



The Listener

A journal for coaches

Sharing knowledge and developing practice in the coaching community

New Series #4 October 2013

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One golden, late summer morning, I found myself at a breakfast seminar entitled “Driving business performance in times of austerity”. The excellent speakers contended that this was best done by “empowering” and “engaging” the people who work in organisations. Listening, I was reminded of how words and phrases, simply through their repetition, become shorthand for uncontested truths; concealing and excusing as much as they reveal and explain; sometimes placed alongside each other with a bold adjacency that makes their contradictoriness seem invisible.



At a second glance, “driving”, a metaphor of force, would seem to sit uncomfortably quite so near to the generosity conveyed by “empowering” and “engaging”. I confess to have long had an ambivalent response to these last two anyway. The giving over of power often evaporates in the presence of behaviours that could be seen as signifying people’s engagement with their work: expressing autonomy and developing their personal mastery, in pursuit of a contribution to their organisation in which they have found an especially meaningful purpose. And sometimes it’s hard to grant legitimacy to “engagement” when a durable commitment is missing from those purporting to empower others. All of us at the seminar were also required to buy in to the need for “austerity”. Anyone giving voice to a view of the creation of austerity as essentially an ideologically motivated withdrawal of public resources in response to the disappearance of imaginary sums of money, would undoubtedly have been given pretty short shrift.

In The Listener NS#3 I reflected on the exhortation made by some colleagues in the coaching world to challenge our clients more; a reasonable plea and consistent with the intention expressed by the coaching bodies of doing good. Driving away from the seminar in the morning sunshine and recalling how the same language had been used at seminars about organisational development long before the creation of austerity, I wondered what the connection might be between our colleagues’ exhortation and challenging the labels placed on how people relate to each other in organisations.

Though I personally hesitate to take on the role of my brother’s or sister’s keeper, I do see a critical obligation to remain alert to constructs which can very easily become un-contestable in the vocabulary used to discuss organisational life. How radical a form the expression of this alertness takes must be a matter for the individual coach to decide; but working with our clients to unfold the layers of assumption on which their narratives sit can only be a valuable undertaking, not least for those of our clients who make a claim on others to follow them.

Ken Smith
October 2013



Coaching the Brilliantly Odd - Differences, Neuroscience and Neurodiversity

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Sally Moore

“Progress comes from the unreasonable man” - George Bernard Shaw

There is much written about different kinds of people in the workplace. Coaches routinely use psychometric instruments such as personality assessments, 360 appraisals and Emotional Intelligence measures to assess these differences. They do so in a number of ways: to raise coachee self-awareness, to identify development areas to address, and perhaps to inform the coaching process itself.

As the business need for top performance becomes ever more important, coaches have responded by seeking new, well-researched ways to understand how different people experience their working lives and “what makes them tick”. The eager reception of a recent run of books on neuroscience shows coaches are clearly interested in how the structure and functioning of the brain, easily the most complex organ in the body, impacts on behaviours. Research shows that brains, like people, are not all structured in the same way and they do not all work in the same way. This is the science of neurodiversity. This paper explains what neurodiversity is; the different ways it influences observable behaviours; and describes how neurodiversity applies in the workplace and in coaching.

The business case

Why should coaches be interested in all this? What’s in it for their coachees and the organisations they work for?

Technology, science and engineering have never been more important in national and global economies. In the 21st century, creativity and innovation in these areas are not only essential, where they are core to what a business does; they are increasingly central to the way organisations in all sectors make and save money and deliver to their customers.

The people who display notable creativity and innovation in these areas do so because of the way they think. Often colloquially referred to as geeks, supergeeks or High IQ/Low EQ, they often experience the world and their working lives quite differently to others. While these differences bring unequivocal strengths to the organisations and businesses they work for, they also bring challenges. For example, people who excel at working with systems, machines, numbers and computers vary greatly in how well they do in working with other people or understanding the commercial perspective.

How do businesses and organisations get the best performance from these highly technical and less social minds? How do you get them to collaborate with each other? How can they be encouraged to communicate better with non-technical customers? How do you access the really great ideas they produce when understanding and communication are difficult? And what are the possibilities for a business that can do this better than a competitor?

This is familiar territory for many businesses, organisations, coaches and consultants. Neurodiversity offers new ways of understanding how these highly technical minds operate, how they experience their working lives and how they learn. It also offers ways of working that coaches can use to differentiate their provision.

