

Alchemy
of Coaching

Base Metal...

The Monthly Newsletter
from
Alchemy of Coaching

The 2021 edition

Introduction

We write Base Metal every month with the intent that it stimulates, challenges, encourages and may even provoke coaches into thinking about and reflecting on their coaching. We write in a largely questioning mode that aims to encourage thinking and reflection.

We are passionate about the importance of coaches continually reflecting on what they do and how they do it, and even more about how they are being when acting as coaches.

Each month we write a short article about a topic we believe is of interest and ally it with an accompanying book review that is relevant or connected to the article.

In this e-book we have compiled all the articles and book reviews from the twelve editions of Base Metal in 2021.

We hope that you find Base Metal useful and ask you to pass this annual review on to anyone that you believe may be interested. Please also ask them to let us know if they would like to receive the monthly version of Base Metal.

The Alchemy team — Ian, Ray and Paul

December 2021





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January 2021

Towards Mastery

Ian writes: The Alchemy team have focused on ideas surrounding mastery over the past decade. What follows in this article is taken from the Introduction to the series of webinars we are facilitating for the AC starting in February. If you would like the complete handout please get in touch with one of the team.

As the coaching profession matures and increasing numbers of coaches have built up a substantial level of experience, knowledge and skill, the concept of mastery in the field is becoming as established as coaching itself. Indeed the Association for Coaching's Coach Accreditation Scheme, like those of other professional coaching bodies, now offers the opportunity to accredit at a Master Coach level. The question we often hear, especially in our volunteer roles in the AC Coach Accreditation Assessment Team, is 'What is a Master Coach?' A good question. How is coaching mastery defined? What would we see and hear as the indicative behaviours - and results - of a Master Coach or a coach displaying mastery? Our Webinar handout aims to address this question - not answer it, as 'towards mastery' intentionally implies a journey: we are continuing to learn.

A group of us who have known each other and worked together for many years started to explore the meaning of 'mastery' as a coach, both to define coaching mastery and to lay out the requirements for an individual's development journey towards it. We call our inquiry 'Alchemy of Coaching - in search of wisdom and mastery'. We named our coach development programme with this title. We continue to explore and develop our ideas on this topic and how it informs the coach development programmes that we facilitate.

We believe it is important to share our view or means towards developing mastery. Some see mastery being founded on coaches acquiring greater and greater knowledge: increasing mastery equates to increasing knowledge and having a variety of coaching approaches at your fingertips. The Alchemy team have a different view - some have commented that it is a unique and valuable difference. We believe that mastery comes more from the coach understanding themselves, their context, their skills and experiences so that they are safe to coach in any situation that they face rather than having to rely on following a procedure or specific approach. We believe the coach needs this understanding about themselves and their current skill levels so that they can best operate in service of their clients. These

ideas come from the experiences of the Alchemy team. In no way would we want you to believe that we think this is 'the' route towards mastery. It is 'a' route.

We believe that there are some elements for all coaches to understand which relate to the concept of 'towards mastery' as a coach. These elements are:

1. What is 'mastery' in the coaching context?

2. We move towards 'mastery' - it is a never ending journey that has some identifiable stages akin to the development of craft skills: 'Apprentice to Master'.

3. Setting out on this journey requires a sense of purpose and intent recognising personal development and growth is unlikely to be a straight and continuing upward trend. There are some features that can be employed to better facilitate our learning, development and growth.

4. There are some essential components that coaches need to understand and learn to continually improve. These components are underpinned by groups of capabilities and individual skills.

5. Our four models are enabling mechanisms for helping us on our journey by providing some structure and direction. We put these models into a common structure: preparation, 'use in real time, reflective practice, supervision, courses and CPD.

This set of interacting components and models, together with The Alchemy of Coaching capabilities, provide the foundation for a coach to go - in search of wisdom and mastery.

Q. What is your understanding of coaching mastery?

Book review

"The Talent Code - greatness isn't born, it's grown" Daniel Coyle, Arrow Books, Random House, 2009
"Mastery - the keys to success and long-term fulfilment" George Leonard, Plume Penguin, 1992
"Mastery" Robert Greene, Profile Books, 2012

Daniel Coyle observes that many times the coaches he studied "are completely silent"; "they listened far more than they talked". For learners his message is to ignite motivation: "better get busy" … then to "go slow", step by step, with attentive repetition, "operating at the edges of your ability - where you make mistakes - and correct them". In "Mastery" George Leonard draws on Zen philosophy and aikido to define practice not as something you do, rather "something you *have*, something you *are*". Both Leonard and Coyle emphasise the importance of repeatedly going to the edge: a lifelong process of learning. For Coyle learning is a kind of personal kaizen, and in an echo of Leonard's invitation to *love* being on the plateau and appreciate practice for its own sake, he quotes Michelangelo: "If people knew how hard I had to work to gain my mastery it would not seem so wonderful at all". Robert Greene examines the nature of such mastery, exemplified in brilliant people.

