

# The helping relationship

*"We forgot that we belong to each other."*

Mother Teresa

## Introduction

I would like to introduce you to the following basic concept of coaching:

1. What is a helping relationship?
  - a. What is **unconditional positive regard**?
  - b. What is **empathy**?
  - c. What is **congruence**?

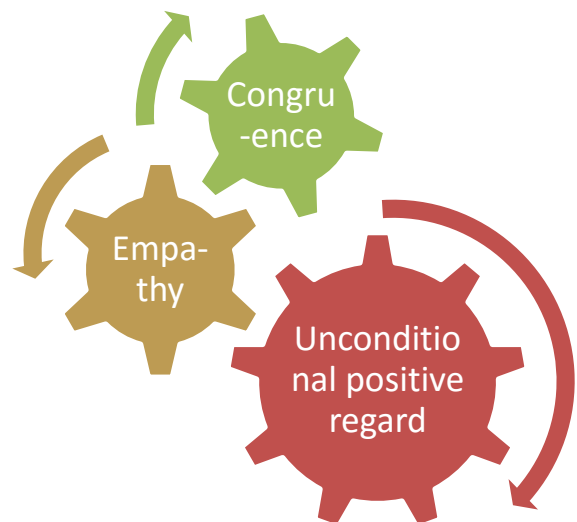
The helping relationship creates self-awareness, a willingness of a client to look at himself, to look at his real self. The helping relationship helps the person to connect with his person, to get in touch and take a look at his real self. To be less afraid of who he is and to be more willing to explore who he really is. The helping relationship creates an atmosphere where a person can discover and explore his self, his identity.

Carl Rogers (1961) defines a helping relationship as "one "in which at least one of the parties has the intent of promoting the growth, development, maturity, improved functioning, improved coping with life of the other". This definition would include parent and child, teacher and students, manager and subordinates, therapist and patient, consultant and client and many other less formally defined relationships."

It is within the circle of a helping relationship that life germinates and grows. A helping relationship re-opens the pathway of inter-connectedness we have with one another. It creates a context where we can see the true identity of the patterns that connect us to one another. It makes discovery, definition and integration possible.

A helping relationship is like a bridge, a safe bridge to discover and explore ourselves again. It is a bridge strong enough to hold when we journey to one another and meet the other to discover ourselves in them.

As coaches we should endeavour to develop and maintain a deep and significant helping relationship with each of our clients. A relationship that will hold when the client dares to venture to her side to see



the distinctions she draws of him. A safe bridge has the potential to facilitate the client's ability to develop empathy. A client with empathy can have empathy with himself as well as with the coach. He can look at himself in a way that is more accurate, and non-judgemental. The empathy created in the client by this 'safe bridge' offers the client the possibility to 'stand in the shoes' of the coach and 'look through her eyes' at himself. He might even accept the coach's ways of drawing distinctions of him and if she does in love he will see an accurate distinction of who he is.

It is within the context of a helping relationship based on unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence that our clients grow.

The essence of a helping relationship is based on the work of Carl Rogers and includes three fundamental ingredients:

1. Unconditional positive regard.
2. Empathy.
3. Congruence.

## **Unconditional positive regard**

Carl Rogers (1967) on unconditional positive regard: "unconditional positive regards is a prizing, acceptance, trust. There is another attitude that stands out in those who are successful in coaching ... I think of it as prizing the client, prizing her feelings, her opinions, her person. It is a caring for the client, but a non-possessive caring. It is an acceptance of this other individual as a separate person, having worth in her own right. It is a basic trust – a belief that this other person is somehow fundamentally trustworthy... What we are describing is a prizing of the client as an imperfect human being with many feelings, many potentialities. The coach's prizing or acceptance of the learner is an operational application of her essential confidence and trust in the capacity of the human organism."

Unconditional positive regard means we regard our clients as they are. Unconditional means we don't frame our clients with a set of pre-determined criteria for acceptance. We don't have any checklist of things they should be, say or do before we regard them. We regard them irrespective. We carry no list or definition of who the perfect client is. We only carry enough space and freedom in ourselves for them to be who they are. Our clients don't have to 'live up' to anything before we give them our regard for who they are. Their performance never convinces us they are 'now, at last good enough' to receive our affirmation. It is never a case of being good enough, it is always a case of 'to be'.

We decide to regard them. It never depends on them to prove they are worthy of our regard before we extend it to them. By default we choose to regard them. It is our posture, our decision to regard them, not their performance that convinces us to regard them. We choose to believe there is nothing our clients can be, say or do that will convince us to regard them. Our regard for them is free, it costs nothing. It is not up to them. It is not dependant on them to earn it. It is our choice and we make it.

Without our unconditional positive regard for our clients we know they 'won't show up'. No one shows up where they are rejected. When we are framed by rejection we behave in a way to avoid the rejection, we don't 'show our real selves'.

In our maturing as coaches we allow unconditional positive regard to find its path in us. We grow to a place where we hear ourselves say, 'I want to regard this person called client'. We want to establish his right to be. We know performance is the limited application of our client. We know for sure that our client too is trapped by this world that only accepts if your performance is good and right. We want in some significant way draw a different distinction for our client. A distinction that whispers, 'You are acceptable. Not because of being right, but because of your right to be'.

Our unconditional positive regard burns on the being of our client. The distinction of regard we draw has informed us that it serves us better when our doing flows from our beingness. Our beingness takes the first step and our doing follows. We are a lesser people when we are forever trying to establish who we are by what we do.

