

Making Powerful Offers

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May 2005

The offers coaches make

Offers are a part of coaches' everyday life. Whether we realize it or not, we are making offers left and right. Consider just a few examples from this coach's previous week:

- I offered to meet with a potential client to discuss the possibility of us working together
- I offered to meet with a student in the Professional Coaching Course to discuss how the course is going for her and provide some tips
- I offered to coach someone
- I offered new distinctions to a few current clients
- I offered to send someone my bio to assist them in connecting me with a director of leadership development in their company

If all of us are making offers, what differentiates one coach from another? Perhaps more poignantly, what is the difference between the offers I make today and the offers I could be making two years from now?

I would assert that there are two answers to both questions.

1. The quantity of offers is different
2. The quality of offers is different

Let me put it another way. If you want to be more successful as a coach and more fulfilled as a human being, one way to do this is to make more offers. Another is to make higher quality offers.

Wait, what's an offer?

An offer is a commitment to bringing about a set of conditions by our own actions. It is a speech act. It is a way that we connect with other people and expand what is possible.

An offer is one of the two major ways people initiate action. The other is a request. Like requests, offers are only one step in the conversation. In order for action to happen, an offer has to be accepted. When this happens, a new condition is present: a promise. The equation is simple:

Offer + Acceptance = Promise

The quantity strategy: more offers

There is value for many of us in simply making more offers. Just think about it. Do you think your coaching practice would change if you made an offer to coach someone every two weeks rather than every three months?

The quality strategy: better offers

What makes an offer powerful? Three things:

1. It produces the outcomes we intend
2. It allows us to put our gifts in service of others
3. It enables us to be our full selves

Four parts of speech in a powerful offer

A few years ago, I discovered an approach to making offers that meets all three criteria. It involves incorporating four different “parts of speech”: framing, advocating, illustrating, and inquiring.¹ By using all four parts of speech, we create a powerful connection between ourselves and the people to whom we are speaking. In addition, we embody four important dimensions of being a human being.

1. Framing

Framing is explicitly stating the context (the “frame” around an offer) and your assumptions. This can include:

- What you care about and are committed to
- What the other person cares about and is committed to
- What has happened, is happening, or will happen
- Other assumptions you hold

Here are some examples of statements that provide useful framing:

- “Given your commitment to...”
- “I know how much you value...”
- “I am assuming from what you’ve said that you would like to...”
- “Since both of us have an interest in....”

A precondition for effective framing is that we’ve actually paid enough attention to what matters to someone else (or what is happening in the moment, or what we ourselves care about) that we have words to express it. Learning to frame is then a good practice of being in touch with what matters to people.

¹ The idea of incorporating four parts of speech into the language of a manager or consultant comes from *Personal and Organizational Transformations through Action Inquiry* by Dalmar Fisher, David Rooke, and Bill Torbert.

2. Advocating

Advocating is taking a stand for a course of action that you would like to bring about.

Here are some examples of how to begin to advocate:

- “I propose that...”
- “I want to advocate for...”
- “I think it would be useful to...”
- “Let’s...”

There is a quality to advocating that we might call fierce. When we advocate for something, we stand behind it. Thus, the practice of advocating helps make us into the kind of person who takes stands.

3. Illustrating

Illustrating is telling a story of what might happen as a result of the proposed course of action.

Here are some examples of illustrating:

- “This will allow you to...”
- “What this will do is...”
- “If this were to happen, we might expect...”
- “One benefit of doing this is that...”

Illustrating is most effective if the story we tell about the future connects to the other person’s commitments and concerns. By telling such a story, we help both the other person and ourselves live in the world of future possibility.

4. Inquiring

Inquiring is asking a question in order to

- Give the listener an opportunity to make assessments of what you are advocating for
- Learn what the listener is open to—their response to the action you propose and other alternatives they see
- Test your assumptions

Here are some examples of inquiring:

- “Would you be interested in this?”
- “Would you like this?”
- “Up for it?”
- “Do you think this would be helpful to you, or do you have another idea?”

Genuine inquiring both requires and fosters a sincere interest in learning what the other person has to say. At your best, you are open to hearing a response that disconfirms your assumptions.

