

**HOW TO SUCCEED IN HEALTH & FITNESS**

**LESSON 2**

# **The Secret to Elite Coaching Skills**

# Today's Workshop

Discover the principles elite coaches use to help clients make profound and lasting change. These powerful principles aren't just for coaching, though; they can be effectively applied in most all professions and every area of your life.

Many health and fitness professionals spend their first few years immersed in the science of health and fitness, from muscle physiology to nutrient biochemistry.

If they're lucky, they're also taught how to translate that into useful recommendations.

Unfortunately, that's where most education ends. Many newly minted professionals never learn how to deal with the psychological barriers and frustrations of working with real people.

If you'd like to become an elite coach, you have to go one step further by also mastering the best practices of coaching and change psychology.

The following principles will give you the blueprint to do that.

## COACHING PRINCIPLE #1:

### Be "Client-Centered"

Let's say you go to the doctor for stomach pain. And, within the first 30 seconds, the doctor says: "Ah, pain right there? It's stomach cancer. We'll treat it with radiation. Make an appointment at the front desk."

After freaking out, you'd probably think the doctor was a jerk and that the diagnosis wasn't credible because the doc never asked questions, did diagnostics, took a family history, or anything.

Same goes for car trouble. You don't want a mechanic to flippantly say, "It must be the transmission."

## Activities

WORKSHEET #2 (Continued):  
Uncover Your Unique Abilities

WORKSHEET #4:  
[Goal Planning →](#)



When you have computer trouble, you don't want the help desk to answer the phone with, "It must be the RAM."

You want people to hear you. Not just because you want to be heard, but because you have essential information that could shed light on the problem.

Now, take a look at yourself.

Do you ever make the same mistake as the doctor, mechanic, and computer expert above? Are your answers sometimes too flippant? Are you sometimes too focused on your knowledge, expertise, and authority (this is being "coach-centered") instead of focusing on the lives and experiences of your clients (this is being "client-centered")?

Here's one way to think of it. Sure, you're an expert on the body or on exercise and nutrition. But your client is the world's #1 expert on their own life. Great coaching can only happen when a coach integrates their own expertise with the necessary expertise of the client.

This is the essence of client-centeredness.

Instead of seeing the relationship as "teacher-student" or "boss-employee" or "sergeant-trooper"—or even as "buddy-buddy"—today's most effective coaches see themselves more like professional guides.

They collaborate with clients to co-create their program and then walk side-by-side with them, nudging them down paths they should see, pointing out potholes and missteps they should avoid—and ask them where they want to go next.

This client-centered approach cuts down on some of your biggest obstacles: client ambivalence and resistance. Plus, rather than building *you* up, it builds the client. As their dignity, self-determination, self-efficacy, and self-expertise increase, you'll see better, more sustainable results.

**You're the expert on the body or on exercise and nutrition, but your client is the #1 expert on their own life.**

## COACHING PRINCIPLE #2:

# Try Compassionate Listening

High-quality listening is a critical part of client-centered coaching. Ask great questions and then deeply, actively listen to the answers without any agenda of your own. Become a student of your clients. Listen at least four times as much as you speak.

Here are a few examples of the kinds of questions we use every day at Precision Nutrition. They're designed to improve your listening skills, better sense into client needs, and pave the way for giving advice without triggering client resistance.

## Types of Compassionate Listening Questions

### Exploring

- ✓ What would you like to see change?
- ✓ If things were better with your eating/exercise, what specifically would be different?
- ✓ What have you tried? What worked and what didn't?

### Solution-focused

- ✓ In the past, when were you successful with this, even just a little bit? How could we do more of that?
- ✓ Where in your life have you been successful with something like this? Did you learn any lessons that we can apply here?
- ✓ Where in your life is the problem not happening? When are things even a little bit better?

## Compassionate listening questions are:

- >> Exploring
- >> Solution-focused
- >> Change-evoking
- >> Advice-giving

### Change-evoking

- ✓ If you decided to make a change, what makes you think you could be successful at it?
- ✓ How would things be better if you changed?
- ✓ What concerns you about your current patterns?