A tangible integrity flows from the client which finds his beingness and then gives application of who he found himself to be. A distinction drawn of performance to prove acceptability is a set up for continual failure. Such performance might drain the very life out of my client. I have to draw a different distinction for him. A distinction that tells him he is ok. A distinction he starts to draw because he experiences the reality of unconditional positive regard flowing from my heart and not just my mouth.

His beingness is the actual truth of who he is and with unconditional positive regard as our closest friend we know that our client's doing is only the surface of his identity.

Regarding our clients in a positive and unconditional manner is hard, sometimes challenging and we rest in the reality that we don't have to **agree** unconditionally with our client to **regard** him unconditionally. Agreement and regard are two distinctions, two different postures. The posture towards our clients is regard, not necessarily agreement. We don't move from the place of agree or disagree because we don't eat from a tree that informs us about right and wrong. We eat from a tree that informs us what life is and *that* is what we desire to bring our clients. We draw a distinction between what is life and what is not.

Never ever do we want to become part of the parts that reflect inaccurately back to our client who he is. We want to reflect life,

When the ground between coach and client is solid she can use many different frameworks (distinctions) available in the people development world that gives 'void of judgement' descriptions of clients. Depending on the primary need of her client she can use many different frameworks that reflect back to the client what the client has 'put into' it. All assessment instruments give only the feedback the client feeds into it. Of course every human assessment instrument is 'bound' by what it says it measures. Taken the right instrument for the desired purpose a lot of significant feedback and reflection is possible to the client about himself.

## Empathy

Carl Rogers (1967) on empathy: "A further element that establishes a climate for self-initiated experiential learning is emphatic understanding. When the coach has the ability to understand the client's reactions from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of growing and learning seems to the client, then again the likelihood of significant growth is increased.... [Clients feel deeply appreciative] when they are simply understood – not evaluated, not judged, simply understood from their own point of view, not the coach's."

Empathy is such a needed ingredient in the space between coach and client. Rogers gave us such a gem when he tried to draw a distinction which he saw and we still grapple to get to. In spite of our inability to draw the 'same depth' of distinction to see empathy for what it is it might be enough for us to know that part of the context of human growth is possible when coaches are empathetic.

Empathy is not merely a skill of the coach. It is a graceful and indispensable necessity in the becoming our clients make possible for us. When we cultivate empathy it shows we are becoming, in a big way and where better to learn the beauty empathy than from those that grant us such a context – our clients. We are not merely empathetic for them as if they are the weaklings that need us to be empathetic for them. No! We are empathetic because for our beingness in our destiny, for our part in this human drama we can't go without it. It is part of the oxygen we as coaches need for our existence. Our clients will help us to breath.

What empathy does is create space. It allows space for us in our client. We can 'enter' our client. We can go and stand in his skin and we can use his eyes and we can see. Empathy makes it possible for us to become one with our clients. We can integrate, first cautiously and tentatively because the space called 'my client' is sacred, a creation of a God that loves him with all His might. We 'enter', we become one and we see things before unseen.

Empathy clothed in unconditional positive regard strips us from the judgements thrust upon us by our previous staple diet of knowledge of good and evil. We enter in and we stand and look until we see and we look with eyes that draw distinctions not of good and evil, but eyes trained to see life. We want to bring hope, a hope that will not ashame, not disappoint. We want our clients to become. We want them to become who they are. We want them to see, see who they really are and by grace we realize that we of all people have the privileged open door into the client's heart. Empathy synergized with unconditional positive regard grants us such immense grace.

## Congruence

Congruence means I am real. To be real I need to know what to be real about. I need to be real about me. To be real about me I need to be aware of me. I need to be aware of what I feel, how I think and what I do during my interaction with my client. When I discover what I think, feel and do I need to be transparent about it and communicate it in my interactions with my client. I should not hide the 'negative' things about me and only reveal the positive. That is not congruence. Self-awareness should

be combined with UPR towards myself in order to be congruent with my client. Only when my client experiences my congruence will he venture to become congruent about himself.

My attempt to create a helping relationship where my client can grow will demand of me to grow, especially in the area of being congruent with myself and communicating my congruence to my client. It is sometimes very difficult to be congruent with myself, especially about my weaknesses or negative feelings. It is difficult to tell a client what I am feeling. It is especially difficult to tell a client when I experience a negative feeling about him. I think I am afraid I would be rejected by my client. I also don't think I should especially in the beginning of the relationship with my client just express all my negative feelings or observations of my own weaknesses. I think I should, without compromising on congruence be sensitive as to when I share these so-called 'negative things' I am aware of in me. I should be congruent with my client and remember I am congruent about what I see in me rather than what I see in my client. Congruence demands self-awareness so when I see something in me that is 'bad' because of who my client is, I should take ownership of what I see because I see it in me. Congruence in essence is recursive. In other words what I think of who my client is says more of who I am. Congruence have potential to bring me in touch with myself, help me see me and in that my client helps me grow. Because it is what I see in me as 'triggered' by my client that I discover something in myself that because I don't like it would want to change it. If it wasn't for my client and my interaction with my client I might never have seen what came to my awareness about me.

Carl Rogers (1967) on congruence: "Perhaps the most basic of these essential attitudes is realness or genuineness. When the coach is a real person, being what she is, entering into a relationship with the client without presenting a front or a façade, she is much more likely to be effective. This means that the feelings that she is experiencing are available to her, available to her awareness, that she is able to live these feelings, be them, and able to communicate if appropriate. It means coming into a direct personal encounter with the client, meeting her on a person-to-person basis. It means that she is being herself, not denying herself."

Congruence means to be authentic, to be genuine, and to 'appear' to our clients as we are and not as we are not. Congruence means we communicate what we are. Congruence means we show what we are, what we think and what we feel. A congruent person is aligned, she is one with herself and she is comfortable in her own skin.