Neurodiversity explained

Neurodiversity is an area of neuroscience that focuses on how brains vary in development, structure and function. Familiar brain differences include left- or right-handedness, clumsiness, IQ and giftedness for art, mathematics or music. Less familiar to those without personal or professional experience are differences such as learning disabilities, ADHD, Tourette's Syndrome, dyslexia and autism.

The area that offers tantalizing possibilities for understanding and getting the best from “high IQ/low EQ” is that of high functioning autism or Asperger’s Syndrome (AS). People with AS, at the highest functioning end of the autistic spectrum, have fluent language and average to highly superior intelligence. A “bottleneck” in social understanding relative to overall intelligence is the core characteristic of AS.

Around 1-2% of the general population is estimated to have AS. Around 80% are male and many are not formally diagnosed. Research shows there are many more people - 40% of men and 20% of women - with qualitatively similar characteristics. These percentages are higher for people working in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) occupations, which are renowned for being male dominated. Most in this larger group do not meet criteria for a formal diagnosis; but for many the challenges they experience at work are what an AS cognitive profile would predict.

People in the workplace with AS, or features of it, are gifted thinkers who thrive on solving complex problems but can find interacting with others mysterious and challenging. Unequivocal strengths include: focus on detail; exceptional concentration; a clear preference for rationality; and extraordinary capacity for difficult technical challenges. These are strengths businesses of today cannot do without.

Sticking points include: lack of commercial awareness; social awkwardness; rigid thinking; excessive perfectionism; resistance to change; disinterest in authority; arrogance; higher likelihood of stress; and pedantic use of language. These can impact on performance and working relationships to the extent that businesses see people with these attributes as too high-maintenance to retain. Importantly, how these strengths and challenges present in the workplace varies widely according to personal style, self-awareness, learned behaviours, culture and environment. It is vital that we guard against stereotyping and oversimplified categorisation.

Much has been learned about how to support people with a formal diagnosis of AS. These include ways of working directly with the individual concerned using techniques that are modified or specifically developed. It also involves “enlightening” the environment around the individual. This means increasing awareness of how that individual experiences the world and helping others make sense of behaviours so they can respond to them

appropriately. There is increasing evidence that these interventions improve outcomes and performance. They can be modified and applied in the workplace. This can be a prestigious and differentiated offering rather than one that is remedial or stigmatising.

Differentiating coaching with neurodiversity in mind

An awareness of neurodiversity can be useful when:

- i. a coachee has a clear pattern of strengths and challenges as outlined above; they are lifelong and not fully explained by culture or environment. This pattern may be self-identified or observed by others. Personality assessments and 360 appraisals have not been designed with neurodiversity in mind but information from them may prove useful.
- ii. a coachee from a highly technical background is required to deal with increased social demands or complexities, e.g. team working, collaboration, leading others or relating to customers.
- iii. there is a “he’s got a brain the size of a planet but...” feeling on the part of the coach or the organisation. The individual may be highly valued but experienced as “different”.
- iv. provision of development or coaching hasn’t been effective or is taking longer and it’s puzzling why not. Alternatively, gains made have not sustained or generalised.
- v. an unusual presentation of stress and resilience occurs. For example, a coachee may work long hours and appear to be “stress resistant” or may experience stress in response to what others would see as relatively reasonable demands.
- vi. there are extremes of emotional expression – either minimal responses or “explosions” with not much in between.
- vii. there are performance management issues in terms of organisation, meeting deadlines and managing communication that have not been responsive to intervention.

Ways to differentiate coaching: the contract and objectives

Often the onus is on the individual coachee to fit in – to become more socially competent or more emotionally intelligent. When working with a coachee who has facets of AS, the capacity to do all the work to fit in may be limited. Bridges need to be built from both sides rather than just one. Consider the following:

- i. How can the coach facilitate and support bridge-building from both ends?
- ii. Who is the coaching for and why?
- iii. Who else needs to be involved – is expecting the coachee to be the only one to change actually setting him/her up for failure? Does the coaching intervention need to extend to others?
- iv. How will maintenance and generalisation of learning be managed after the coaching has ended?
- v. What do those working with the coachee need to know to get the best out of them?
- vi. How can the coachee communicate their unequivocal strengths? What is needed for them to achieve this?

