

## Dear Master Coach

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November 2015



**Dear Master Coach:**

**I am up against a wall here! Every time I meet with my client and we begin our coaching session, she says "I don't know" to virtually every question. I have tried role playing, asking her to describe various events in her workplace that are related to her overall coaching goal and other tactics, but consistently hit a wall with her.**

**Do I need a bulldozer or is a gentle hammer better?**

**Thanks,  
Potential Wall Buster**

Dear PWB:

Your question was so nice I'm answering it twice. There are at least two big possibilities when you hear a steady stream of "I don't know." Last month we looked behind Door #1, where occasionally you find a client who may need a different—or additional—professional resource. However, through the years I've found that most of the time when a client begins to be stuck, there is much to be curious about behind Door #2.

One of the deepest convictions I hold—and that informs my work every day—is that there is always valuable information in resistance: *Is there an old story in play? Or a missing resource? Where is this client in the stages of change? Is this a case of competing commitments? Or is there a critical voice bossing my client around? Maybe there is a clear personal boundary my client is beginning to define.*

See what I mean? This is where your both your curiosity and coaching presence really matter. If you stay compassionate and curious in the face of resistance, and continue to listen well, both you and your client will learn things, and movement will begin to happen. I tend to agree with my pal Peggy Gilmer who coaches with the help of her horses up on Whidbey Island. When it comes to influencing mammals, she advises "minimum essential influence." So, good news—you can find a way to be both direct and challenging without having to use either a bulldozer or a hammer.

A good way to practice minimum essential influence is with your posture. Do you lean in a lot? Try sitting back and waiting. Do you practice steady eye-contact? Try looking away. Leave room for your client to move in your direction. As always, questions that are big enough to matter, questions to which you don't have the answer, are our stock in trade. Leave time and space for yours to land.

Of course, requesting a pre-session e-mail is a coaching best practice. Clients who grant my wish and send me a note prior to a session about what they hope to work on tend to have a conversation with themselves before they have one with me.

And, assuming I've coached well, if a client still begins to consistently have no new learnings or experiments to report, I've been known to delay rescheduling. "Would you be willing to call me after you've \_\_\_\_\_?" It might even be time to review together and agree to wrap up the coaching engagement.

Keep breathing PWB. Your success as a coach might come during the wait.

PEB, MC

Listen to Patty's "Dear Master Coach" monthly 3-minute answers at: <http://www.seattlecoach.com/dear-master-coach-blog>