



How to help coaching clients to reframe their thinking

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Reframing is about altering perception: a new perspective can allow us to find solutions that were previously unavailable.

Reframing

Reframing is simply changing the meaning of an event or experience, in the way that placing a picture in a different picture frame somehow changes the look of it.

Human beings are meaning-making machines and we learn the meaning of things from an early age, from our individual culture and the significant others in our lives. The meaning or 'frame' that we place on something has a significant impact on how we respond to it.

Frames are often described as being negative or positive, out of our control or in our control, and we come across them in everyday situations. Here are some examples:

- 'I made a real mess of that' versus 'I did my best and can learn a few things.'
- 'They made me so angry when they said that' versus 'I chose to let that person wind me up.'

Reframing and coaching

Reframing is useful in coaching situations because sometimes clients get stuck with a particular way of perceiving a situation, and that may be disabling rather than enabling for them. Reframing helps them to see things differently and subsequently come to different conclusions, or feelings, about the event or experience. The coach's ability to reframe this situation for the client provides a new perspective, and often a sense

that things that seemed impossible may now be possible.

Reframing isn't about pretending that everything is wonderful for the client. Instead, it provides more and varied ways for clients to consider the problems they are facing and to find easier ways to solutions that work for them.

Key learning points

- ◆ Why reframe – the benefits of reframing.
- ◆ The different types of reframing – reframing for content and context.
- ◆ Using reframing with a client's preferred representational system.
- ◆ Useful questions for helping clients to reframe an experience or event.
- ◆ Using Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) – a six-step reframing process.

An NLP six-step reframing process

Six-step reframing is a process used in NLP that addresses any behaviour which seems to be out of conscious control. It is useful in situations where a client wants to change the way they are doing or perceiving something, but some part of them seems to be making them behave in a way that is not helpful.

In this process, the client is asked to talk to parts within themselves. This may seem a little strange, but this can be effective because the part that is causing the block in the client is actually in the unconscious.

A short description of the six-step reframe is presented below. A much more detailed explanation can be found in *Introducing NLP* by Joseph O'Connor and John Seymour.

- 1 Identify the behaviour that the client wants to change. This is often described as 'I want to do/stop doing (the behaviour) but I can't.'
- 2 Establish communication with the part that is responsible for the behaviour. It is important to get the client to ask permission to communicate with the part and for them to thank the part for their response.
- 3 Establish the positive intention of the part and separate it from the unwanted behaviour. Here the client asks the part 'What's the positive intention of what you are trying to do for me?'
- 4 Ask your creative part to identify new ways of fulfilling that positive intention. The client is encouraged to ask for several options from the creative part of them.

- 5 Get agreement from the original part that it will use one or more of these choices rather than the original behaviour. Again, the client literally asks the question 'Are you willing to use these new options?'
- 6 Ecology check. Here the client is asked to check if there are any parts of them that object to using these alternatives. If the answer is 'yes', revisit step 2 and reframe this part. If the answer is 'no', then the client is in a position to use alternatives when the time arises.

In a practical sense, the new options can then be included in the client's action plans for development.

Summary

Reframing is a useful process for coaches to use in a range of different circumstances. All of these reframing techniques, once demonstrated, can be taken away and applied by the client when they find themselves stuck with a particular way of looking at a situation. In this way, they are acquiring tools and methods that will serve them for a lifetime of helping themselves.

Reference

1 Joseph O'Connor and John Seymour, *Introducing NLP*, Thorsons Publishing, 1995.

Further reading

Robert Dilts, *Sleight of Mouth, the Magic of Conversational Belief Change*, Meta Publications, 1999.

Ian McDermott and Wendy Jago, *The NLP Coach*, Piatkus Publishing, 2001.

Some useful questions for helping clients to reframe an experience or event

- Does the problem really lie in the task, or the way you feel about the task?
- What 'rules' are you using that could be challenged?
- How would you deal with it if you were a man (or a woman, or a child, or a customer, or an MD)?
- What would (insert name of role model) do in this situation?
- What would you do if your bonus/life/job depended on the satisfactory resolution of this problem?
- What would the best manager in your company do?
- If you were your coach, what question would you ask right now?
- What would you try now if you knew you couldn't fail?
- What would you do now if you were already the person you know you have the potential of becoming?
- I know you don't know, but what if you did know?

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Reframing isn't about pretending everything is wonderful

Different types of reframing

Reframing can be broken down into two types – *content* and *context*.

Content reframing

The content of a situation is the meaning that is given to it. The content of what the client is saying has a cause-and-effect structure.

'I made a real mess of that presentation' means 'I am useless at presenting.'

This statement is also a generalisation: taken in isolation, the statement implies that from one single presentation a judgement can be made. When clients make comments like this, I have found it helpful to ask questions like these:

According to whom?