Ways to differentiate coaching: relationship

As difference is at the heart of what we are looking at here, it is wise to:

- i. assume nothing; explain everything. The person-centred assumption that coachees know their own answers does not apply with people who have more facets of AS.
- ii. be aware that the coaching relationship itself may be a source of stress and confusion; as such, rapport may take longer to establish.
- iii. once trust is established, use the relationship in real time to give feedback and learning opportunities on social interaction and reciprocity.
- iv. pay attention to language and communication. Avoid dropping hints and watch your use of metaphor and irony. Check more frequently for understanding and do not allow a lack of it to get in the way of progress. Over time, your coachee may have mastered the art of pretending to understand. Generate a common language, and use the coachee's word choices.
- v. pay attention to the physical environment, particularly light and noise.

Ways to differentiate coaching: techniques

Coachees with AS or facets of it are highly systemised thinkers. Coaching helps provide a system in managing the social and emotional demands of the workplace.

- i. How has your coachee coped in a world he/she doesn't easily fit into? What has been the system? What has worked and what is needed now?
- ii. As a coach, focusing on strengths and solutions comes fairly naturally. Not so for a coachee who thrives on solving problems. Make the coaching at least look like it's problem-focused.
- iii. Open questions may be too vague. Use more closed questions and keep away from questions about hypothetical scenarios.
- iv. Be directive rather than facilitative – social development is a "hidden curriculum" and your coachee will not reach answers by a coach asking questions. Be prepared to ditch the person-centred approach.
- v. Use concrete rather than abstract language or metaphor.
- vi. When challenging thinking use highly structured evidence-based techniques. There is good evidence for the effectiveness of cognitive behavioural strategies for people with AS. Use worksheets and written materials.

And in conclusion

We know that qualitative features of Asperger's are widely seen in organisations although not always recognised and understood. Stigma is evaporating, with more people than ever identifying themselves as "on the spectrum" whether they have a diagnosis or not. Evidence-based practice in schools and higher education has proved highly effective. As we are at a point in time where the business needs of the highly technical are unequivocal, the arrival of neurodiversity in coaching is inevitable.

Further reading and other resources

Baron-Cohen, S., Wheelwright, S., Skinner, R., Martin, J. and Clubley, E. (2001) *The Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ): Evidence from Asperger Syndrome/High-Functioning Autism, Males and Females, Scientists and Mathematicians.*

Brown P & Brown V: *Neuropsychology for Coaches*

Peters, S (2012): *The Chimp Paradox*

Rock D & Page L (2009) *Coaching with the Brain in Mind*

For blogs articles and events: www.top-stream.co.uk. Top Stream has been collaborating with Nicholson McBride, Business Psychologists on commercially focused research in this area. Our initial findings will be published soon.

If you are curious about where you are on the spectrum, try the Autism Quotient (AQ) at <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/9.12/aqtest.html>.

Note this questionnaire is not diagnostic, nor is it for commercial use.



Sally Moore is a Chartered and HCPC Psychologist; she is a former NHS Consultant Clinical Psychologist and Head of Service. Sally combines expertise in coaching, developmental, organisational and clinical psychology. This has led her to develop a professional interest in neurodiversity at work, particularly working with those who have high IQ and/or facets of high functioning autism. She can be contacted at sallymoore@top-stream.co.uk



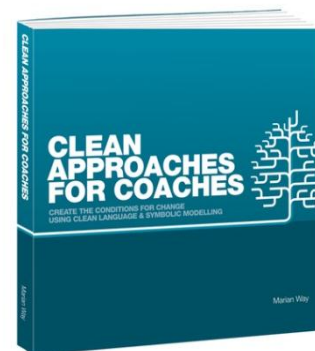
Book review: “Clean Approaches for Coaches – how to create the conditions for change using Clean Language and Symbolic Modelling” – Marian Way

Ken Smith

The literature on Clean Language is slowly and steadily growing. Marian Way’s new book is to be especially welcomed as it is one of the very few that places it firmly in the context of coaching.

Marian presents a very full account of Clean Language, from the work of its creator David Grove and its core principles, through the central place of metaphor in facilitating change, to the subtleties of working with clients who find themselves in an unproductive bind. In doing so, she draws closely on the work of James Lawley and Penny Tompkins, who adapted and developed Grove’s work in the form of Symbolic Modelling and who, in their own key text on Clean Language and their later work, provide various models and frameworks for its practice.