### Advice-giving

- ✓ Would it be okay if I shared some of my experiences with you?
- ✓ In my work with clients/patients, I've found that...

### COACHING PRINCIPLE #3:

## Focus On What's Awesome

Shifting from coach-centered to client-centered means thinking less about awfulness (what the client's bad at) and more about awesomeness (what the client's good at). For example: Great problem solver at work? Let's apply those skills to the breakfast issue!

With awesomeness-based coaching you specifically ask yourself: "Where is this client winning outside of health and fitness?" And, "What skills are they using to win at that?"

Don't know where they're winning or how? Ask them. Then look for the following.

- ✓ **Skills:** What do they already know how to do?
- ✓ **Knowledge:** What information do they already know?
- ✓ **Expertise/experience:** What have they already done? (In particular, what have they already done well?)
- ✓ **Interests:** What do they like to do? What do they enjoy?

Where is the client winning outside of health and fitness, and what skills are they using to do that?

- ✓ **Talents:** What are they naturally good at?
- ✓ **No-problem-times:** When does the problem they often face not happen, and why is that?

Once you understand where clients are awesome, give them the kinds of tasks that interest them or that use their talents. Or help them work toward a goal that inspires or excites them.

#### COACHING PRINCIPLE #4:

## Set the Right Kinds of Goals

At Precision Nutrition, we've found that coaches and their clients repeatedly commit the same errors when it comes to establishing goals. The biggest problem: They focus on "outcome goals" instead of "behavior goals."

### What are "outcome goals" and "behavior goals"?

An "outcome goal" is something you want to arrive at, such as losing a certain amount of weight or running a certain time in a 5K.

A "behavior goal" is an action or practice you'd use to move toward that outcome. For instance: putting down your fork between bites or practicing your running technique three to four times a week.

### Why not outcome goals?

While there's nothing wrong with wanting an outcome like a lower body weight, we often can't control outcomes because they're affected by so many outside factors.

### Why behavior goals?

Behavior goals, on the other hand, allow us to focus on (and practice) the things we can control—actions, not end results.

### What does it look like in practice?

Say a client wants the outcome of "losing twenty pounds." However, to lose twenty pounds, they'll have to do certain behaviors like exercise regularly, better control calories, manage stress, and sleep well. So

**Behavior goals allow us to focus on (and practice) the things we can control—actions, not end results.**

you turn those into the goals. (Don't worry: We'll show you how in just a moment.)

Now, to take goal-setting up another notch, you also want to focus on “approach goals,” not “avoid goals.”

### **What are “avoid goals” and “approach goals”?**

An “avoid goal” is something you don't want—something that pushes you away from your current pain, like “I don't want to be out of shape” or “I don't want to be on diabetes medication.”

An “approach goal” is something you do want—something that pulls you toward a better, more inspiring future, like “I want to feel confident and strong” or “I want to live pain free.”

### **Why not “avoid goals”?**

“Avoid goals”—don't smoke, stop eating junk food—are psychologically counterproductive because telling someone to stop something almost guarantees they'll keep doing it. In addition, a flat-out “don't” reinforces the feeling of failure when someone messes up.

### **Why “approach goals”?**

“Approach goals,” on the other hand, give clients something else to do when old habits might have otherwise kicked in. Plus they're about helping people feel good, successful, and inspired to keep on their journey.

### **What does it look like in practice?**

Instead of “no junk food,” try focusing attention on eating more cut-up fruits and vegetables. Instead of “no soda,” try focusing attention on drinking a glass of water with at least three meals each day. Instead of “no stress-eating,” try focusing attention on stress-relieving activities to do instead of eating.

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give clients  
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## COACHING PRINCIPLE #5:

# Establish The Right Practices

Just knowing the right kinds of goals isn't enough. How you go about achieving those goals matters, too.

Imagine being told to “do a back handspring” when you've never done a back handspring. It's not a reasonable instruction. As a coach, you can't just demonstrate a back handspring and then tell your athlete to copy you. They'll surely fail, maybe even get hurt.