Tips for using the four parts of speech to make offers

Evidence of competence

Since we are in the business of building competence, let me suggest how I think we recognize competence at using this model to make offers. Below are several behavioral signs that we are developing such competence:

- **Use at least two parts of speech in any given offer.** A few examples:

“I can tell we’re running out of time and have more to say [Framing]. I propose we block a half hour tomorrow to complete this conversation. [Advocating]”

“From what you’ve told me, I would suggest that the place to start in our work together is not with your life purpose, but with getting your life in balance [Advocating]. Once you are sleeping and eating well, you will be rested and grounded enough to begin to listen for your calling. [Illustrating]”

“I know how committed you are to helping your direct reports connect with more peers in the company [Framing]. Would you like some suggestions on how to do this effectively? [Inquiring]”

- **Use the parts of speech in the suggested order.** Sequence is important. Consider the difference between the following two sequences of the same statement:

A: “Would you like some suggestions on how to do this effectively? I know how committed you are to helping your direct reports connect with more peers in the company

B: “I know how committed you are to helping your direct reports connect with more peers in the company. Would you like some suggestions on how to do this effectively?”

The difference between A and B is merely one of sequence. Yet imagine yourself as the listener, and the difference becomes clear. In B, the speaker first establishes connection with what you care about, then asks you a question. Now it is your chance to reply. In contrast, in A, the speaker’s question is followed by another statement, which may lead you to wonder whether the speaker actually wants you to respond or has more to say.

- **Use all of the parts of speech on a regular basis.** If all of my offers consist of Advocating followed by Inquiring, the individual offers may be relatively powerful yet I am missing opportunities to build my repertoire and choosing not to build all dimensions of myself.
- **Remain completely silent and motionless after inquiring.** If we sincerely welcome the perspective of the other person, the way to express this is by shifting into a receiving mode after asking a question. This means being silent and motionless—in essence, demonstrating our commitment to listening with openness. If we fail to do this—by continuing to speak or shifting around—the other person may doubt whether the question is sincere or we are simply going through the motions.

When breakdowns occur

- **Use only one part of speech in a given offer.** For example, “naked inquiry” is a term Bill Torbert uses to describe when a person asks a question (inquires) without advocating, framing, or illustrating. The statement itself is naked—it lacks any clothing explaining what it is for. In addition, the listener may feel naked because they don’t know why the question has been asked.
- **Consistently use the parts of speech out of order.** For example, when I develop the habit of always advocating before framing, people who don’t know me well may be taken aback while listening to the advocacy because they don’t know the context in which it occurs.
- **Consistently leave out the same part of speech.** For example, if I never illustrate, I deny others the opportunity to think imaginatively about the future we can create together through the offer. In addition, I split off the part of myself that lives for the future.
- **Continue to talk after inquiring.** Again, the fastest way to ensure others doubt the sincerity of our questions is to continue talking after the question mark.
- **Allow the inner critic to attack us for not being perfect at this.** These things take time to learn.

Other keys to powerful offers

The four parts of speech provide one useful approach to making powerful offers. Here are several other factors that are also valuable:

- **Good timing.** When is a good time to make an offer? Some of us make offers before we’ve gotten to know the other person—and before they’ve had a chance to know us. Others wait and wait for that perfect moment—and perhaps never make an offer. In a different vein, even within a given conversation, some people are very skillful at recognizing a good moment to make an offer.
- **Good location.** The physical and natural environment matters. Sometimes, an offer is more powerful when we schedule a conversation to make it. Other times, a spontaneous conversation in the hallway provides a great opportunity. Likewise, there is a difference between making an offer in a dark and dismal room and making one in a cheerful, well-lit room or outdoors. Similarly, telephone, e-mail, and face-to-face all have advantages and disadvantages for making offers.
- **Having many conversations for relationship and possibility.** Conversations for relationship—in which we explore mutual interests with others—help us understand others’ commitments and concerns. Conversations for possibility—like brainstorming, exploring a future action, or idea generation—provide an array of actions that we can then choose to offer
- **Having a body for each of the four parts of speech.** I’ve noticed that people who have difficulty advocating often display certain physical features that reflect and reinforce their habit of not taking stands. They may lean forward (putting them off balance and insecure), collapse their torsos, or simply take up as little space as possible. Learning to advocate involves not only developing linguistic skill, but also shifting one’s body posture and breath. The same could be said of the other three parts of speech.

Examples of offers in coaching using the four parts of speech

As mentioned previously, there are many contexts for making offers in a coaching relationship. Below are examples of offers that use the four parts of speech. These are for illustrative purposes only. Remember that often two parts of speech is enough.