The structure of Marian’s book is wonderfully clear, combining a 6-part iteration which recalls the six-fold process of Emergent Knowledge; and mirroring the notion at the heart of Clean Language of iterative cycles of feeding back precisely to them the client’s own language. She gently bats back incorrect interpretations of a coach using Clean Language as not doing anything, with the inclusion of “vectors”, under which term she shows how Clean Language coaching is indeed purposeful; a point which is reinforced by her very helpfully anchoring much of the second part of the book to a session overview structure. I found two sections of the book connected to this overview particularly interesting: Relating over Space and Relating across Time. Here the subtle workings of metaphor become apparent, with much more to this than reliance on conspicuous, discrete symbols. Allied to this is the importance of remaining alert to and utilising the client’s own language of space and time; as it is in and through the relationships between the symbols within a client’s “metaphor landscape” that fundamental change and movement towards desired outcomes occur.



In talking about Relating across Time, Marian reminds us that in recalling an event, it essentially becomes alive in the present moment. Consequently Clean Language questions are all worded in the present tense and invite the client to attend to their perceptions as they are experiencing them now. So in enabling the client to build their model of their experience, through considering the consequences and origins of their symbolic information, Clean Language questions are concerned not with past, present and future but more with before, during and after the perception being attended to. This is another important distinction through which Clean Language places the client at the centre of the modelling, indeed the coaching process.

A very experienced Clean Language practitioner, she is also admirably a pragmatist and makes clear that Clean Language competence comes not with strict adherence to form and syntax but with developing a flexibility in using these that is completely congruent with the notion of working with the logic of the client's own emerging model; of directing a client's attention to what is most important to them, rather than to what the coach is perhaps most curious about. This is a form of working with ambiguity and with "not knowing" that requires no small amount of courage and trust in the process and in the client.

The most challenging part of the book for the reader comes with the closing sections on Change and Working with Binds, with the latter culminating in an extended annotated transcription of a client session. Here the multiple symbols, which populate the landscape of the client's bind, shift and evolve in their attributes, significance and relationships over space and time. This illustrates the great complexity and skill required to work with Clean Language at its furthest reaches.

Marian's use of annotated extracts from client sessions is very effective and she indexes them with references to their associated key learning points. This transparency of approach characterises the book as a whole, with the material presented in digestible though always fully integrated chunks. A glance at the case study index suggests that overall the coaching topics lean more towards personal development coaching, with relatively little taken from the world of organisational life. This may leave the reader who is looking for more evidence of its application in organisational settings a little unconvinced – but this is I think something that unfortunately can be said of the Clean Language literature generally. Showing how Clean Language can flavour the various stages of the generic coaching process, e.g. contracting, objective setting, evaluation, etc., might also have been more explicitly drawn out, if only to highlight the emergent nature of working "Cleanly". Nonetheless, the writing style is clear and straightforward throughout and the diagrams and illustrations are helpful and well placed, making the content accessible to coaches with all levels of experience.

"... a question is clean when it avoids unnecessary presuppositions, when it follows the client's logic, and when it is designed so the client can answer it (i.e. so they stay engaged in their own inner world, rather than having to come out of that state to check the meaning of your question)."

The book is ambitiously comprehensive in its coverage of Clean Language practice. The author's desire to make it so with the inclusion of more advanced material, may leave some readers a little baffled by the end; but this is a small quibble on what is a well-constructed, helpful and readable book. It perhaps would work best as an accompaniment to a programme of training and indeed Marian offers accompanying resources at the book's eponymous website.



Using a Supervisory Approach in Coaching Leaders: a research project

Paul Raben-Christensen

Introduction

The recent financial crisis has clearly widened the expectations placed on corporate leaders as the world has changed. They must now cope with increasingly complex organisations while having less resource to deliver their goals under more pressure. A business leader must also maintain an increasing number of vital relationships, both inside and outside their organisation. All of this takes away time to reflect and creates a need to constantly change.

Many organisations have turned to coaching to help sustain and develop their leaders. Coaching is clearly useful but it often tends to focus on specific issues and is usually time-limited. Importantly, coaching generally offers measurable targets for the employing organisation.