February 2021

Psychometrics, Leadership, Emotional Intelligence and coaching

I do share the views put forward in the January 2020 Base Metal about pre-conceptions of my client from a psychometric assessment and the absolute need to work with what my client presents in their situation, in their moment.

That is a reality here and a very powerful reason for accreditation of our industry: anyone can read a psychometric report and tell a client what they are like, and what they might do about it. The value of

psychometrics to me is absolutely not what the report says, it is what my client feels as I ask questions or when they are reading it. Valuable questions are not of the 'is this you?' variety; rather they are 'how does this make you feel?' and 'do you want to take action to change your behaviours?'

I am lucky to work with executive leadership development, a wide field full of opportunity both in corporate and SME markets. As we approach senior executive and board levels there are a variety of training courses available; many of these are still focused on the 'What' of the job when, as Marshall Goldsmith puts it in his excellent book 'What got you here won't get you there', "the higher we go, the more your problems are behavioural".

At this level, we need to develop our self-awareness, empathy, decision making, delegation, stress resilience and adaptability. Which of these would you want to focus on? I believe that self-awareness is critical here as we cannot develop and grow without first understanding ourselves. Then we need the courage, humility and discipline to take sustainable action. The result is a powerful change in habit which can advance your executive career. There are powerful tools to help here, maybe the topic of a future article?

Moving to a specific psychometric for leadership and executive roles, Emotional Intelligence is the critical element for success at the highest levels. For this reason, I frequently use EBW - Emotions and Behaviours at Work at the start of a coaching programme, often reviewed during the second meeting.

How do I know, when I read the report, what is reality, or what is perhaps the outcome from a misunderstood question? I am not, and have no chance of ever being, clear on this so I read the reports with curiosity maybe wondering how my client will react and respond but not taking anything as factual.

Before completing the psychometric assessment, I will advise my clients to set aside time when they are relaxed and not going to be disturbed. I have experienced one client who, when we reviewed their report, said it was really inaccurate. We discussed this and when I asked about their state of mind during the assessment, they had been through a traumatic experience which weighed heavily on their mind. Did this make the report invalid? Not at all, it still provided a basis for coaching questions both at the time and across the following months.

On a final point, many psychometrics use their own terms, acronyms, colours etc. as a means of describing or slotting people or their behaviours into so called meaningful sections. Whilst I do realise that each of us has a different blend of VAKOG (Visual, Auditory, Kinaesthetic, Olfactory, Gustatory) values, these reports should never be read cold by the client. I strongly believe in using my clients' terminology wherever possible and this means that when I ask questions, I can phrase them in a manner my client understands. So, I use a psychometric that is in normal business language.

Do you use psychometrics when coaching?
If so, why do you use them?
How do you use them to your clients' real advantage?
What else can you do to increase your client's or your own self-awareness?

Phil Summerfield
Executive & Business Coach/Mentor

Book review

"Psychometrics in Coaching - Using Psychological and Psychometric Tools for Development", edited by Jonathan Passmore, Kogan Page, 2008
With contributions from 35 authors, this is a go-to resource offering theory and explanation of a wide range of instruments and guidance on their use. Chapter 8, by Dr David R Caruso and Professor Peter Salovey, addresses coaching for emotional intelligence, focused particularly on the MSCEIT, an emotional intelligence test. This chapter is of value for both coaches in their own emotional development and that of their coachees.

