

Dear Master Coach

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The Biggest Challenge for a Coach with Some SME (which is all of us)

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This month I asked a bunch of spectacular new coaches-in-training (SeattleCoach Cohort #30 to be exact) what they thought I should talk about in my little advice column.

The irony of my question was not lost on them. I love these people because, before they came to coaching, each one worked hard to be one of the best in town at something else. Each of them is already in possession of some major subject matter expertise and experience (SME). Now they have volunteered to be beginners again and they already know the drill: that coaching is not telling, advising, consulting, converting, rescuing, propping up or nagging.

They looked back at me and started talking about how truly fulfilling it is to give advice: You get to share your expertise/experience. And you have this deep sense of satisfaction that you're earning your keep. You might even become the hero.

"OK." They said, "Maybe talk about how we can use our SME at the same time we learn to coach the person, not the problem."

Read on or [click here](#) to listen to the 5'12" video version of my thoughts on their great question.

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Coaching is highly customized, just-in-time, adult learning—and if we do it well, the brains of our coachees get to light up.

I know that for most of us (I can't think of any exceptions), becoming a coach or a coaching leader is almost never a first stop professionally. My own story includes several chapters: as a campus minister, as a leader in an international non-profit, as a licensed marriage and family therapist and finally as a professional coach and trainer of coaches. The experience and expertise I carry from each decade of my life enriches what I bring to my work now and I long to be a good steward of all of it. Every day that wisdom and "SME" informs my curiosity, my questions and challenges and acknowledgments.

At SeattleCoach we train new coaches to challenge their "default": to push the pause button on how they have traditionally used their SME while they learn the skills and presence and disciplines of professional coaching.

This is hard. Especially when a conscientious coach gets a request like this:

Coachee: *You have a lot of experience with this. What do you think?*

Your "default" might be to immediately advise (tell, consult, convert, rescue, prop up or nag.)

But if you take an extra beat and engage your coachy curiosity, maybe you do something different:

You, the Curious Coach: *What part of this are you pretty clear about?*

What makes you tap the brakes?

I hate robbing my coachees of their epiphanies, but I don't want to be coy either if I have a sense that they really might be facing a missing resource. If I really do have some expertise to offer (not just a strong opinion disguised as expertise), I'll offer it briefly and then (this is key) ask my coachee to evaluate what I've shared.

You, the Curious Coach: *If I were thinking about this, something I'd consider might be . . .*

If you've got some true experience and expertise and wisdom, and you're eager to share it with the people you long to serve, I want to see you write about it, reflect it on your website, do workshops with groups and teams and become differentiated as a coach who understands that issue or sector or niche. And then I want to see you reserve your coaching for helping your coachees to uncover wisdom that they may not know that they have—and to help them to cultivate enough confidence about what they discover to start testing and learning.

The biggest, on-going challenge and discipline for most of us is valuing the practice of coaching the person, not the problem, and doing that coachy thing so that people leave their conversations with us a little more aware of what they didn't know they knew.

PEB, MC

Listen to Patricia Burgin's "Dear Master Coach" quarterly 5-minute answers at:

<http://www.seattlecoach.com/dear-master-coach-blog>