To teach a back handspring, you have to break the complex movement down into smaller, simpler movements, teaching your athlete those in a logical progression, and then adding them together over time.

In this case, you might start with 1) back bridges from the floor, then 2) falling into back bridges, then 3) kicking over with one leg from a back bridge, then 4) kicking over with both legs from a back bridge, then 5) doing that with an octagonal tube that guides them smoothly over, and so on until, months later, they achieve their back handspring.

This idea of progression isn't unique to sports. The best piano teachers use it to help people eventually play Rachmaninoff. The best yoga teachers use it to help people eventually do inversions. And the best language teachers use it to eventually help people become fluent.

On some level, these teachers realize that accomplishing advanced “outcome goals” is never done through heroic single efforts. Rather, “outcome goals” are accomplished through the mastery of a series of basic skills. And those basic skills are accomplished through regular practice.

Here's how we teach coaches and clients to visualize the process.

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Let's now translate this into a common health and fitness example: weight loss.

Say a client has an "outcome goal" to lose weight. Sure, write that down on a piece of paper as the desired outcome. But don't stop there. Your next job is to help them come up with "behavior goals" that'll help them accomplish the outcome. One such behavior goal: Eat better consistently.

Eating better consistently is great but it's still more of a goal than a skill. It's sort of like the back handspring in that it needs to be broken down into smaller chunks.

Ask yourself: What skills are required to eat better consistently?

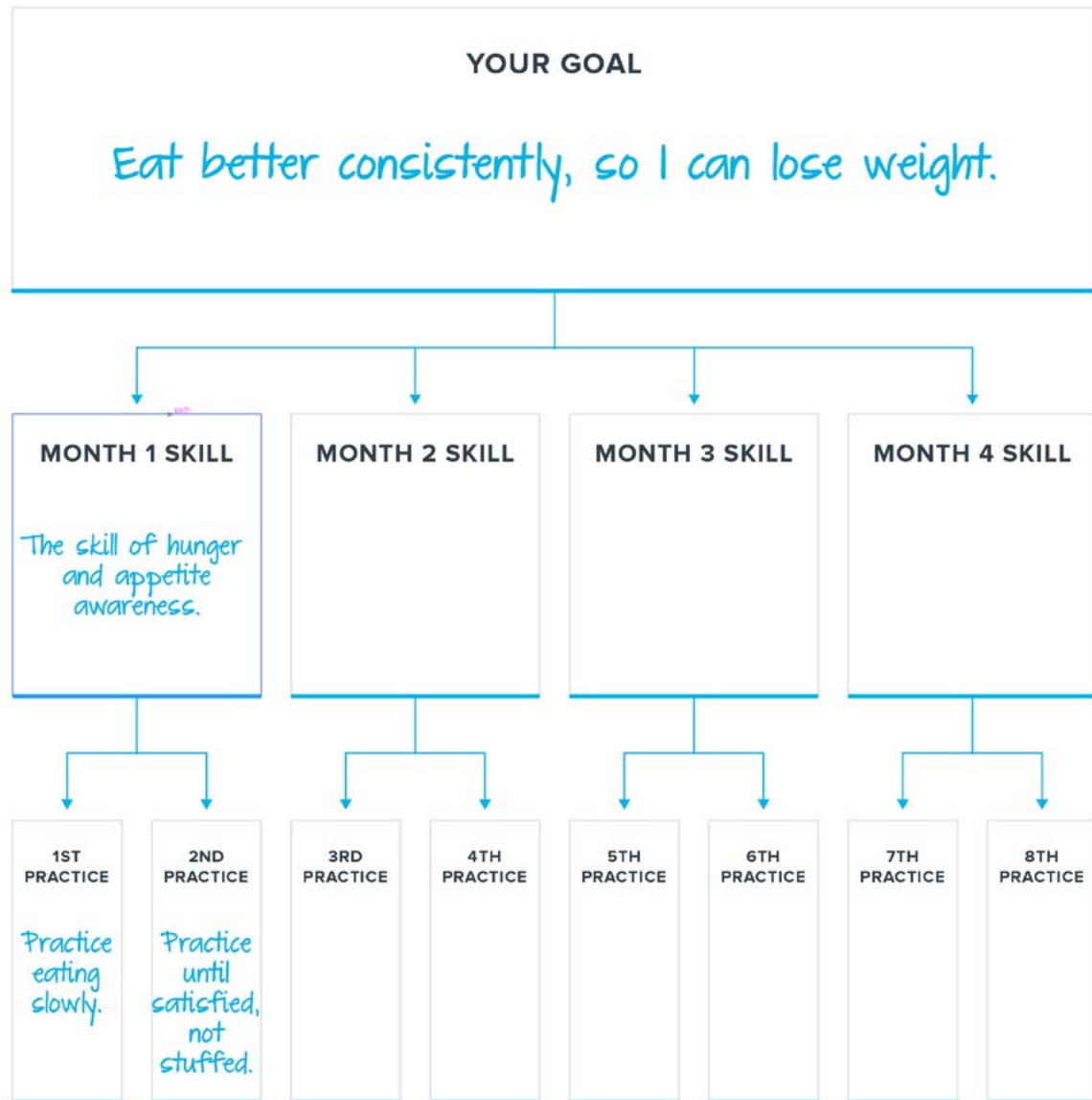
At Precision Nutrition we identified that better hunger and appetite awareness is a primary skill for making progress in this area.