“ Psychological Dimensions of Executive Coaching”, Peter Bluckert, McGraw Hill Open University Press, 2006

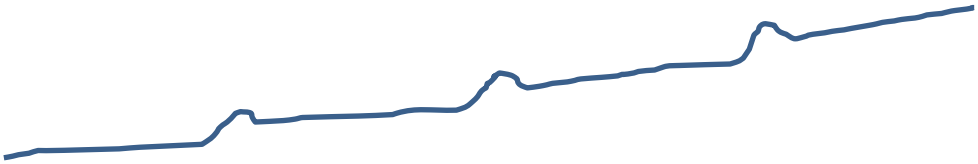
In this volume in the Coaching in Practice series, the author refers to several aspects of emotional intelligence. Whilst he recognises the value of assessment tools to assist in raising awareness, he warns against over-dependence on such instruments, emphasising that they are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. He counsels us to be clear why we are using them and not to use them as a comfort blanket for our own reassurance.

March 2021

Three types of change

Paul writes: Coaching in recent months, as well as thinking about coach development in preparing for the webinar series we are currently running, has led me to reflect on change processes and how different people experience and respond to change. As a coach, it has struck me that some understanding about what sort of change my coachee might be experiencing, or indeed what they might be open to, is a very useful thing to know. What I have been noticing are (at least) three different types of change.

According to the classic model, particularly when thinking about personal development, change often occurs in a non-linear fashion – particular experiences or ‘lightbulb moments’, with the right support, resulting in a significant shift, and one that occurs extremely fast. A version of this is when we experience long periods with no discernible change or improvement, and then a desired yet unexpected shift to a new level – the result of many hours of practice. George Leonard, in his book ‘Mastery’ uses the following graphic to illustrate this pattern:



One might perhaps term this ‘step change’, and those experiencing it tend to be aware of it.[1]

In apparent contrast to Leonard’s plateau pattern, there is quite a significant amount in the literature about incremental change, whether relating to elite sport, business or life in general: to put this in mathematical terms, if I can be 1% better every day, over a year that translates to an almost 38% improvement.[2] Or to think of it another way, if I can improve several different areas by a tiny amount, those tiny amounts can add up to something substantial. The bigger challenge here may be awareness of those incremental changes, and often the significance is not apparent until much further down the line, when the difference between the present and the past is more apparent. Small shifts of mindset are often like this, where the role of the coach might be to support their client in seeing and recognising both the shift and the difference it can make.

There is also a third type, of perhaps a slightly different nature – what one might call experimental change. If I recognise that there is something I want to work on, but my path to improvement is not clear, one way to explore this is through taking an experimental, semi-scientific approach. One of

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1 The difficult bit after recognition, as shown in Leonard’s diagram, can be the cementing of that learning, ensuring that the change is lasting. Continued practice is necessary to reduce the risk of decline and increase the chance of further gain.

2 $1.01^{365} = 37.78$.

hypothesis testing (whether in simply thought experiment terms, or in real situations). What would happen if I took this different approach? How do I feel about that? Are there areas of my life where I could try this out, where the risk is lower?

For me, there is a crucial element of this sort of change, and which is often neglected: it relates to evaluation. For this experimental approach to be successful, there are, in my experience two prerequisites: firstly, conscious choice to try something new; and secondly, post hoc specific assessment of the outcome. 'I made the choice today to go into a meeting with a particular mindset. Did I manage to do that, and what results did I observe?' Without this clarity of experimental evaluation, the change of making a lasting change is significantly reduced, as is the potential of an iterative experimental process, where over time and experience, you find what works for you.

Noticing which road our coachee might be on seems important to me, as how I, as a coach, might support and challenge them may differ quite significantly depending on that understanding.

Q. What types of change do you observe in your clients, and how do you go about supporting them through it?

Book review

"Coach yourself - make real change in your life. It's your life. What are you going to do with it?", Anthony M. Grant and Jane Greene, Momentum / Pearson Education, 2001.
I take the view that change begins with myself - I have much more chance of changing myself than of changing anyone else, no matter how discouraging this may be. Rather than worry about my many concerns about the state of the world, I can do as Stephen Covey recommends: concentrate on those things which I can influence. As a coach I invest in my own learning. When I work on myself, I increase the likelihood that I can be of service to others - for example by avoiding giving them the kind of advice which will prove unhelpful and instead supporting them to find their own path and resources.

In "Coach Yourself" Anthony Grant and Jane Greene assert that coaching is about change, provide a wealth of practical information and tools to address it. They explore why being able to change is important, explain what coaching is, and provide a solution-focussed set of techniques for coaching yourself and relevant evidence from research. Chapters include what works and doesn't, finding out what you want, understanding motivation, moving from negative to positive, gathering strength, staying on track, success, and co-coaching.

I think this book is valuable for my own development and to inform my practice as a coach for others.