What might be useful about this experience?

How else could you describe your behaviour in this situation?

What can you learn from this experience?

How would you advise someone who had just given the presentation you did?

What did you do well?

The point of these questions is to help the client to consider the positive aspects of their own behaviour, looking at the situation from a whole range of different perspectives that may change the way they view the meaning they have given to it.

Context reframing

The context of a situation or event is about *where* it occurs. It is a simple fact that any experience, event or behaviour has different implications depending on where it occurs. If you have studied NLP, then you will know that in NLP one of the presuppositions is that all behaviour is useful in some contexts.

A client might say, 'I spent so much time on the detail that I just didn't get it finished in time – I'm just too detail conscious!'

This statement focuses on the negative aspect of a particular

behaviour, but there will be times when being detail conscious will serve the client well. A useful way of reframing this for the client might be to ask these questions:

When might being detailed be helpful for you?

Where could you use this skill in the future?

These questions get the client to focus on times when and where attention to detail is important. That can then help them to respond in a more positive way to what they see as a negative behaviour.

Using different frames

Representational systems are the way that we represent experience. These are typically described as visual, auditory and kinesthetic (feelings). Reframing can be used in different ways, depending on our preferred representational system. When coaching, it is easy to pick up the client's representational systems from the language they use. Here are some well-used examples.

I see what you mean – visual

That sounds about right – auditory

I feel unsure about that – kinesthetic

Looking for patterns and for repetition of visual, auditory and kinesthetic words, as well as context and content, helps the coach select the most helpful reframing tool for the client. Here are some examples and some advice as to how they might be used.

Change the picture

This is a highly effective way of working with visual clients who have created a picture of a particular experience in their mind's eye. As a coach, you can suggest they try making the following changes and then reflect on how this alters their experience of the situation:

- Changing the colour.
- Making the picture larger or smaller.
- Changing the frame around the picture.
- Adjusting the contrast.
- Adding some humorous imagery.

The new perspectives offered by these changes may also influence the feelings that the client has about them. In this way, a potentially daunting meeting – with the boss, for example – can be adjusted so that it becomes a more pleasant experience or even one that the client looks forward to.

Reframing the internal dialogue

Our internal dialogue is the constant chatter that goes on in our heads. This conversation that we have with ourselves can be positive or negative. I often ask my clients what they are saying to themselves at certain points during the coaching session. This helps them to notice what their inner voice is saying and whether it is helping or hindering their progress. You can ask clients with auditory preferences to try the following and reflect on how this alters their perception:

- Turn the volume up or down.
- Add some funny music.
- Change the pace or tone of the voice.
- Change any negatives to positives.

As with changing the picture, this process also has an impact on feelings about the experience. Changing the internal dialogue from 'I'm hopeless at managing my team' to 'I'm a fantastic people manager' will not make the client a great manager, but it is a much more helpful starting point from which to become one – and the journey then appears less daunting.

Looking at the situation from a different perspective

Sometimes we can be so close to a situation or event that we can't see the wood for the trees. We become intimately bound up with events, issues and concerns about how to tackle a relationship or a situation in our lives. This often leaves us trapped in a cycle of non-productive behaviour. A useful way of helping clients to reframe this sort of situation is to get them to view their experience or event from another person's shoes, often described as being in second position – or even third position.

As a coach you can encourage your client to look at things from a different perspective by asking questions like these:

If you were the other person, what would you notice about your behaviour/approach/manner?

If you were an observer watching the event/discussion, what would you notice?

What would your mentor/manager/best friend/coach do in this situation?

I have found it helpful for some clients to move around physically as they do this exercise, imagining that they are someone else observing what is going on from another position in the room.

The process of stepping into another's shoes can take the heat out of a potentially fraught situation, helping the client to see a relationship in a different way, identify alternative ways of tackling a problem and receive a variety of different ways of responding to situations. It is effective for clients who have visual and kinesthetic preferences.

Moving the feeling

Some of us get negative or bad feelings about situations or events, and these are often associated with a negative past experience. If, for example, our past experience of giving a presentation was a pretty negative one, then the thought of giving another can create a range of limiting sensations and feelings. Again, this is an example of a past experience limiting future capability. It is, however, possible to change or move some of these feelings so that they become less intense and allow us to move forward more productively.

Here are some examples of how feelings can be reframed for the client.

- 'Heavy, like a lead weight in the gut' could be reframed as 'light as a feather and in the head'.
- 'A tension in the back of the neck' could be reframed as 'a calm sensation around the chest'.

Sometimes clients can give shapes or colour to their feelings if asked. If they do, it is possible to ask them to change the colour and shape as well as the location. For clients with dominant kinesthetic representational systems, this can be a highly effective way of reframing feelings.