But could there be an alternative, less-defined way of helping a leader to develop in the modern world? Throughout my MSc in Coaching and Behavioural Change at Henley Business School, I became increasingly interested in the potential for *using a supervisory approach to enhance leadership development*. The final year of my course included a management challenge project on a subject of my own choosing and this gave me the perfect opportunity to investigate this topic further.

Research set-up

In the work that I do with leaders, as a coach and as a leadership development facilitator, a common theme I've heard is: 'It's lonely at the top'. Leaders appreciate the opportunity to talk to someone external to their organisation about what is going on for them. I started to wonder whether you could take a supervisory model such as Hawkins' and Shohet's 'Seven Eyed Model' and apply this to working with leaders. It provides an excellent framework to focus on the systems within which coaches work, as I know from the supervision I've had. Leaders also work within a system and it could be argued that they are coaches of their own teams.

With an extensive literature review revealing little existing research in this field; and initial conversations with some of my potential research participants suggesting that some coaches believed supervisory techniques were useful in working with leaders; the topic seemed a worthwhile one to investigate. I decided that the best way forward was to base my research on a series of semi-structured interviews with experienced coaches and supervisors who work with leaders at an executive level.

I employed carefully designed, open questions to give the interviewees as much freedom as possible in answering. Two of the key questions used during the interviews were:

- In your view what are the key differences between a coaching conversation and a supervisory conversation? And why?
- How has using a supervisory technique enhanced the development of your client in their leadership role?

In total 20 interviews were conducted. The resulting transcripts were then coded to distil the data into a manageable state.

Overview of findings

There was strong support of the assertion that supervisory techniques can enhance leadership development; and a clear suggestion that the use of a supervisory approach might deliver improved overall results, with straightforward coaching techniques not necessarily the best way of developing leaders. Supervisory-style interventions could be used in parallel with traditional coaching or on a stand-alone basis. Supervisory aims are very different from coaching: there would be no specific goals; instead the intention would be to provide the leader with a safe space in which to think widely about his or her role.

The results also suggest some key conclusions:

- There are critical differences between supervision and coaching, particularly regarding the contracting, the lack of specific outcomes and the ability to develop multiple facets of the leader concurrently when using supervision techniques.
- A good supervisor should be experienced and mature, have a high degree of self-awareness and be able to see the bigger picture.
- There are key parameters that are required to ensure successful supervisory leadership intervention.

Discussion of the main research themes

Do supervisory techniques enhance leadership development?

The interviewees generally believed that they enabled their clients to build more effective relationships, develop broader perspectives and become more reflective leaders, where they had employed supervisory techniques with them. Interview responses suggested that the use of supervisory techniques enabled clients to 'disconnect from their immediate preoccupations' and clients found the process 'quite liberating'. Feedback from leaders to the interviewees seemed positive and particularly highlighted the fact that the process allowed them to detach from detail and to see what is really going on in their organisation.

Some interviewees had seen a change in the culture of the organisation where they had used supervisory techniques, although it was difficult to measure such change. Most of my interview subjects commented, however, that it was rare for them to see a measurable impact on the organisation from the work that they did with their client. This reveals one of

the main problems with employing supervisory techniques: the difficulty on demonstrating to the employing organisation why they would want to employ such processes as part of their leadership development programme.

Differences between leadership coaching and supervision

There is a critical difference in contracting between supervision and coaching: for supervision the contract is solely between the supervisor and the leader, whereas for coaching the contract may also include the leader's organisation. The use of supervisory techniques means not working to a specific outcome and this changes the dynamic of the relationship and how both parties work together. Therefore the contract must be very clear. Where the coaching relationship had gone on for a long time, a number of interviewees said that they would re-contract with their client when moving into more of a supervisory relationship.

The interview results suggest that a supervisory approach has a different view from coaching: sometimes looking down from a higher level or working in partnership with the leader. Phrases such as 'a golden eagle flying overhead' and 'bird's eye view' were used by several of the interviewees. Coaching has a developmental role but interviewees were clear that it generally focuses on a specific area or agreed outcome. Supervision is seen as capable of developing multiple facets of the leader concurrently, e.g. ethical awareness, capabilities, breadth and depth of thinking. Interviewees talked of creating space to allow the supervisee to reflect for himself and develop his own breadth and depth of thinking.

