

The Designed Alliance

By Dorothy Atcheson

Where else in life do we consciously and intentionally design our relationships?

With our partners, work colleagues and family members, we usually just kind of fall into the relationship. It's only later, when patterns or problems emerge, that we may try to address them—if we bother to do address them at all.

In Co-Active Coaching, the idea of a designed alliance can sound mysterious and intriguing, and yet, essentially, it simply describes the relationship between the coach and the client; the intentional, articulated and flexible contract between you that supports and empowers the client and enables the coaching to flourish.

In CTI training, we learn that it's the relationship that has the power in co-active coaching, not the coach.

Unlike other professions, say a doctor or a lawyer, the coach is not an expert that the client comes to for advice. Instead both coach and client take responsibility for the relationship and give power to it by specifying at the outset—and on-going—what they want to achieve and exactly how they want to be and work together.

As a coach, the designed alliance reminds me that I don't have to have 'the answers'. I just have to show up in the way my client and I have agreed, to support the relationship and use my coaching skills to help them toward their own eureka moments.

In the Co-active Coaching book, the designed alliance is the part of the model that 'surrounds the coach and the client and represents the container within which they do their work'.

It's literally the circle that wraps around the client's fulfilment, balance and process. In that way, it's kind of a protective layer—or safe space.

For me, the key to creating a safe space is to encourage open and honest communication at all times, and to model this in my coaching. I ask clients to be candid about how they're feeling and what's coming up. I don't want them to humour me and go through the motions if I do or say something that doesn't work or pisses them off. It's only if they feel safe enough to tell me about it that we can then both get curious and look at what's really going on. This establishes the necessary trust to nurture and support our alliance.

Your alliances will be slightly or wildly different with all of your clients. That's the beauty of it. Just as co-activity ensures there are no cookie-cutter coaches, there are no identikit clients either. As

their lives change from the coaching, what they need from you and the relationship often changes too. Which is why, in a way, you're constantly designing the alliance.

In one client's discovery forms, I learned that she had a tendency to put on a smooth veneer and act as if everything was okay when she was under pressure.

So I asked: 'How do you want me to be with you around that?'

She thought about it carefully and then asked me to challenge her if I thought that was going on and not take what she said at face value; to probe further. She essentially gave me permission to push her when she was uncomfortable—something that may not have felt safe for her without our designed alliance.

Some clients are a bit hesitant with this question, as if they're not sure they're allowed to request for me to be a certain way. So I always probe a bit here. I tell them about my style: that I tend to be direct, rigorously honest and sometimes challenging. Is this okay with them? How might I need to adjust for them, their personalities, their circumstances?

And then, during the course of your coaching, it's important to reflect on how it's going, to check in with each other about what's going well, what could be improved and how things might need to change to get the most out of the coaching.

If you're not a coach, why not take a look at some of your relationships and ask yourself and the other person: How do we want to be together in this relationship? What are my requests? Or: Where could we be more honest with each other? It's amazing what can happen even in ordinary relationships when you open up this sort of purposeful dialogue.

And, if you are a coach, check in with some of your clients again. Ask yourself and them: What's going well in our coaching right now? What's going less well? And: What do we need to change to get the most out of this coaching relationship?

As the Co-active Coaching book says, 'the strength of a client's ability to make changes is a measure of the strength in the coach-client relationship. And the strength of that relationship is measured by the commitment and open, fearless design of their alliance.'

So give yourself and your clients another chance at this, and as the relationship strengthens perceptively, so too, will their ability to make real changes in their lives.

About Dorothy Atcheson Working with [LionHeart](#), Dorothy specialises in coaching people who are in flux in their career—whether facing the challenges of promotion or redundancy, or simply looking for more fulfilling work that is in line with their values, talents and dreams.