April 2021

Reflections on 8 years and 100 editions of Base Metal

Ian returned to write this 100th edition (has he really ever gone away????).

In the autumn of 2012, not long after Alchemy of Coaching was getting set up we decided, in line with one of our aims 'to share our knowledge and information as widely as possible', to produce a monthly Newsletter. With the name Alchemy of Coaching, calling the newsletter Base Metal was a fairly obvious one. A number of good friends and colleagues said that we would find it really difficult to publish once a month. That we have done so, and published within the particular month every time except once, is something we are proud of. It has been challenging at times and made a little easier because coaching covers such a wide range of ideas, topics, skills and knowledge that finding something to write about is usually possible without a lot of soul searching. It has also helped that, at the outset, we determined the

article would be about 700-800 words, the book review would have some relationship with the article and the whole Newsletter had to be contained within two pages and was not to be used for marketing purposes. It was, as I have said earlier in this article, a means to share our knowledge and ideas. We have maintained this format: despite the occasional pressure to do something different, we have resisted and we believe this has been to our and Base Metal's benefit.

We want to pass on our grateful thanks to the dozen or so guest contributors. They have provided us with different points of view and enabled us to publish articles on topics we are not so familiar with. So thank you. Also a huge thank you to Ray who has written almost all the book reviews. While he needs little encouragement to read a new book it has been a big and regular challenge. Again, thank you.

Alchemy set out, more than a decade ago, to focus some attention on all aspects of mastery. This has become a topic we are increasingly interested in, both for experienced coaches and also for those starting out on their coaching journey. We have learned a lot about mastery and have a particular point of view that mastery is more about how we are and how we are being whilst coaching, rather than having armfuls of approaches and techniques. So, much of what we share about mastery is as relevant to beginners as it is to experienced coaches. We have recently pooled much of our knowledge and experience into a series of webinars for the Association for Coaching. We have written a substantial handout to accompany the webinars and this will probably be available to purchase once the webinar series is completed. If you are interested in getting a copy of the handout please get in touch.

Beyond mastery we have covered a wide range of topics, some of these two or three times if we feel they are particularly important to coaches. Some topics, such as those on breath and breathing, may seem less related to coaching and we have always found a way to make a connection. We often do this by posing questions to invite our readers to think about something, perhaps to gain new insights or to try out a new idea. As I look through the list of articles it is clear how we have ranged across all sorts of topics relating to coaching, from the big questions such as "What is coaching?" and "Is coaching an art or science?" through to narrower topics like "Stuckness" or "What do I do when I don't know what to do?" via "Supervision", "Reflective Practice" and "Boundaries".

All back copies are published in an E-book at the end of each year and we are currently in the process of compiling an E-book of all 100 editions. All the E-books are available via the website free of charge. Please do download them if you have missed any articles - and tell others about them. We are pondering whether it will be worthwhile to put a simple list of topics onto the website so that readers can, more easily, find topics they are interested in. If you think this is a good idea please let us know.

We plan to continue producing Base Metal once a month and wonder where it might go over the next 100 editions. Alchemy have started facilitating an Open Leadership Development programme (which we developed after delivering it successfully in-house for a client). This has carried on through COVID restrictions and given us valuable insights into delivering digitally. We are planning a Leader as Coach programme to be delivered later this year. These programmes open up the possibility to expand our range of topics to include some about leadership, at least as it relates to a coaching style.

Please let us know of any topics that you would like us to explore and write about.

Book review

"How Proust Can Change Your Life" by Alain De Botton, Picador,1997

Over the 100 editions of Base Metal so far, I have chosen and reviewed books which I thought relevant for the coaching topic of the month. Sometimes I have cited two or three titles for a single article. Along the way there have been two or three seminal books to which I've returned. There remains a wide selection of pertinent works which I've not picked from my library and many more of which I'm unaware. The accompanying quotations have come from a more diverse range of reading. I am struck by the high proportion of reviews which fall into the category of psychology, reflecting the focus of coaching on the

individual. Perhaps the next most common choices have been about leadership, or about approaches to coaching and particular techniques. Sociology and anthropology have appeared occasionally. Philosophy has seldom had a mention.

