

Coaching creative talent can be exciting, hugely rewarding and extremely challenging.

**Alec McPhedran** outlines a coaching framework for developing creative people – GENIUS



# Turning ideas into reality

**I**n my naïve, innocent, early days, coaching was working with the client, imparting my worldly knowledge and wisdom as well as, sometimes, working on their ideas. Of course, it's actually about working solely on the individual's agenda, developing his ideas, stretching his thinking – hands-on coaching and hands-off coaching.

One of the key skills within coaching is managing the process of the coaching session in a timely way, as well as making good use of your questioning and listening skills. In the creative industries, in which I mainly work, it is critical that ideas and solutions came from the client, and that's really hard when you believe you know what the solution is. But surely that's one of the points. It's not

what you believe the solution is, it's what the client believes it is.

In the creative world of television, film, music, arts, theatre, games and music, the idea is the asset. Talent always shines through. On that basis, creative coaching, and indeed training creative people, relies on always working with the talent and their ideas first and foremost.

Great creative talent coaching is about working the individual, his imagination and his aspiration into an inspiring and exciting reality. Not yours. It has to be owned by him. So your inputs have to be really relevant, valid and appropriate. You, the coach, act as the conductor. The individual has the talent. The creative coach's role is to get the best out of the talent.

Like most coaches, I have come across a number of really useful coaching models, including the often-used GROW model

(Goal, Reality, Options and Will do). Another useful model is CLEAR, developed by Peter Hawkins. CLEAR concentrates on Contracting, Listening, Exploring, Action and Review. However, within the world of creative talent, these two models as a guide to the structure of a coaching session don't always quite work as effectively as the situation requires.

Creativity, innovation, exciting aspirations, firing imagination, new territories and fresh new ideas all need turning into a reality. That's the great challenge in media and arts with creative coaching. For me, a new approach was needed that worked differently for some of my clients.

### GENIUS

GENIUS coaching developed following a chat with a pretty cynical script-writing friend who felt coaching had its place but most definitely not in the world of creative people.

Her previous experience of being coached at a leading broadcaster had been helpful only in career progression, not in her desire to be the best in her field of telling stories. A number of coaches had been unable to really fulfil her aspiration.

This made me think about myself, my own ability to go further than I had been before with people and, therefore, how I could meet her challenge. Yes, we do offer stretching objectives but are we held back with the SMART objective format, particularly with the Reality part? Whose reality? Her point was whether we really always push past the boundaries. Was I helping my coachees by agreeing to their initial objectives or was I really stretching them, taking them to new and exciting areas, sometimes scary in their ambition?

Coaching creative talent, of course, has its challenges. Buy-

## Great creative talent coaching is about working the individual, their imagination and their aspiration into an inspiring and exciting reality

in, first of all, is often an issue. They don't often think there will be a benefit because 'nobody understands them'.

In business or management coaching, we develop objectives for personal and business improvement where appropriate. With creatives, this causes automatic eye-glazing – a weird and unusual symptom, I find. However, once they acknowledge that it's linked to helping them turn ideas into reality, a script into a film, an idea into an image, they become engaged.

Coaching talent has other challenges, typically in keeping up with the fast-paced process of exploring options and ideas and managing the flow of ideas without trapping them. Equally, the use of a coaching programme

or session objective can very

often change as the ideas and enthusiasm move in different directions.

Remember that, in the creative world, the idea is the asset. In many cases, it's not right to pitch your creative ideas unless you have the passion for them. In coaching, as the idea evolves and the passion for it grows, that is when the objective can change – becoming more challenging, more exciting. The different approach here is being able to stop, reflect, review and revise, if appropriate, the coaching objectives.

Over the following months, therefore, I revisited my sessions, the processes I was using and the results we were getting. Goals were being achieved but I was wondering if they could have been wider, more challenging – daring to be truly different.

The GENIUS model of coaching evolved after testing it out on some knowing victims with mixed success. People who were really up for a new adventure opened their mind to great new ideas and opportunities that truly seemed off the wall. It made others feel uncomfortable and my learning was that you have to work with the aspiration and the reality of the coachee's ambition. Again, not *my* ambition.

Eventually the GENIUS model came about, probably the result of a fire, aim, ready strategy. It's now one of my favourite models, particularly when working with exciting talent.

GENIUS coaching is simple. It's another model for coaches' toolkits, drawing its inspiration from the likes of GROW, CLEAR, OSKAR and other useful models.



## Goals

The first step of GENIUS is to set the **goals** – an obvious starting point. We know the goal is critical for a number of reasons but, primarily, it provides us with the reminder of what it is we are working on, what needs to be achieved, and it makes sure all future conversation is relevant to achieving the goal.

With GENIUS coaching, there are three types of goals to set:

1. The aspirational goal of the overall coaching contract. What will we have really achieved at the end of the coaching programme? This should be highly ambitious, breaking into new territory for the coachee
2. Session goals. What do we need to achieve by the end of each coaching session that directly supports the aspirational goal?
3. Action goals. As a result of the coaching session, what steps does the coachee need to take by the time we next meet to achieve the aspirational goal?