Since coaching is generally used to address specific issues with a leader, the contract tends to be of a fixed-term. The interview results show that supervisory contracts tend to be on-going and longer-term in nature compared to coaching contracts.

Whilst both coaching and supervision have commonalities from a developmental aspect, there are distinct differences in the way that this plays out, with supervision approaching development from a more systemic view and in some instances a more psychological perspective.

What makes a good supervisor?

The interview responses gave clear consensus that a good supervisor should exhibit the following qualities:

- An experience and maturity
- A high degree of self-awareness
- The ability to connect at the required level
- Be detached and able to see the bigger picture

One interesting point about experience is that there was no overall consensus from the interview subjects as to its definition. Was experience based on hours coached or was it more related to the experience that the supervisor can bring to the table in terms of life, organisational knowledge and maturity? Interviewees generally felt that a high degree of

self-awareness was required and this gave them greater ability to challenge clients when working with them.

What makes a successful supervisory leadership intervention?

The interview results identified some key factors that are helpful in ensuring a successful supervisory intervention:

- A deep relationship and trust must be established between the supervisor and the leader. This will often result from a pre-existing long-term relationship as a coach.
- The leader should elicit the intervention and must be fully engaged in the process.
- A robust contract and careful management of client expectations.
- Creating a safe environment.

It was also clear from the responses that the maturity of the supervisor is a factor in determining the success of the intervention. Maturity brings experience, awareness and clarity for the supervisor around their own purpose and role and therefore contributes to success and helps resist pressure from the leader and his organisation to deliver. Maturity also helps the supervisor stand up to the leader's ego, which may be considerable.

Interviewees mostly felt that their own techniques had improved as they had matured in terms of time spent coaching. Increased maturity for the supervisor produced greater awareness and ability to spot more subtle signals in clients.

All but one of the respondents talked of having used the Seven-Eyed model in their supervision practice at some point, or having been supervised using this as the framework for their supervision. Although the model seems to be widely used by the interviewees, it was not clear from their answers whether it had been used successfully within their leadership development techniques.

Trust, relationship and safety were words that occurred frequently across the interviews. Interviewees mentioned a deep level of trust and relationship as a requirement so that clients didn't feel that they were being judged in any way. Trust was mentioned 182 times and relationship 312 times in the 20 interviews.

Problems with supervisory leadership development

Of course the research also suggests some problems with the use of supervisory techniques for leadership development. For starters the leader must actively choose to use supervisory techniques. He must also be willing to engage with the techniques otherwise they will fail.

Interviewees felt that that it would be difficult to demonstrate a tangible impact on an organisation as a result of supervision because, unlike coaching, it is not outcome-based. The lack of responses in the interviews to the question about success of the techniques reinforces the belief that results are difficult to measure. Corporates are likely to struggle to employ somebody to carry out the role of 'leadership supervision'.

There could also be a risk of the leader leaving the organisation as they become more self-aware and clear around their own purpose and beliefs. This may well be positive for the leader himself but the leader's organisation may be less pleased with this outcome.

Supervision may also be confused with mentoring. The latter is narrow in its focus and requires the mentor to have experience in the leader's role or business. Supervision is much more about helping the leader step away from the detail of his role.

Conclusion

In summary, this investigation suggests that supervisory techniques could be very useful in enhancing leadership development. The analysis has identified a number of success factors that should ensure that supervisory methods deliver a positive outcome. The following should be in place:

- very clear contracting and a strong understanding of the process from both the leader and their employer
- a pre-existing and deep, trusting relationship between the coach and the leader
- an experienced and mature coach
- a leader open to the less-structured processes used in supervision

Some further, more detailed research into how to measure positive change in corporates as a result of using supervision methods would be welcome and could help overcome the major problem that corporates are unlikely to employ such open-ended techniques without evidence of measurable results.

The question still remains in my mind as to how leaders would respond if you said to them that they were being supervised? The term supervision has many meanings and connotations dependant on the context, the individual and the conversation. Maybe I'll save that for another research project!



