

Janeé Franklin Coaching Diary Nov 2022-Mar 2023

Early/Mid-Career INGO HR Professional, Catholic Relief Services

Why I Decided to Work with A Professional Coach & My Expectations

During my 1.5 years on the DEI team in my agency, I received repeated feedback on certain elements of my behavior. Over time, I found that I was neither able to fully grasp the criticism nor improve it.

At that point, I started exploring the possibility of getting a workplace mentor or a professional coach. However, the formal options in the agency were not available to people below a certain job grade level.

After the abrupt and tension-filled departure of the team's director and an intense, in-person retreat with the remaining team members and our executive sponsors, the head of HR met with me to discuss my performance as she had observed it. She recommended I work with a professional coach and put in motion the process for making that happen.

Given my history of doing well in academic environments, having an external accountability partner and a "teacher" of sorts seemed like the best way to address my issues.

I expected that professional coaching would look like the therapist-client or schoolteacher-student relationship I had been part of in the past. I anticipated recapping recent workplace situations, analyzing how I had behaved in them, and then being given "homework" or specific tasks to practice new strategies. At the end of the experience, I assumed I would be given some sort of formal assessment to see if I had made marked, positive change towards the goals laid out for me.

Chemistry Session

Overall, I found my coach Halina to be a warm, yet direct person. She seemed like someone who was easy to talk with and who did not mind having a bit of fun. She gave me a fairly clear idea of what the 3-month period would look like and the type of coach she was. She also clarified the difference between the professional coaching and therapy models.

Clarity, empathy, openness, a sense of humor, and a willingness to actively guide another are all things I value and appreciate, so I decided to proceed with her as my coach.

Session 1 Reflections

Before the session, I anticipated reviewing the goals I had sent in advance and answering any clarifying questions Halina had. In reality, we spent most of the session going over the first two goals with Halina getting more context behind each one.

One of the biggest revelations during that session was when she said, “It seems like your job is to be a champion for your colleagues.” That really resonated with me and gave me renewed energy and purpose, especially as that aligns with the kind of employee I want to be.

Although we only discussed the first two goals, I found the questions she asked me to reflect on in relationship to them quite powerful:

1. What is the problem that I would like this outcome to answer?
2. How could I have done things differently?
3. What might have happened instead?
4. What have I missed or not noticed over time that has brought me to this point?

I honestly did not expect her to ask me to further examine the goals I had written out, so ending the conversation with such questions surprised me. Nevertheless, I did some deep written reflection on my own between session 1 and 2. This helped me to see several things more clearly.

First, I was able to identify the key events that informed my goals and the common threads between them. Next, I considered my role in those situations (an exercise in humility for sure) and was able to identify new actions I could have taken along with their potential consequences.

Finally, I was able to reflect on all my experiences collectively over the last 1.5 years, review them from a privilege of distance, and recognize some warning signs that I ignored. Overall, the session helped me to reframe the situations and see my role in the outcomes. This not only helped me to think of those involved in a less antagonistic way, but it revealed the agency I still had in my own work life.

Session 2 Reflections

In this session, we focused on my challenge with mentally pivoting at work as well as general workplace conversational skills. What I remember most from this session were the many concrete suggestions that Halina provided, that I later began trying out:

- When asked to pivot, physically turn in your chair to get a new perspective
- Ask for clarification when you don't understand something
- Ask questions and make comments from a position of curiosity rather than bluntly (the latter of which can be perceived as challenging someone)
- Questions to ask when soliciting feedback: What went well? What could have gone better? What would you have preferred instead?

We ended the 90 minutes with some reflection questions that compared my current work to my new JD and the academic settings with which I was familiar:

- If my agency were a course, what would someone need to know to understand the agency and be successful in it? For each of those elements, who would be the best people to contact?
- If CRS were a community, how would you engage with it? What would you put in place to create that engagement?

Afterwards, I was able to identify the key “content” I would need to fully understand the agency as well as brainstorm activities that would help me to further engage the CRS employee community.

Regarding the latter, I found that what I described was close to what I was already doing. That assured me that I was on the right track. It also gave me some strategies to consider for improving a large event I had just held a few weeks prior.

