

Finding depth in the coach's signature presence

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As coaching has developed into a high performance profession, the 'signature presence' of a coach has emerged as the practitioner's most significant attribute. In the past, there have been those who have thought of this 'coaching signature' in terms of how to establish a brand identity, stand out in a crowded market-place, find a niche and draw a likeminded clientele. However, as the profession and rigour of coaching has become more established, the understanding of the concept of a coach's signature presence has developed as a characteristic that eclipses the marketing strategy. It has a deep impact on the actual client experience of the coach.



In her renowned book, *Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart*, Mary Beth O'Neill defines a coach's signature presence as: *"bringing your self when you coach — your values, passion, creativity, emotion, and discerning judgment — to any given moment with a client."* This demands that coaches are especially adept when it comes to high levels of self-mastery, and of consciousness. For businesses looking to invest in coaching services that effectively help bring about organisational change, these are important criteria to consider when recruiting a coach

Emma Sexton is a coach practitioner and coach educator at [SACAP](#) (the South African College of Applied Psychology) who specialises in facilitating the development of a coach signature presence. She points out that a signature presence is relevant for anyone interested in a conscious and intentional path in life. And, in the coaching context, it's not just for coaches, it's for their clients too. "As a coach, you are in a professional intimate relationship with a client, partnering them on a significant learning journey of change towards their desired future goals," she says, "thus your signature presence serves a key purpose in coaching, to invoke purposeful and authentic attention and engagement from both you and your client, as you

assist your client to discover their optimum pathway of change. In each coaching conversation, both your and your client's signature presences are in the room. Are you conscious of maximizing this potential? Are you assisting your client to develop their signature presence?"

Identifying, understanding and putting your signature presence to work for you and your clients is far from a once-off educational event. In effect, the coach with an impactful signature presence is an ongoing learner, reflecting on every interaction with every client, and changing and growing as a coach and a human being. Mary Beth O'Neill expands on her definition of a signature presence by describing the coach-client interaction as *"moving through... moments in your own unique way, thus making the most of your own strengths, interests, and eccentricities."*

"For me," Sexton says, "O'Neill highlights three things - being yourself, being present in the moment, and being adaptable through moments. The interaction of these three aspects can often bring about paradox and ambiguity, as well as joy, motivation, and a whole host of wonderful experiences! The key is how we maintain equilibrium amongst these three aspects, to stay true to our signature presence, and thus ourselves."

Sexton makes the point that clients present unique challenges to coaches in their sessions in the form of certain personality traits, stories, stress, heightened emotions such as anxiety, habits and resistance - to name a few. The coach is required to be present to all of this while preventing a reactive response to it. Without the consciousness to withstand a client's stress, a coach can easily be triggered to saying something or taking action that relieves their own discomfort instead of helping the

client to find their own solutions.

“Of course, we are human, so it is not about being perfectly in our signature presence all the time. However, it is about building our ability to recover from the reactive moments, so that we can return to being present as a resourceful human, serving another as a coach.”

Sexton recommends the following to help coaches further develop their signature presence:

- Engage in practices that enable you to go within, reflecting deeply about who you are and what you bring to the world. ‘Know thyself’ - your strengths, interests and eccentricities! This isn’t a once-off reflection or a stage in one’s life, it involves ongoing practice. This includes practices that engage the mind, body, spirit, and/or shadow.
- Become familiar with your reactions to aspects such as ambiguity and paradox, and find ways to navigate this terrain in coaching to serve your client’s learning experience.
- Develop tolerance and compassion for the reactivity within you and your client, thus enabling you to access a responsive state soon after. This role modelling can demonstrate to your client the impact that presence has on their ability to access their resourcefulness, and thus move more effectively towards their goals.
- Prepare for coaching sessions. How do you want to conduct yourself in the session? What is your goal for the session? How can you offer an optimum learning space for your client today? Knowing your client as you do, how can you serve and honour their best thinking and ‘being’ today? Knowing yourself as you do today, how can you manage yourself in the midst of adversity in a coaching conversation?
- The journey of continually living and developing your signature presence is happening now, not just in coaching sessions. Be clear about what you bring to coaching, and how to engage with another human that honours and amplifies their signature presence.

On Wednesday, 13 September, SACAP will be hosting a coaching Twitter Talk from 1pm to 2pm, focusing on the coach’s signature presence – What is a signature presence? How do you discover your signature presence as a coach? How do you maintain your signature presence while creating an environment where clients can access their unique and creative thinking?

Join the conversation by following the hashtag #CoachSignature and the @SACAPGrad_CL Twitter handle.

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