



GIVING THE CLIENTS WHAT THEY WANT— A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

RYAN CARVER, CSCS

Every client that comes in the door has their own specific goals, whether it is to lose weight, build muscle, improve balance, etc. It is the job of the personal trainer to help their clients reach that goal in a safe and effective manner. However, personal trainers can sometimes lose sight of the big picture of a client's life and have tunnel vision on specific training aspects that may not matter.

When I first started as a personal trainer almost 10 years ago, my boss taught me a valuable skill in keeping clients happy and coming back for years. At the time, I listened but I did not realize the pricelessness of the advice until after I started talking to others in the industry. He had been in business for more than 15 years and was still training many of the clients he started with. To this day, I try to heed his advice by asking two simple questions each session with each client: “how are you feeling?” and “what do you feel you need most today?”

HOW ARE YOU FEELING?

This question is more than simple chitchat. You want to get an update of their overall wellbeing (e.g., physically, emotionally, mentally, etc.). This happens by sincerely listening to what they have to say. As Stephen Covey says in his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People*, “seek first to understand, then to be understood,” (2). If the client does not respond specifically, the personal trainer should follow-up with additional questions pertaining to previous injuries, how much sleep they have been getting recently, or other questions that make it personal.

The purpose of asking this question is to get a quick gauge of their state of body and mind before jumping into the workout. It is very common for personal trainers to get started with a session and after several minutes, they notice that something is off with the client that day. At this point, the personal trainer asks the important question: “How are you feeling?” or “I notice something seems off. What’s going on?” If the personal trainer simply asked the question at the beginning of the session, they would likely not have to change plans mid-session and the training session would have a better chance for greater flow and consistency. For example, I recently asked a client the “how are you feeling” question and found out they had done a monster hike the day before and were suffering from delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS) in their legs. This meant that the original plan of going for a personal record on squats was out the window, and the session was adapted to their needs.

WHAT DO YOU FEEL LIKE YOU NEED MOST TODAY?

When I was right out of college, I would write very specific programs for all my clients. Very quickly, I found myself frustrated. For some reason, my clients were not adhering to the program or would come into a session and not be on their “A” game. Finally, I realized that it is fine to have goals I want the client to accomplish in a given workout or week, but I needed to be more flexible in specific prescription. This flexible approach along with asking this question has proved to be a great strategy for dealing with clients.

It is fair to say that individual clients know their bodies better than the personal trainer does. If they tell the personal trainer what is going on with them and what they need, it can save a lot of time and effort, and may help in allowing the client to achieve their goals. Without asking this question, the personal trainer has to rely solely on guesswork or how the client is moving in a session. However, this input from the client should not dictate the programming but rather help the trainer better plan around the client's wellbeing and current state (physical and emotional).

This question does come with two caveats. First, the personal trainer must be prepared with a solid, yet flexible, workout before asking the question. If the personal trainer is not willing to change the workout plans, they should not bother asking. A great follow-up statement I use right after asking the questions is: "I have a couple different ideas, but I wanted to get your input first." For example, I recently used this follow-up with a client giving him three different options. He picked two of them that he wanted to do that session, and the third option he chose to do in the next session. Overall, he got what he wanted while sticking to the program and staying on target for reaching his goals.

Second, there will always be those clients who do not want to push themselves and want to take the easy way out. Although it is tempting, personal trainers should not ignore asking either of these questions to these particular clients. In this situation, the personal trainer has a couple of options: they can talk about the client's goals and discuss whether their "needs" at the moment are going to help with those goals, or the personal trainer could try to adapt their training session in a different way than normal while still adhering to the training strategy.

As an example, I have a client who is always stressed and always asks for something easy each session to help cope with the stress. For a while we did yoga, foam rolling, etc. but she was not working towards her goal of building strength and stamina. The next time she told me this, I switched it up. Instead of doing weights (original goal) or yoga/mobilization training (usual result), I had her do some bodyweight/lighter weight compound movements, really focusing on range of motion. She found that she loved this compromise. Additionally, she achieved all her goals for the session, felt less stressed, and worked towards her long-term goal of increased strength and stamina.

WHY THIS WORKS

First and foremost the personal trainer must recognize that the client is the boss and the personal trainer is their employee. The client is ultimately in charge and they have the power to "fire" the personal trainer at any time. If the personal trainer keeps their boss happy with their work, they are more likely to stay "employed."

Second, by asking these questions, the personal trainer gives their client an active role in their workout, their goals, and the process as a whole. In other words, the personal trainer makes it about the client. Deci and Ryan call this autonomy in their self-determination theory (3). Autonomy, in this case, essentially means that the client believes that they have the power of decision-making. This autonomy may reduce the dread of the workout, complaining, resting as much as they can get away with, or even the view that the personal trainer is the enemy. If the client has autonomy, they

are more likely to have better attitudes and push themselves harder with less coercion on the part of the personal trainer (3). Bandura in his self-efficacy theory said, "Among the mechanisms of personal agency, none is more central or pervasive than people's beliefs in their capability to exercise some measure of control over their own functioning and over environmental events," (1). Therefore, it is very important for personal trainers to give their clients the opportunity to make some decisions about their training sessions so they can be a more active participant both mentally and physically.

CONCLUSION

It is important for personal trainers to remember why the client hired them in the first place. It was probably to get help in reaching some sort of physical goal. When a personal trainer asks the client what they need and the personal trainer delivers, they have just given them the exact results for which they have agreed upon and paid. If the clients are always getting exactly what they want and need, the personal trainer has a better chance of retaining them as clients for a long time.

REFERENCES

1. Bandura, A. Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology* 52: 1-16, 2001.
2. Covey, SR. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Free Press, 2004.
3. Deci, EL, and Ryan, R. 2011. Self-determination theory. In: Van Lange, PAM, Kruglanski, AW, and Higgins, ET (Eds.), *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology: Collection: Volumes 1 and 2*. SAGE Publications; 416-433.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Carver is a fitness coach and independent personal trainer. He was a collegiate athlete and spent one season in the American Ultimate Disc League (AUDL). He received his Bachelor's degree in Exercise Science with a minor in Nutrition from the University of Utah. He is a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist® (CSCS®) and a Functional Aging Specialist through the Functional Aging Institute (FAI). Carver is the founder of Leverage Fitness Solutions, which helps corporations and individuals achieve a healthy and sustainable lifestyle.