Yet that's still not totally actionable so we break it down into practices like "eat slowly at each meal" (for the first two weeks) and "eat until satisfied instead of stuffed" (for the second two weeks). Both naturally lead to better hunger and appetite awareness.

As you can see, the whole point here is that daily practices (eating slowly at each meal, eating until satisfied instead of stuffed) lead to new skills (better hunger and appetite awareness). New skills are the only way to reach "behavior goals" (eating better consistently). And accomplishing "behavior goals" is the path to producing our desired outcomes (weight loss).

Here's what that looks like on our worksheet.

**Daily practices lead to new skills, which support "behavior goals" and, ultimately, desired outcomes.**



This is just one example. The cool part? The practices-skills-goals model can be applied to every area of coaching.

And it's fairly simple to comprehend. Break goals down into the skills required to accomplish those goals. And break skills down into daily practices that help develop those skills.

Take 10 to 20 minutes and try it on your own, using the [Goal Planning Worksheet](#). Use this framework anytime you (or a client) want to achieve something.

### COACHING PRINCIPLE #6:

## Always Confidence Test

Before deciding on any course of action or recommendation, simply ask a client: On a scale of 0 to 10—where zero is “no chance at all” and 10 is “of course, even a trained monkey can do that”—how confident are you that you can do Practice X every day for the next two weeks?

You could even have them use a scale like this to visualize it.

If a client gives you a 9 or a 10, proceed with the practice. If they score an 8 or lower, work with them to “shrink the change.” This means coming up with different practices until they're confident enough to give you an honest 9 or 10.

Even if a practice seems easy to you (*Eating only one extra vegetable a day? That's a joke!*), remember that coaching isn't about you. If all your client can do is muster up the confidence to eat one extra veggie a day, even if it's just the parsley garnish, so be it.

Having positive experiences with health and fitness—experiences where they don't feel like a total failure—will lead to more confidence and bigger challenges down the road.

It's only when we relax, when we allow non-change, that our clients become more ready, willing, and able to do it.

## COACHING PRINCIPLE #7:

# Guide Clients Toward Solutions

When we want so badly to help clients, we often find ourselves preaching, lecturing, pushing, cajoling, and prodding. When on the receiving end of all that pressure, clients do what humans do: They push back.

That's why the more we argue for change, the more clients will argue against it. Paradoxically, it's only when we relax, when we allow non-change, that our clients become more ready, willing, and able to do it.

But how do you relax and allow non-change? Check out the following coaching scenarios. They'll show you how to use questions and curiosity to facilitate the change process, not sabotage it.

## SCENARIO

### The Change Talk Wedge

When someone is expressing ambivalence about change, you can start by reflecting on why they might not decide to change. It sounds weird but often leads to a client proposing their own solutions. Here's how it might go.