For this month's topic I started by picking quotations which reflect perseverance and the coach's journey towards mastery. Then I was attracted by mention in philosopher Alain de Botton's title of 'change your life' - a theme common to many people who present for coaching. This book, an international best seller, is described by John Updike as "Dazzling" and by Allan Massie as "…so charming, amusing and sensible that it may even change your life". Among the book's chapter headings are 'How to Take your Time', How to Express Your Emotions', 'How to Open Your Eyes' and 'How to Put Books Down' - this last clearly directed at me!

I recommend this book - in it I think you will find serious fun and wise counsel.

May 2021

To coach or not to coach - that is the question

Ray writes: At Alchemy of Coaching Ian is leading the creation of a set of coaching guides. Meanwhile we continue with our webinar series for the Association for Coaching "Towards Mastery - four enabling models" and by the end of May we will have delivered two more AC events: "Who are you when you coach?" and "Coaching Mastery". In June I will be leading a session for Midlands Coaching Central, entitled "Take your coaching to a new level". All of this activity has prompted us to consider what we do, how we do it, and most importantly what it is for: the purpose and value of coaching.

Origin, Purpose and Value

'Coaching' derives from the word 'coach' as a term to describe a particular class of vehicle. Joseph O'Connor and Andrea Lages describe this origin in more detail in their 2007 book "How Coaching Works". Robert Dilts ascribes a similar derivation in his 2003 book "From Coach to Awakener": "a wagon or carriage…which literally …carries a person or group of people from some starting location to a desired location." **Q. *In what ways does your coaching provide a vehicle for your client?***

A carriage provides the means of transport for the traveller to move to a different place. Perhaps Robert used the word 'literally' to bring alive the physical reality of the journey. Metaphor plays a major part in how we experience and navigate the world, make sense of what happens, find place and meaning, and communicate with each other. Our stories are suffused with metaphors - see, for example, George Lakoff and George Johnson: "Metaphors We Live By", 1980. We tell ourselves stories, and we benefit from hearing others tell theirs. By listening to others we help them to validate themselves and, potentially, to become more aware, and to be able to access different choices - even to rewrite their personal narrative and show up differently in life. ***Q. What part does listening play in your coaching? What is the nature and quality of your listening?***

Being seen and heard, being witnessed, nurtures connection and belonging. By providing non-judgemental attention we can provide a mirror (another metaphor) for our client - giving more access to introspection and thought. By offering "Time to Think", Nancy Kline (1999), the coach contributes a quality of attention to enhance their clients' opportunity to think for themselves, and develop "a thinking environment". ***Q. How does you coaching support your clients to think for themselves?***

Value for the client

Coaching can provide the client with attention, support, feedback and challenge. This 'vehicle' can be a relatively safe conveyance or container in which the client gains information, insight and clarity of direction and action. Such safety requires the coach's commitment to ethical practice, recognition and respect for boundaries, and clarity of roles and responsibilities - all in service of the client. Establishing rapport, building trust, maintaining confidentiality and avoiding collusion contribute to a developmental partnership of benefit for the client. ***Q. How do you begin, co-create, sustain, and end an effective relationship with your client?***

Deciding if coaching is right for this person - and with this coach

Prospective clients present with varying needs, notions of what coaching is, and expectations of it. They may come to coaching as part of a package of development provided by an employer, or otherwise recommended to them - hence with varying degrees of prior knowledge, misapprehension, scepticism or enthusiasm. Deciding whether coaching is appropriate is an important first step. A usual way to address this is to provide a 'chemistry' session in which coach and prospective client share information to inform the choice. For this to be of value, the coach will know and describe their approach to coaching, how it will work, its duration, what it will cost, respective roles and responsibilities and terms of agreement. The client will share such aspects of personal history, circumstance and needs as are pertinent to establish whether coaching is appropriate or whether a different professional service is required. If coaching is the preferred route, a further consideration is 'fit' - do the backgrounds, preferences and personalities of coach and coachee suggest a beneficial partnership or would a different coach be a better match. ***Q. How do you contract for your coaching?***

Evaluating the coaching

Research suggests that beneficial outcomes from coaching result not from any particular approach or method adopted; rather from the quality of the relationship (see, for example, "Quantitative Research into the Coaching Relationship" in "Coaching Relationships", Erik de Haan and Charlotte Sills (2012). ***Q. How do you know that you have an effective relationship with your client? How do you assess / re-contract?***

Continual Professional Development

Coach training can provide breadth and depth of preparation and improvement - there is a great diversity available. Coaching practice groups offer valuable opportunity for feedback and learning. Reflective practice and critique help us to develop. Reading articles, books and journals and attending webinars enrich our CPD. Participating in supervision and implementing personal development plans aligned to coaching capabilities and competencies improve my skills, knowledge and effectiveness. *Q. How do you engage in CPD and supervision?*

