

Focusing-Agenda Setting

Focusing to Create an Agenda for the Conversation

A coaching conversation needs a strategic direction; this is necessary in order for the coach to guide the conversation effectively. Setting an agenda is a collaborative process that happens during each conversation, and the client's goals and needs can sometimes shift during the coaching process.

The process of collaborative agenda setting invokes many of the core competencies, including D: Ensuring that the client's agenda, needs, interests, and preferences drive the coaching, and E: Inviting the client to select the focus of the session. The coach assists the client in narrowing, clarifying, confirming the agenda. This can include what the client wants to focus on, what they want to take away from the conversation, and might include what they feel needs to be addressed in order to arrive there.

Below are several specific strategies for focusing to get to a clear agenda for the conversation.

We might use open questions such as:

- *What is an area you'd like to focus on during our time today?*
- *What feels important for us to discuss today?*
- *What's your top priority to address today?*
- *Which area feels most ripe for change to you?*
- *What feels important for us to focus on today?*

The coach might also acknowledge their response with a reflection (a statement that describes your sense of their current perspective or underlying values, intentions, and emotions). Or, the coach might also inquire as to what's important about addressing that topic or their reasons for selecting this starting place. Be sure to get clear on the client's true underlying goal/desire.

- *What does _____ mean for you?*
- *What made this goal important enough for them to prioritize it?*
- *If this [topic] was ideal for you, what would that look like?*

Once a topic area is determined by the client, the coach can support the client in identifying what about that topic the client would specifically like to address, and what they might wish to come away with in regard to that topic area.

- *What can we address specifically in this conversation to get you closer to the outcome you're seeking?*
- *By exploring ____ today, what would be the most helpful outcome of this conversation for you?*

If the client has difficulty identifying a focus, another strategy can be to support the client connecting with their broader goals, or provide a menu of options that the client already articulated from which the client can choose.

- *I've heard you talk about A, B, or C. What, if anything, here makes sense to you as a place to begin?*
- *Sounds like your priorities are A, B, and C. Which one seems like it will have the most impact for you to address today?*

While we are seeking to support a client-centered process in agenda setting, sometimes, in the opening of the conversation we might hear something important to address or explore. If you have something that feels particularly important to share, something that you may be noticing or concerned about (i.e., a potential red flag) make sure to ask permission first:

- *Would it be okay if I shared something that I've noticed that I have a concern about? Allow time for the client to respond to your question and to what you've shared.*

Some have asked what's the difference between focus and agenda?

To some extent the terms are interchangeable. For example, MI uses the term focusing the same as agenda-setting. One way you might find helpful is to think of the focus as the broad topic or area the client would like to work on in the session, and the agenda is what the client wants out of the session. That is, the agenda for the session. In between those two steps, you will get clarity and specificity on their true desire/underlying goal.

Beware of the “faux” focus

This is when a client talks about a strategy and the coach runs with it before getting to the true underlying goal/desire. Things like “time management” or “motivation” or “a plan” or



“balance.” No one wants those things in and of themselves – those are their ideas for strategies to get to the desired thing. What is that desired thing? What do they want to do that time management would allow them to do? By getting to the true goal or desire, it opens up possibilities for many strategies.