

COACHING ACROSS RACE IN DYNAMIC TIMES

Through decades of coaching and training in diversity and inclusion, **Anita Sanchez** has found that that when coaching across race and culture is successful, both she and her client emerge with greater knowledge and wisdom.

*‘S/he who knows others is learned and intelligent;
s/he who knows oneself is wiser still’*

- Lao Tzu

When you commit to being truly effective in coaching cross-culturally or across race, you may discover as much about yourself and the larger realities that exist than you do about your client – or more. This is particularly true for coaches from majority groups, though it applies to all of us. Similarly, white leaders routinely report that, when they mentor people of colour and other diverse groups, they are convinced that what they learn is greater than what they give their mentee. It is a beautiful example of the coaching dance, both growing through engagement.

A NEVER-ENDING JOURNEY: THREE INSIGHTS INTO CROSS-CULTURAL COACHING

In service to the goal of great coaching across race and culture, here are three foundational keys to being a genuinely effective coach for an individual (or a team) from a different race group than your own:

1. **Continually open yourself to the recognition that your understanding of the world is missing essential data.** This requires a commitment to seeing the world through different eyes, letting go of unconscious insistence that your perspective is the ‘right’ view of the world. To do so, we need to recognise, and learn about, our own culture and the ways in which it frames our understanding of the world. When we see how we have been trained to interpret situations and behaviours, we can begin to notice how we might misunderstand what others with different cultural frames feel, do and believe.

Without this insight, we will be blind to the ways in which we impose our way of being on our clients, through parochial insistence that our way is the only way or ethnocentric assertion that our way is the best way. If we aspire to effective cross-cultural coaching, we have to work towards achieving a multicultural perspective that there are many good ways of knowing and operating in the world.

2. **Believe the coachee’s experience is real.** Believe that their personal encounters with individual bias and systemic racism are facts. When we accept that, the coachee does not have to expend energy convincing us. We can then honour them and be present in the work as they come up with their own insights and solutions to the problems and systemic barriers they face, as well as the opportunities that arise. Recently, a white coach told me that she kept telling her black client how to create partnerships, but that the black client kept saying employers wouldn’t trust or hire them that way. The coach kept trying to get the coachee to see how her negative assumption(s) were holding her back. The white coach would say, ‘How do you know unless you try?’. Upon reflection, the white coach owned that she did not believe her client – that she was not deeply hearing her client nor was she seeing through her client’s eyes. As a coach, you can create so much power and safety for that black, or any ethnic minority, client by believing their experience, recognising that it is different

from yours. Furthermore, the white coach I was working with realised that she was actually, unknowingly, asking her client to confront not only biased individuals but also sizeable anti-blackness racism in the organisational system. The white coach realised that she could provide a lot more support by believing the client. With this container of trust, the client could feel acknowledged and supported. A racially aware, culturally responsive coach is able to support co-creating strategies that are more appropriate – and realistically safer – for the client.

3. **Even more consciously use the power of listening.** All too often, organisations normatively avoid allowing discussion of race. Leaders look to go anywhere else, making it difficult, even hazardous, to speak about experiencing racial marginalisation and prejudice. After decades of turning a deaf ear and a blind eye, the murder of George Floyd opened peoples’ hearts and minds to the truth that people of darker skin around the world have a very different experience than others do when it comes to law, business, housing and other institutions.

As coaches, we can open the door by listening with empathy, holding the coachee of colour in the highest possible positive light. We can listen without judgement, understanding the impact of clients’ experiences on their lives and their world views. The simple act of listening, allowing an individual to speak their experience and be fully heard, is a powerful one of support which facilitates emotional release and clears the mind to consider paths forward. To this end, practise listening with the softest part of your ear and an expanding heart, especially when working with someone of a different race.

As coaches, we have a potent impact on our clients and, often, the systems they live and work in. The good news is – if we are open to new information about the world and willing to believe what our clients tell us, listening to their stories – we can contribute to deconstructing racism and support dreams of the most positive possible future for all of humanity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Anita Sanchez PhD, Aztec and Mexican-American, applies indigenous wisdom and modern science to guide leaders in creating caring and inclusive teams and organisations. She’s trained tens of thousands of leaders in global corporations and non-profits, and is a board member of Bioneers, the Pachamama Alliance, and a member of the Transformational Leadership Council. She is the author of *The Four Sacred Gifts: Indigenous Wisdom for Modern Times*.

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