

SELF-TRUST • THE POWER OF CHOICE • TRUST AT WORK • NEUROSCIENCE OF TRUST

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TRUST.

WHY IS IT INTRINSIC TO COACHING?

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HOW CAN I REBUILD TRUST WITH A CLIENT?



The Situation:

Four months into a six-month coaching engagement, my client said she felt that I doubted her ability to succeed in her job, leading to trust issues. I was surprised by her perception and saw it as a misunderstanding – even if I held such thoughts, I wouldn't have expressed them without discussion. I now seek ways to restore her trust in me. How can I effectively rebuild that trust?

By Victoria Trabosh, CDC, CEC

The situation you describe is common in coaching relationships, where communication nuances can easily be misinterpreted due to the personal and vulnerable nature of the engagement. Addressing the issue with authenticity, empathy and transparency will be essential to restoring your professional bond.

Acknowledge the Concern – Begin by recognizing your client's feelings without defensiveness. Trust issues often stem from unaddressed tension. Set up a dedicated session where you allow her to explain in detail what led to her perception. A simple yet powerful statement like, "I appreciate you sharing your concerns with me. I genuinely want to understand what made you feel this way," can open the door to constructive dialogue.

Practice Active Listening – During your conversation, focus on truly hearing what your client is saying, rather than planning your response. Reflect back her statements to confirm your understanding. Avoid offering explanations or corrections – instead, validate her experience. This approach shows respect and demonstrates that her feelings matter to you.

Take Responsibility for Impact – Simply apologize. It takes great courage to put the skunk on the table when someone tells you how she felt. Don't over-engineer your response – a simple and heartfelt, "I'm sorry" matters.

Clarify Your Intentions – Once your client feels heard, clarify your coaching approach and intentions. And search yourself for honesty: did you judge her? And then reflect back your understanding of how your comment may have come across. What is your intent? To challenge her constructively, and if so, how can you do it more effectively next time?

Time to Reset Your Relationship – Revise your working approach together. Ask your client how you can best support her moving forward and what changes might help her feel more secure. Reaffirm confidentiality, respect, and mutual commitment as the foundation of your partnership.

Demonstrate Consistency & Care – Rebuilding trust is a process, not a one-time conversation. Be consistent in your support, feedback and communication style in every subsequent session. Celebrate her progress, emphasize her strengths, encourage open communication, and specifically ask for honest feedback on the coaching process.

Reflect & Learn – It's never easy to hear this kind of feedback. Acknowledge your own emotions and reset. You're in a business that requires you to show up each and every time authentically and with vulnerability. Remember, we learn more from failure than success. Keep working at being a great coach and be thankful your client spoke her truth rather than talk with her feet.

By Suzi Pomerantz, MT, MCC

I have so many questions! You were surprised, which makes me wonder: Were you paying attention to what your client was not saying? Was your attention on yourself? Was there a shift or incident that you were not aware of that caused this rift so deep into the engagement/relationship?

Is the misunderstanding on your part, or are you insinuating here that your client is misunderstanding something? Are you invalidating your client's experience with your judgment? Can you take her statement at face value as true and seek to understand what is happening for your client? Can you explore for context?

The fact that you say, "even if I had such thoughts" strikes me as a bit defensive, my dear ... please look inside and honestly reflect on whether you did (or do) have such thoughts – even unconsciously – and that your client is highly perceptive.

Your client demonstrated enormous trust in calling out her experience of your judgment. She came to you and expressed her concerns. This is great news, and proof of trust in your relationship. If she didn't trust you, she wouldn't bother telling you that she feels doubted by you.

To repair and rebuild trust involves stepping aside from you and making it all about her. You might start by validating her feelings. You are sorry you hurt her. You are sorry she read something from you that you did not intend, and that you do

not actually doubt her ability. Authentically share what you see in her and why you do believe in her success. Thank her for sharing her truth with you, for sharing her experience with you, and acknowledge her courage in bringing this to your attention.

Ask her questions to find out where along the path the misunderstanding emerged. Then, if you do not feel that trust has been restored, ask her point-blank what it will take to restore her trust in you as her coach.

Keep the door open to multiple conversations about trust and the relationship going forward. At the macro level, you can explore what she believes about trust. What messages did she learn as a kid? Is trust a gift to be given freely, or must it be earned? What happens when someone breaks your trust? What patterns does she have in her relationships? Is what she feels about you doubting her ability to succeed a familiar thing for her in other relationships? Does she want to improve her self-esteem or explore more about Imposter Syndrome?

You could potentially turn this into a second coaching engagement out of this exploration into trust. Go bravely with an open heart and dive in.

By combining validation with actionable strategies, you can help this leader feel supported, while equipping them with tools to challenge perceptions and strengthen their leadership impact.

By Craig Carr, PCC, CPCC

Although you aren't aware of saying anything that would cause your client to feel that you doubt her ability to succeed – at least not consciously – there is now a trust gap where once there was a connection. You can fix this, but it may not be easy or comfortable.

First, a little honesty: Trust doesn't erode overnight, and it rarely breaks due to a single misunderstanding. More likely, subtle signs accumulated – facial expressions, tone, or even the absence of affirming language – and contributed to a story she now believes. That's the sticky part. Your job is not to correct her narrative, but to listen deeply to what's behind it.

Since you can't identify a specific breach, this is where systemic intelligence earns its stripes. Recognize that beneath her comment is a hidden dynamic—perhaps an earlier experience where a mentor truly doubted her, or a workplace culture that critiques more than it supports.

As her coach, you may have unintentionally stepped into a pattern already weighed down by past mistrust. You're not the source of the wound, but you've been cast in a familiar role. Acknowledge it, explore the territory gently, and – perhaps most challenging – resist defending your intentions.

Begin with the design (or redesign) of the coaching alliance. Reassess how you want to work together. Ask: "What helps you feel trusted and supported in a relationship like this?" Then listen—truly listen—for cues about her systemic past. The act of naming and co-creating a new working agreement serves as

a form of repair. My one caution (and I see this happening to coaches far too often) is not to get triangulated. If her mistrust is actually about her boss, the organizational culture or a long history of being underestimated, she may unconsciously be handing you a burden that does not belong to you.

It's a classic systemic pattern every coach needs to understand because it is adept at creating confusion, draining energy and blocking progress. Your job is not to become the rescuer or the accused, but to bring the dynamic into the light and return the responsibility to where it belongs.

Lastly, don't underestimate the power of acknowledging your own humanity. You might say, "I'm truly sorry that something in my approach left you feeling doubted. That wasn't my intention, but I understand that impact matters more than intent. I appreciate you bringing it forward."

And remember, restoring trust isn't about being perfect. It's about being present, open, and courageous enough to address what remains unsaid. If you can navigate that terrain together, the trust that emerges will be deeper than what you started with. •

Are you grappling with a sticky situation?

You don't have to go it alone. Let our senior coaches give you some different perspectives to consider. Email your situation to submissions@choice-online.com and put "sticky situations" in the subject line.