Paul has recently completed his MSc in Coaching and Behavioural Change at Henley Business School. He has experience of working across a number of industry sectors and cultures and with a diverse range of global corporate clients. Paul's particular interest is in the interaction between management and psychology. He can be contacted at paul@raben-christensen.com



Coaching As a Gestalt Trained Coach: a personal insight on my experience

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Natalia de Estevan-Ubeda

This article is a personal reflection on my learning and practice as a Gestalt coach. It sets out some personal insights and a sample of Gestalt interventions. This is not a theoretical essay on Gestalt coaching but a first-person reflection on the Gestalt approach.

My first reflection is that I work differently now as a Gestalt coach. The way I contract with the client, manage expectations, give feedback, attend to somatic language and not just to what is not being said, bring an openness to experimenting: this all feels different from my practice before my Gestalt training. Previously, my coaching was more goal-oriented and performance focussed in the way that I held the client's objectives. I am not talking about rigidity in approach but definitely a less flexible, less "present" way of working and a more achievement-driven. My practice has changed in that I work with only one goal in mind: to bring awareness to my client's world.

As a Gestalt coach I have learnt to work more on sensory modalities. This was new to me and has helped me to support clients better by developing their awareness. Working creatively through inviting direct attention on experiencing "what's it like for you", "how does it feel?", "where is anxiety?", "show me"; is a way to heighten the client's self-awareness.

In Gestalt terms, the coach is at a point of creative indifference. This is powerful because it made me realise that as a coach I am truly invested in the welfare of my client but not invested in the outcome. In whichever way I intervene as a coach, I do it lightly.

Working with figures and polarities

Gestalt-based coaching is a phenomenological approach, in which perceiving, feeling and acting are distinguished from interpreting pre-existing attitudes. Explanations and interpretations are considered less reliable than what is directly perceived and felt. The individual is viewed as perceiving the environment as a total unit: we respond to the "whole", which is made up of the stimuli of which the person is aware (the figure) and those of which the person is not aware (the ground).

The figure-ground relationship can change from moment to moment. Consequently, working with phenomenology applies to what I notice in my client and in the attention I pay to the judgements I make. By not imposing my judgements I am giving my clients more room and more opportunity to really show up. It also means that I am more able to sit patiently and for longer with them and be more selective in how I respond to them.

Gestalt experiments are intended to bring more awareness to the figure. I use amplification and exaggeration and polarities as ways of enhancing the client's awareness. I often work particularly with polarities now, which is based on the notion that when an individual recognises an aspect of himself, the presence of another, opposing aspect is implicit. This widens awareness, whereby we bring attention to something that the client was previously

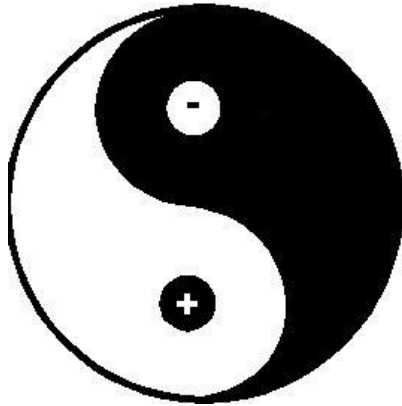


Figure 1 Ying-Yang

not conscious of. In Gestalt, polarities translate into working with what the client is saying and not saying. This is how, in the Gestalt sense of the "whole", we acknowledge a polarity, allowing the client to name the elements within it.

The YING-YANG polarity work truly open my eyes to the sense of "whole". I have learnt to notice what is missing, what the client is not saying or doing: if I think what I notice may add to the awareness of my client, I start by just naming it.

Closing the session, by enabling the client to make sense of it in the wider context, also completes a Gestalt.

Additionally, it supports the notion of integration, not only in relation to personal goals but in how we hold organisational goals in relation to client's sense-making – by encouraging the sense-making of one in relation to the other I hold corporate responsibility as a coach.

Working with a Gestalt trained supervisor

It has been helpful to work with a Gestalt trained supervisor. Active experimentation in the supervision sessions has supported my learning by enabling me to focus on direct experience. For instance, the concept of working with resistance - the opposition to change - was at first difficult for me to understand in terms of what it brought to the session. Going deeper into how my self-awareness became heightened has to do with the way I have experienced my own resistance, paradoxically by resisting to resist; somewhat similar to the Gestalt notion of change happening when we are more fully ourselves.