Book review

"Tiny Habits - Why starting small makes lasting change easy", BJ Fogg, Penguin, 2020

Many clients present for coaching because they sense that they know what they want and yet are unable to change in ways that will work for them. They ask their coach to help them to shift from stuckness to success. "Tiny Habits", written by the founder of the Behaviour Design Lab at Stanford, is a New York Times bestseller. Described as *"a rare diamond: a self-help book that actually helps"* this is a how-to manual filled with simple methods and numerous real-life examples of how to use them to deliver changed behaviour. *"It isn't about will-power: it's about starting small, and making it feel good."* When I'd read only the first section I was already recommending a simple technique from the book to one of my coachees, to help move from procrastination into action. *"Even when life gets tricky, creating the habits you want is much easier than you think."*

June 2021

Trying hard...letting go

Many years ago a friend and I got asked by a consulting team in a big professional services firm to run a planning day for them. They said they already had their strategy for the coming year – they just needed help putting together a coherent plan.
The first exercise we sent them off to think about was essentially this:
- what assumptions have you made in putting this strategy together?
- what's the likelihood of those assumptions coming true?
It didn't take them long to come back with shocked faces and the realisation they'd made lots of assumptions, very few of which were likely to come true. We helped them spend the rest of the day developing better assumptions, a better strategy, and some simple plans.
I share this story not because they were stupid – these were very experienced and smart people. But the flip side of being trained and paid to be professional at anything is it's too easy to confuse professionalism and perfection.

So why do I tell this story in a blog about coaching? Well, as a professionally trained, certified and experienced coach, I've been experimenting over the past year with this idea of letting go of assumptions (and beliefs, and habits, and ...) Part of this was prompted by external factors. We all had to let go of assumptions about lots of things in March 2020, and try to navigate an uncertain world that's still unfolding. As I was processing that for myself, and trying to help family and clients, I found myself explaining William Bridges' work on transitions a lot. Bridges didn't invent transitions but he did a good job of packaging it in a way that people could understand. The essential idea is that, when faced with any change, the time it takes to transition depends on our capacity to do three things in parallel:
- let go of how things used to be
- realise that there are probably few guarantees about the future
- begin to explore and experiment with the uncertainty

Most coaching is about transition in one shape or another. The best known coaching model of them all – GROW – is based on a future state which is different from the present, which will require all three capacities. But what I think we don't always pay enough attention to is the art of letting go in that. In a very goal focused world, it's too easy to create a nice shiny goal, and a plan to get there, without pausing to check our assumptions about what it might take.

One of the things for me about coaching through the pandemic has been how hard it was to have any clear sense of the future. We had to accept that we couldn't carry on as before, and begin to explore/experiment. But that word 'accept' is easy to spell, and harder to do. I'm not talking about an intellectual acceptance. I'm talking about the potentially raw lived experience in which some fundamental aspect of yourself gets dismantled or shattered. Intellectual acceptance is what happens when well-paid politicians and scientists tell us to follow the rules. Real acceptance is being able to live through the pain and real loss of something, and still begin to make forward progress, for whoever or whatever matters most to you. That's letting go.

Which brings me back to us as coaches. Having seen the power for clients of letting go – of what is sometimes referred to as radical acceptance – I started challenging myself. What was I holding on to tightly when I turned up in those sessions? How was I influencing and shaping the conversations, and was it more about the client and the situation, or more about me? I found lots of useful insights for me, but I'll leave you with one. I found myself doing one thing I've coached hundreds of people NOT to do.

My ‘story’ was that, because times were tough, and people were struggling, I had to make sure I was properly prepared. But actually I was over preparing, to manage my anxiety. I was making lots of assumptions, in a very uncertain time. So, I practised letting go of my anxiety. Accepting the risk. Doing ‘enough’ preparation. Trusting the process. Living with the discomfort. And the coaching got better. The clients made more progress. Which prompted the title of this blog – what’s more ‘professional’? Trying hard, or letting go? There’s no certain answer, so I’ll leave you with a few questions.
What’s one thing you regularly rely on in your coaching practice?
What’s your assumption about why that’s important?
What if you released your grip on it?
What else might then be possible?
Have fun exploring and experimenting.