Your client is ambivalent or resisting change. Don't condescend or patronize. Be sincere here and compassionate.

**YOU: "Wow, it sounds like you have a lot on your plate. I can see how tough it is to schedule exercise time." OR "I know it can be hard to resist those homemade brownies. They're so good."**

Tap into your own busy-ness or love of brownies to offer genuine empathy. Then wait. Be quiet and patient. Let your client speak first.

When they do start talking, they'll likely start telling you why they should change. This is "change talk" and it's a great step. It means they're not arguing against change, but for it.

**CLIENT:** “Yeah, I do have a lot going on. But I really should get to the gym. I know I’ll feel better.” OR “Honestly, I don’t think I need three brownies. I’d probably be happy with just one.”

Once you hear them suggesting change on their own, you’re getting somewhere. Using their language, simply reflect and gently imply a next action in the form of a question. Look inquisitive.

**YOU:** “It sounds like you’d feel better if you went to the gym?” OR “It sounds like maybe one brownie would be enough for you?”

Now wait again. They may be silent for a bit. Eventually, they’ll likely keep talking about what they want and how they can achieve it. Let them lead the discussion. Once you feel like they’re ready for a next action, go there.

**YOU:** “Given all this, what do you think you’ll do next?”

Notice how you’re not playing expert or guru. You’re simply using questions to lead them through an articulation of the challenge, to arguing for change, and to their own solutions.

## SCENARIO

# The Continuum

You can use this after listening for change talk. This can help them move up the continuum of behaviors from worse to better without taking an “all or nothing” approach.

The client has decided, through the first scenario, that they want to eat less fast food. But they’re not confident that they can give it up totally.

**YOU:** “OK, so it sounds like you want to eat less fast food, but eliminating fast food entirely feels like too much, which makes sense. What if you could just move a tiny bit towards your goal instead of all the way? What would that look like?”

Let them lead the discussion. Once you feel like they’re ready for a next action, go there.

Notice how you're suggesting the possibility of a third option between "all" or "nothing." And empowering them to come up with the option themselves.

At this point, clients often propose something smaller than "no fast food ever" but still too difficult to do consistently.

**CLIENT: "Well, what if I went cold turkey and ate no fast food for the next two weeks?"**

Although you haven't confidence tested yet, you have a gut feeling that the change is too big. So you might shrink it a little and see how they feel about it.

**YOU: "Okay, no fast food for the next two weeks. You know, I think that's awesome. But that feels like a pretty big challenge. What about no fast food for just a few days this week? Say, three of the days? Or maybe some days you pick another thing from the menu that's slightly better? What do you think?"**

**CLIENT: "I can totally do that, coach. 9/10 on the confidence scale! I'll make Monday through Thursday my 'no fast food' days. Or if I go to [insert fast food restaurant] I'll get the chicken wrap and a salad."**

This sounds promising!

**YOU: "That's a great idea. I'm wondering how I can help? Would you text me at the end of each day to let me know you were successful? Even better, send me a picture of the meal you chose to eat instead!"**

At this point, you layer in some accountability. And you make a fun "what did you eat instead" game out of it.

**You have a gut feeling that the change is too big. So you shrink it a little and see how they feel about it.**

SCENARIO

## The Self-Solution

Now it's time to see how the client might solve their own problem.

**YOU:** “It sounds like you already have a good sense of the key issues. Knowing this, if you were the coach, what would you recommend? Of course, I have some ideas here. But I’d like to hear yours first.”

Let them work through some ideas here. Don’t be afraid to ask follow-up questions or help shape the recommendations.

**YOU:** “Great ideas. I’m wondering, on a scale of 0 to 10, how confident are you that you can do each of them for the next two weeks?”

They give you an enthusiastic 10.

**YOU:** “Awesome, it sounds like we have a winner here. At this point do you mind checking back with me in a few days to share how it’s going? What day and time is best for you?”

Set a time for follow-up and hold them accountable to it.

In the end, notice how each scenario demonstrates the power of good questions, compassionate listening, and change-oriented dialogue.