Session 3 Reflections

We ended up ending my third session early as I was exhausted and struggled to focus. However, I did recap some of the strategies I had tried out since our last session:

1. During a meeting where I was having a tough time adjusting my thinking, I turned off my camera briefly and physically turned in my chair to face the stairs. It was not effective in helping me to consider a new way of doing things, but I am still willing to try that technique again.
2. At another time, I had received an email that, upon first reading, provoked feelings of anger and defensiveness. Instead of responding immediately in anger, I acknowledged my emotions and decided I needed to calm down before answering it. After a few hours, I re-read the message and realized I had misread it earlier. I was then able to respond calmly and respectfully.
3. I had been more conscientious about using more formal, professional language during workplace meetings. I hope this will retrain my mind to adjust my speech for my current context as well as encourage others to take me more seriously.
4. Finally, my previous supervisor who left abruptly had reached out via text since the last session. Even though several months having passed, I found a lot of emotions—frustration, confusion, sadness, anger—still coming up for me. Instead of responding immediately, I gave myself some time to process my feelings, consider how best to respond, and identify my personal boundaries in the process. I believe this process helped me to respond in a way that I hope will not cause any professional tensions in the future should I need to reconnect with that person.

Overall, it was helpful to review my “progress” and ways I was applying what I had been discussing in session in real life. Even though I failed sometimes, it was a good reminder to keep practicing, remembering that changing habits takes time.

Session 4 Reflections

My fourth coaching session focused on strategies for managing strong emotions during workplace conversations. This was (and still is) one of my biggest personal struggles. Because I spend so much time trying (in vain) to control or manage my feelings during conversations, I am not able to be fully present or consider alternative approaches.

I appreciated Halina's suggestions to verbally acknowledge and process my feelings in real time when that happens, but the idea of doing seems to be a way to only seem LESS professional than I already do.

Nevertheless, this conversation was a start towards addressing conflict earlier so it does not seep further into my professional relationships. I also appreciated Halina's challenges to some assumptions I had made about mutual understanding and the need to ensure both parties really are talking about the same thing.

Finally, I appreciated her suggestion to think of behavior change as a type of "experimentation." I can try different strategies, evaluate their impact, and then adopt the best ones for me over time. Although it is still nerve-wracking, I look forward to the process.

Session 5 Reflections

This session continued with the theme of the last one: how to manage difficult emotions during colleague interactions. However, this one was different in that I was able to connect the concepts we were talking about to some of my other life experiences.

Those examples and their connections helped bring the concepts Halina had introduced to life and give me my own "shorthand" for remembering emotional management techniques.

One thing I forgot to mention in my last reflection was that these strategies would help me to manage both my emotions AND that of the other party (to the extent possible). It also helped reinforce previous conversations about entering dialogue from a place of curiosity as well as asking clarifying questions to ensure mutual understanding.

Finally, we discussed the place of morals and opinions in such interactions. My academic background in social work encouraged me to act as an "advocate" or "champion" for those often left out of discussions or decisions impacting them.

However, it was helpful to remember that a) being a champion does not necessarily mean that someone with a different view is an "enemy" and b) that I still have more to learn about the art of negotiation.

Session 6 Reflections

My last session started off as a time of sharing. Over the course of the last month, I found myself successfully implementing multiple strategies Halina and I discussed during our sessions.

I was really proud of myself and pleased that I had been retaining what I had learned. (That is not any snub to Halina, but rather a surprise at my own memory.) It also showed me that the extra attention to these performance issues is in fact paying off. (I am a recovering perfectionist, so again, I was surprised at myself for sticking in out and seeing things improve over time.)

We then proceeded to talk about ways to better manage what I have felt to be an increasingly overwhelming workload with more leadership responsibilities than I have previously had. I appreciated the strategies we discussed as they both helped me consider how to better delegate work and how to demonstrate a strong, confident leader presence.

Finally, we ended the conversation with a question about what I envision for my professional future. While I shared that my ambitions ultimately did not lie in the international humanitarian aid sector, the question did make me think about what else I could strive for in my remaining time at CRS.

Final Analysis

I came into my coaching sessions with 3 goals:

1. To further develop my emotional intelligence in the workplace
2. To cultivate more active listening and conversational skills within my specific agency culture
3. To develop a more agile, growth-oriented mindset.

I can confidently say I have learned several strategies related to each goal that I have already started practicing. I have been sensing a difference in how my colleagues and supervisors perceive me, which I think is in part due to my tenure as well as (I hope) marked improvement related to my performance and behaviour.

I have confidence that as I continue experimenting with these strategies, I will determine which ones can permanently stay in my workplace “utility belt.”

In fact, when I followed-up with my supervisor the other week to find out if there was anything else I needed to do to be eligible for promotion consideration at the end of the fiscal year, he told me that I was not only on track, but that he and his supervisor were both having the conversations to seriously consider it.

If that is not an indicator of success, I am not sure what is!