Alan Arnett

Book review

“The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse”, Charlie Mackesy, Ebury Press, 2019
When I was asked if I wanted to do a book review to go alongside the article, I knew instantly this had to be the one. You may have already read the book, in which case take this as permission to go back and dip into it again. If not, you definitely need this book. Or your children do. Or someone else in your family or friends. It’s not a business book. It’s not a coaching book. But it is full of great insights into life, and between them I think the four characters are pretty good coaches. The book has taken off over the past year, with lots of teachers getting their children to share their own pictures and tips.

It’s a book to remind us all of the pain and joy of being human, and how simple support for each other matters. It’s better than almost any other book I know at the practice of letting go, simply because, you’ll read something in it, feel your tension, and the release of letting go. Find a copy. Find an excuse to buy one. But read this book.

July 2021

Breath

It is fundamental to our lives as living, breathing human beings. We do it without thinking about it. And yet breath is also key in other ways if we can train ourselves to be more conscious of it, its potential and its effects on ourselves and on others. At one level, breath can be a window into the state of mind of an individual, an indicator of high stress, a signal of relaxation, a marker of overall health and well-being. It is for this reason, among many others, that so much therapeutic training (whether based on methods of yoga, Tai Chi or mindfulness) focuses on ideas around breath.

Anyone who keeps abreast of the coaching CPD offer will have observed something of the current trend towards some form of meditation. Supportive research is growing, and the cast of vocal supporters both glittering and significant. What I’m interested in here is that many use the idea of taking time out, or pausing ‘for breath’, as well as including some content which relates to the physical breath itself, whether that is the superficial ‘take a deep breath before you speak’, or the more involved ‘meditate to succeed’ premise. However, few if any seem to take the next step towards application to others. It is all self-centred. This is not necessarily a criticism, as meditation is, by its very nature, focussed on the individual, but there is another angle here. The common ground here is consciousness of the breath and its nature as the starting point.

Let us put ourselves in the position of the observer here, rather than the practitioner of the breath. What can we learn about someone else from how they breathe, and what lessons are there for ourselves about the effects of our own breath on others? Is the breathing short and shallow, or long and deep? Is there obvious tension around the chest, shoulders and throat from the act of breathing? How does that relate to posture? Does it affect the quality of the voice? Subconscious clues perhaps that we can read as part of observing the body language of another, but clues that we might beneficially move to the conscious level, both in a perceptual and active fashion.

Singers and actors face these questions and challenges every day of their working lives, and can offer useful insight. Both are professional voice users, and need to be aware of anything that can either affect their vocal production, or that they can actively use to affect that production, depending on the context. However, going right back to the physical aspect of taking in and expelling air from the lungs allows the tracing of certain unconscious behaviours (like raising the shoulders when breathing) that are both personally unhelpful, and can transmit negative messages to those who read them. Something as simple as standing up to make that difficult phone call can make a noticeable difference, as here the posture is typically better, and the breath typically more grounded, which positively affects the timbre of the voice.

Some of this is about perception and confidence, but there is also something about authenticity going on. A leader who stands well and breathes well will also speak well, and carry an authority that brings people with them. The open breath can also be an invitation, an inclusive action that comes literally from within the leader. This is not about 'acting the part', but about connecting with oneself and one's breath, and being aware of the messages that are transmitted as a result. Again, both consciousness of an action and its potential are important, particularly in positions of leadership.

This is one further area where the power of experiential learning is difficult to overplay. In these contexts, we need the feedback of an outsider to assist our consciousness of our own actions, and to point out where those actions can and do have ramifications, and this role is often fulfilled by a coach. However far we study 'the theory', it is this personal interaction which acts as the key catalyst for deep-rooted learning experiences of this kind where such actions can be overtly rehearsed, and where coaching can provide a varied and insightful canvas.

Q. Do you observe breath patterns in your coachees?

Q. How might you make more active use of breath in your coaching?

Book reviews

These books, linked by attention to the breath, offer practical methods for being present and centred.

"Three deep breaths - finding power and purpose in a stressed-out world", Thomas Crum, Berrett-Koehler, 2006 A short story of simple practice for gaining awareness and connection.

"The Intuitive Body - discovering the wisdom of Conscious Embodiment and Aikido", Wendy Palmer, Blue Snake Books, 2008 Techniques for access to the body's wisdom.