Always remember this: When a coach argues for change, clients argue against it. So don’t argue for change! Instead, get clients arguing for it themselves. Bonus points if you help them propose their own solutions too.

Each scenario demonstrates the power of good questions, compassionate listening, and change-oriented dialogue.



## What to Do Next

Continue to work on your unique abilities statement (**Worksheet #2**).

Try out the **Goal Planning Worksheet** for your own goals or a client's.

Practice developing your active, compassionate listening skills any chance you get (with clients, friends, family members, and colleagues)

And get ready for **Lesson #3: How to Attract Clients Authentically**.

## Activities

WORKSHEET #2 (Continued):  
**Uncover Your Unique Abilities**

WORKSHEET #4:  
**Goal Planning →**



## Ready to take the next step in your career? We might be able to help.

If the career path you choose includes coaching people to make lasting change, check out the Precision Nutrition Level 1 Certification. It's the most respected nutrition and lifestyle coaching education program in the world—and the next group kicks off soon.

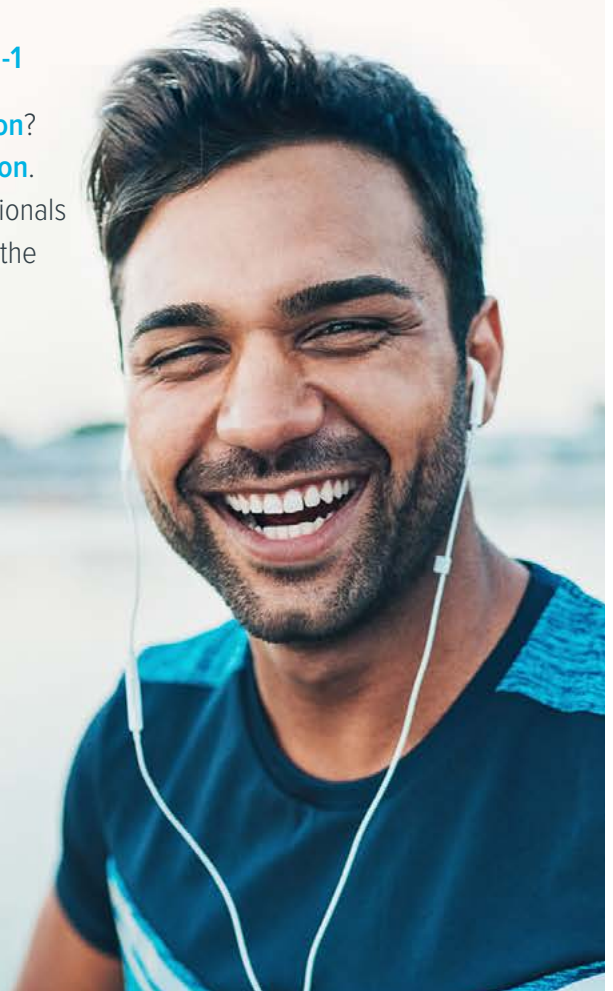
Created specifically for people working in all areas of health and fitness, our self-paced nutrition certification teaches you the science of nutrition and the art of world-class coaching.

Developed over 15 years. Proven with over 100,000 clients. Trusted by professionals in every corner of the health and fitness industry—from personal trainers, group exercise instructors, and health coaches to doctors, dietitians, physical therapists, and more.

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(Already a student or graduate of the [Level 1 Certification](#)? Take the next step and check out our [Level 2 Certification](#). It's an exclusive, year-long Master Class for elite professionals who want to take their nutrition knowledge and skills to the highest possible level.)



# Goal Planning

## YOUR GOAL

Your Goal

### MONTH ONE SKILL

Skill to develop

### TWO WEEKS

1st practice

### TWO WEEKS

2nd practice

### MONTH TWO SKILL

Skill to develop

### TWO WEEKS

3rd practice

### TWO WEEKS

4th practice

### MONTH THREE SKILL

Skill to develop

### TWO WEEKS

5th practice

### TWO WEEKS

6th practice

### MONTH FOUR SKILL

Skill to develop

### TWO WEEKS

7th practice

### TWO WEEKS

8th practice