Enrolling clients in coaching relationships

Framing: "I understand that finding more balance in your life is very important to you. You are committed to it, yet you feel stuck, and would like some skilled support. As you know, helping people get unstuck is what I do."

Advocating: "I would be honored to have the chance to support you, and I'm sensing that a 3-6 month time period would work well."

Illustrating: "Our work together can give you the kind of customized support that will help you spend more time with your family and fulfill your commitments to staying healthy and feeling peaceful. 3-6 months will be enough time to make some real shifts and incorporate them into your day-to-day life so they last."

Inquiring: "Would you be interested in doing this?"

Offering new distinctions

Framing: "Let me summarize what I heard and then offer a reframe. You're committed to spending time with your family, yet you continually come home late from work, and this causes pain to everyone. You think the answer is to quit your job and find a new type of job where you won't have to work as late."

Advocating: "There is more than one possible reason a person gets home late from work. It may be the nature of the job...or it may not. Instead, it may be the way the person responds to requests made of them. For example, no matter what the request, the person either says yes or no, and most often yes. Thus they have a pile of requests to respond to, and they stay late. If this is their habit, it doesn't matter where they work. Changing jobs won't make things better. Instead, it will mean that they will say yes to different requests in a different location, and stay at work just as late. I think this may be happening for you."

Illustrating: "Focusing on requests is important because it means you have more choices than stay-in-the-job or leave-the-job. You can actually learn to speak differently in conversations – like learning to say "no" or counter-offer when you will have something done - and this can allow you to leave work earlier."

Inquiring: "How is this landing for you?"..."What possibilities might this open for you?"

Offering self-observation exercises

Framing: "What we've just described is just my take on the situation. We don't actually know if it's true. The only way to find this out is to gather some data."

Advocating: "I'd therefore like you to do some self-observation exercises around responding to requests. [Describe the exercise]."

Illustrating: "Asking yourself these questions does two things. First, it allows you to test out the notion that you tend to respond to requests in only one or two ways and not others. Second, because you are simply observing yourself and not trying to do anything differently, it helps you learn in a relatively low risk manner."

Inquiring: "So, want to give this a try?"

Offering practices

Framing: "It appears that this reframe around responding to requests is a powerful 'aha' for you. So we're on the right track. Now, one thing we know from research in how people develop is that 'aha' moments dissolve pretty quickly unless we put into place ways to integrate them over a longer period of time. I refer to these as practices.

Advocating: "One practice I want to suggest for you is setting up three conversations every week with a trusted friend in which you role play requests. Your friend makes a request and you practice different ways of responding, particularly the ones you don't typically use. That's one practice. A second practice is to do a deep relaxation exercise every day."

Illustrating: "Practicing with a friend will give you a safe way to experiment with this unfamiliar way of speaking. Once you get good at it, you can start using it in other situations, like in the work setting. So that you take more risks as you get better at it. As for the deep relaxation practice, it will help you relax your body and get in touch with what is true for you, so that when someone makes a request, you are in touch with the sensations in your body, and these can provide useful information in deciding how to respond."

Inquiring: "Would you be willing to do these?"

Offering an opportunity to explore breakdowns

Framing: "Now you have a few new things to do, and I'm assuming your life is already pretty full."

Advocating: "I'd like to hear what you think could get in the way of doing these practices and exercises."

Illustrating: "This will give us a starting place to then talk about how to anticipate and learn from these potential breakdowns."

Inquiring: "So, let me ask you: what do you think might get in the way of doing these practices and exercises?"

Offering a suggestion of where to meet

Framing: "You like iced tea. I like chocolate milk. There is a café down the street that has both."

Advocating: “Let’s meet there.”

Illustrating: “Then we’ll both be happy campers.”

Inquiring: “Sound good to you?”

Practicing Offers

Everyday life presents dozens of opportunities to practice making offers. Any time we can take an action that would benefit someone else, there is an opportunity to make an offer. The trick to practicing, then, is to ask two simple questions:

1. What matters to this other person now?
2. What can I do about it?

If I have not sufficiently demystified the act of making offers, let me provide some examples of practice opportunities that should do the trick.

- Offering to hang up someone’s jacket
- Offering to drive someone to an event
- Offering to pay for a meal
- Offering to pick up your neighbor’s mail while they’re out of town
- Offering to bring a cup of coffee for your co-worker
- Offering to write comments on a report
- Offering to meet someone
- Offering to have a phone conversation

When it comes to practicing, the topic and context of the offer matters less than the simple act of making an offer—consciously.