Using this three-step approach to goal setting provides the coachee with consistency and focus for making things happen and a clear understanding of why he needs to do things.

The key skill for the coach is managing and setting the aspirational goal.

## Energy

Once the aspirational and session goals have been set, the next part of GENIUS coaching is to look at the **energy** of the coachee. He may want to achieve something that is far reaching for him but does he really have the energy?

The desire to achieve and the energy to do something can sometimes be poles apart.

Get the client to rate his energy levels for making this work, perhaps with a score out of ten. Without the genuine energy to achieve the goal, is the goal the right one in the first place? Discussing energy allows you to explore why that rating has been given, based on reviewing the current situations, issues he is facing and other things he has tried.

## Nurture

Once goals and the energy levels needed to achieve them have been established, you need to **nurture** a range of ideas and opportunities. This, again, is where the coach's questioning, listening and creative thinking skills come into play. Your ability to explore ideas and encourage the creative thinking of things that are really off the wall – that have never been done before – is absolutely critical.

Nurturing ideas should ideally be treated in the same way as a pure creative thinking session: pull out the ideas, don't critique too early, set the parameters linked to the objectives and work through some of the ideas. My experience has shown that many creative people have good visual thinking skills, so do use Post-Its, flipcharts with colour pens, magazines and the like – visual stimulants are fantastic. Equally, having a range of soft toys or items around can be a useful sub-stimulant.

This is also a great time to use challenging and creative thinking tools such as de Bono's Six Thinking Hats (data, emotion, negativity, positiveness, feel good, innovative thinking and process). Often, Six Thinking Hats generates all the issues and options as well as creating new ideas. It also provides the coach with an opportunity to contribute to the generation of ideas when using the Green Hat.

In one session, a young writer and I explored how he could promote his work to television people and, through the Green

Hat discussion, identified an idea that eventually became a web-based drama using new actors and quality mobile phone film clips.

The website now has a following of more than 250,000 people and he will be meeting an American television station to explore new projects.

Once you have looked at each idea, work through and prioritise the key actions that came out of the nurturing process. Priority one is the way forward. Options two, three and four are potential back-up ideas or ideas for further discussion at an appropriate time.

From the Six Thinking Hats model, you will then be able to move into the next stage of GENIUS coaching, thanks to identifying emotions and negatives from the Red and Black Hat discussions.

## Inhibitors

You need to revisit the agreed priority actions from the nurturing stage and identify the **inhibitors**. What's going to stop the ideas from working? This is really powerful as you seek out the negatives. Again, de Bono's Black and Red Hats significantly help here. The use of the Yellow Hat helps to explore benefits and counter arguments to any potential inhibitors. It's those negatives that you then address with the client to establish how they will be tackled if, or when, they crop up.

I guess it's the development of the cunning plan B scenario. We are great at planning the perfect life but, unfortunately, life's not perfect. Therefore it makes sense to anticipate inhibitors and manage them into positives. It's worthwhile at this point revisiting your nurtured actions to see if they need revising to reflect the points identified in the inhibitors stage of the session.

## Utopia

So, we now know what the client wants and how much energy he has to achieve his goal. We've



generated some great ideas, and have identified the potential problems and the likely responses to any negatives. If it all works fantastically, then... **utopia**: an imagined perfect place or state.

This is where the coach's NLP knowledge comes into play. Can you get the individual to visually, auditory and kinaesthetically imagine his utopia once the goals have been achieved? This is a powerful tool to make the end result feel real. What will he see happening, how will it sound and how great will he and others feel once it's been achieved?

It's that thinking process that turns the aspiration into the reality for a creative. Envisioning, recording or feeling that end goal gives it life. It puts utopia in the mind of the individual. I have in the past encouraged clients to make that picture real – getting a close or true-to-life image and placing it at their desk or work space. For the auditory types, a written statement always at hand has the same effect.

We're back to the immense importance for creatives of goals linked to imagination. Once goals look real, they *become* real. Setting, writing down and imagining goals are an essential role of the coach to get the creative talent to understand this.

I believe that the best prediction of your future is whatever you believe it will be. The skill of the coach is to plant that positive and exciting future with the talent.

### Steps

Finally, the coaching session is rounded off by summarising the **steps** to be taken by the coachee. What will he do between now and the next session?

These are developed by writing SMART (specific, measurable, realistic, agreed and timed) action goals and clarifying the actual steps to take to achieve them. I guess in the good old days that was called action planning.



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So there you have it – yet another wonderful tool for coaching. The very simple GENIUS coaching model. It's about pushing and developing ambition and creativity for creative people, exploring wide-ranging opportunities and imagining the realities of what success will look, feel or sound like when achieved.

Obviously, I know this model may not be perfect for some –

that's the beauty of the business we're in. If we were all perfect, we wouldn't have anybody to coach.

G – Goals to be achieved  
E – Energy to achieve the goals  
N – Nurturing and exploring options for achieving the goals  
I – Inhibitors that may arise on the way to achieving goals  
U – Utopia when the goals will be achieved  
S – Steps to be taken to achieve the goals. ■

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