwhile and that they are being listened to.

To make this technique really effective, use not only their words but their tonality – the same timbre of the voice and pace of speaking. In face to face sessions you can mirror their body language as well. This happens most effectively when such a state of rapport has been reached that coach and client find they are mirroring each other's physical positions naturally, without conscious effort.

Mirroring is effective in moving the coaching conversation forward, particularly when brainstorming various options. Hearing their own words come from the coach makes the client feel validated. They will be able to leave that space and move on.

Example:

Client: *I want to do something different. Get more out of it. More satisfaction.*

Coach: *Satisfaction.*

Client: *Make a difference to people.*

Coach enables client to pinpoint the desired direction.

Further uses for clarifying:

Interrupting: When the client wants to spend time telling stories, repeating their words back to them is the least abrasive method. A good question to ask oneself at times like this, is: "Is this conversation useful or interesting?" A useful conversation moves the client forward and they get value for money. A conversation that is merely interesting is of no help to client or coach. (See back page for example).

When the coach gets stuck: Clarifying is a big help if the coach gets stuck for words. It is something that happens to the most experienced of coaches from time to time: our intuition may be highly developed but we are not mind readers. If the coach feels they are losing control of the process, or not sure what to ask next, getting the client to repeat what they have said has the effect of setting a new common ground where they can draw breath and start moving forward again. This might be achieved by mirroring a few words the client has just said, or by paraphrasing a whole series of statements, or by summarising everything that has been said since the beginning of the session, or of the whole relationship with the client. (See back page for example)

Personal transformation through clarifying

All the techniques of clarifying are not just about repeating the client's words. Clarifying is about hearing what is behind the words and what is not being said. It enables the client to tap into core emotions and thereby gain the type of insights that lead to real and lasting personal transformation.

PART III: EXCERPTS FROM SESSIONS

Further examples of clarifying:

1. Summarising the whole coaching series:

Client: *I had one of those 2am moments last night, when I look at all the responsibilities I've committed too, and all I could see was what might go wrong.*

Coach: *Can I ask you to cast your mind back to where you were when the coaching started 6 months ago? You didn't know what business you wanted to be in, and were feeling a bit of a failure for being out of work. You've gradually worked out the way forward and put the building bricks in place. How would you have felt then if you could have looked forward to where you are now?*

Client: *Fantastic. I wouldn't have believed it. Making the comparison puts it in perspective – I'm on much dryer ground now than I was 6 months ago.*

The coach has changed the client's perspective to a more positive view.

2. Paraphrasing to get the client unstuck:

Client: *If I have a baby and go on maternity leave, we won't be able to afford the mortgage repayments just on my husband's salary. But we couldn't move anywhere smaller with a growing family.*

Coach: *Sounds like you're between a rock and a hard place.*

Client: *Exactly. I can't see a way forward.*

Coach: *Would it be okay if we brainstorm some options?*

Client: *Of course. Actually, there is a possibility of...*

The coach enables the client to off-load their frustration and move out of the detail towards solutions.

3. Mirroring to build the client's confidence:

Client: *You might think this is ridiculous, but sometimes I think that I could do the job at the next grade up.*

Coach: *You could do the job at the next grade up.*

Client: *Yes. I have the qualifications, and more experience than some of them. I'm getting great feedback too.*

The client's confidence grows, having uttered something they may not have put into words before, and having had it accepted. Hesitant at first, the client is now confidently asserting why they could do the job.

4. Using clarifying to interrupt a talkative client

Example:

Client: *What happened was I went into the boss's office to speak to him about promotion. Every time I have to do something like this I freeze. In my last job it took 18 months. Every time I tried to have the conversation I started talking about something else. Yet when I finally made it, she agreed without a pause.*

Coach: *So you got the raise last time. What did you learn about yourself from doing that?*

The Coach has moved the client's focus from history to self-directed learning. The question is cleverly chosen as one which the client might find more interesting than their current train of thought, being a question focused specifically on the client's self-knowledge. This alleviates any danger that the client might feel they have been cut off in mid-story, or that the coach is not interested in what they have to say.

5. Clarifying to find the way forward when the coach feels stuck

Example:

Coach: *What options are open to you on this?*

Client: *I just can't see a way forward.*

Coach: You've said you loathe your job, that art is your hobby but you don't want to be a professional artist, you would like to be working with artists, but you don't know how to find out about jobs in that field.

Client: *I suppose I could do an internet search for the types of companies that handle the sort of art I like. And see if they need any staff.*

The coach may have thought it was blindingly obvious to research on the internet. (The coach in this scenario was me – and I did!) However, the purpose of coaching is for the client to experience self-directed learning. By summarising the client's journey, the coach has encouraged the client to come up with their own solution.

About the author:

International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is Managing Director of Performance Coach Training in partnership with Sir John Whitmore, Europe's pioneer of coaching, and on the Executive Committee at Performance Consultants International. Carol experienced the value of a coaching culture at first hand when she worked at board level with Sir Richard Branson in the formative years of Virgin. She became the first woman in the world to found a successful record company, the first woman director of global corporate Polygram and is now Honorary Vice President and Head of Accreditation at the Association for Coaching.

Carol was nominated for the AC Awards 'Influence in Coaching' and 'Impact in Coaching' and is the author of 'Best Practice in Performance Coaching' to be published by Kogan Page in Autumn 2007 and featuring Forewords by Sir John Whitmore and Sir Richard Branson.

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