I had a sense I was being "quick and clever" in spotting the different ways in which my clients resist. Somehow I was also getting a sense I was becoming a little bit of a "judge" in spotting their resistance and very fast in going "aha, there's resistance here". From that point on, I found the work I did with my Supervisor easier. I realised I was not giving myself permission to become the centre of attention and had to address my own issues with resistance, in order to get rid of this sense of judging my clients' resistance. I was so focused on "spotting" other's resistance that I was ignoring my own. Fully experiencing resistance has enabled me to work more effectively with that of my clients.

Some Gestalt Interventions

This section gives an account of some Gestalt interventions from my practice. I provide examples of what these look like and of how I understand the context and impact.

Contracting as a Gestalt coach

I say:

“As a Gestalt coach, I work in the present, with whatever happens in the session. I pay attention to what is being said and what is not and I give feedback in a way which is solely focus to support your awareness. We may experiment in the session if the opportunity to do so comes up and I will be re-contracting with you to check where your energy and attention are as we work differently. As we start working together, I am wondering what would you like from me in the session?”

What the impact is:

Expectations are managed, the client knows about my style as a coach, there is common ground as to how we will work together, and the relationship begins to be co-created. This way, the client knows that we will work in the moment, he/she will appreciate that experimenting links to the work on increasing awareness and that awareness has also got to do with what is being left out.

What is different about this way of contracting then is that objectives are held lightly because we are working in the moment. There is not a fixed outcome for the session and whilst there is a purpose to the coaching, we are not fixing objectives and tracking progress towards them. Instead, I am tracking the client's energy, being attentive to what is happening between us in the moment.

My presence and the use of myself

I say:

“I am feeling a bit lost about the way you are saying this to me... I just want to ask you how you are feeling right now ... Let me tell you what I have noticed that has lead me to say that (...).”

The context:

As a Gestalt coach I rely a lot less in models, e.g. GROW, and more on how I am able to connect with the client, interact and work in the moment, in a way that is authentic, genuine and rich. A fundamental part of this interaction is how I communicate and how I use myself in the coaching session in a way that supports my client's needs. This is what is referred as “signature presence”.

Supportive closure

I say:

“Let's take stock in the few minutes we have left: Is there anything we have not completed here? As an ending, what kind of reflection can you make that would be helpful to you? What do you need now for this to have the best finish for you?”

The context:

The coaching session is coming to an end. A lot has happened during the session: experimenting, linking emotions, reactions, feedback, etc. The final minutes of the coaching session sometimes tend to be when sense-making and connections happen for the client. Holding the space for the client to take stock of what has happened is something I am mindful of and work with. I appreciate that reflecting on the session will also take place during the hours and days afterwards.

By asking about what may have been left out of the session, the client has the opportunity to have a sense of continuity towards some further reflection or even further work for next session whilst becoming more aware.

How I have changed as a Gestalt trained coach

There are two points where I have really changed my practice as a result of being a Gestalt trained coach:

- ✓ Putting meaning to how “working with the client’s objectives lightly” relates to an emergent way of working.
- ✓ A new way of contracting that tells the client how I work, the nature of the feedback I will offer, the re-contracting for experiments.



When I coach now, I am paying more attention to my internal dialogue; I am more attentive to what is going on with me as I work with my client. This attention is focused on how I am using and offering my internal data. I now feel more confident to reflect this back to my client to see if it can help (for instance, when a pattern may be relevant between what is going on in the session and what goes on in the life of the client). Knowing the relationship is the key enabler of the effectiveness of a coaching session, I work with my

awareness, my reactions, how things land with me; and use this data in an emergent way, offering it to my client when I believe it may add something to heighten his/her awareness.

Being more attentive to my internal data, confident working in the moment and doing the somatic work that I once saw in isolation, also means I am more selective in the way I approach feedback. I now understand that tracking energy is as a way to stay close to the client and gives me a congruent place from which to give feedback.

Reflection is an integral part of my coaching practice. I dedicate time to thinking back over the sessions, understanding what went on with me, with the client, how I showed up and impacted on the client. Becoming more aware has enabled me to notice more, not only about my client, the relationship we build, but also about me. The most fundamental shift

has been in the awareness of my own resistance. Reflecting on it has allowed me to understand my own reactions.

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And finally:

"The machinery of power works by imposing forgetfulness."

Philip Hensher

If you would like to respond to any of the articles in this edition or if you have a suggestion for an article of your own, do please contact kensmithcoaching@btinternet.com