"Pause for Breath - bringing the practices of mindfulness and dialogue to leadership conversations", Amanda Ridings, Live It Publishing, 2011 A Nautilus Award winning book, twice recommended before in Base Metal.

"Leadership Embodiment - how the way we sit and stand can change the way we think and speak", Wendy Palmer, and Janet Crawford, Embodiment International, 2013 Somatic psychology, mindfulness and power.

"Your body is your brain", Amanda Blake, Trokay Press, 2018 Another Nautilus Award winner; how we can access somatic intelligence - "*a journey of purpose and meaning*" Richard Boyatzis.

"Do/Pause: You are not a To Do list." Robert Poynton, The To Do Book Company, 2019 *Accessible and implementable practical reflections on the importance of pause and how to do it.*

August 2021

Is the coach's development journey a neglected subject?

Ray writes:

Q. What motivates you as a coach? What are you inspired to achieve?

As a coach you are almost certainly committed to lifelong learning, with the expectation that this both applies to you and is available for your clients. Rather than having a fixed mindset (see Carol Dweck's book "Mindset"), with its associated implication that there is not much you can do to change, you have a development mindset with its inherent enthusiasm for discovery. Perhaps you already give close attention to your development journey - reflecting on how you have become a coach, the values which you hold most dear, the strengths you bring to your coaching, how you measure your contribution, and your curiosity about improving your knowledge and skills. Maybe you have made and are following a Personal Development Plan. You may be taking part in supervision; in co-coaching; in reading and attending webinars to deepen your knowledge and practice to hone your skills; and perhaps contributing to research and training provision.

Q. what is your experience of your learning journey?

When we created Alchemy of Coaching, at first coach training was our central purpose. We chose to provide a distinctive experience in which each participant finds their individual expression of coaching, based on who they are - and at the same time to cover the essentials of coaching competence recognised and upheld by the Association for Coaching, from whom we gained accreditation of the programme. The aim of the first running was to support experienced coaches on their journey in search of mastery. We discovered that the principles underpinning the design, in particular starting with each unique individual and supporting them to create with us and nurture a collaborative learning community, meant that the programme worked equally well for participants at any stage in their coaching journey.

Q Who are you as a coach, and how do you develop?

As we gained experience from cohort to cohort we became more and more invested in the coach's personal and professional development. The material, activities and supervision we produced and delivered for the programme participants informed our growing interest in how coaches learn. We developed our own set of coaching capabilities, complementary to and additive to published sets of competencies. We wanted to capture our insights from the programme and share them. Plans were made, and work begun, for a book about the Alchemy approach. Some of the ingredients have been explored in editions of Base Metal, and recently we have delivered a Signature Series of ten webinars for the Association for Coaching, and two AC regional webinars, related to the coach's learning journey.

Q. What development resources have you accessed, or could you draw upon?

We have noticed that in an extensive and ever-increasing range of books on coaching, there are surprisingly few which are explicitly about the coach's learning journey; what there is on this subject seems to be found mostly within the literature produced for coaching supervisors, having to do mainly with the supervisor's responsibilities. We think there is a need to address the coach's opportunities and responsibility for their own learning and how these can work for them. Ian, the driving force for our potential book, has for the present turned our attention to producing a set of twenty coaching guides -

inspired by our experience as coaches, coach trainers, supervisors and accreditation assessors - covering both basic and advanced elements of the coach's learning journey.

Q. How valuable might such guides be for you, and what topics would you want them to cover?

We welcome your views on this subject. Let us know if you think this is a neglected area; tell us what has helped you, and what more you would love to have. Share your experience and insights; volunteer to write a piece about your learning journey, for Base Metal.

Book review

"Supervision in Coaching: Supervision, Ethics and Continuous Professional Development" edited by Jonathan Passmore, Association for Coaching / Kogan Page, 2011.

In addition to the editor there are twenty-eight contributing authors, offering a rich resource in a single volume. The book is organised in four parts: *Approaches to supervision; Coaching ethics and the law; Continuous professional development; and Personal reflection*.

In Parts 3 and 4, particularly relevant to the theme of this edition of Base Metal, David Hain, Philippa Hain and Lisa Matthewman define and explore CPD; Anne Davidson and Dale Schwarz propose creative approaches to continuous development; Max Blumberg and David Lane examine coaching research as CPD; Declan Woods addresses reflection and the use of reflective journals; Peter Hawkins offers a developmental model of supervision which builds emotional, ethical and cognitive capacity in coaches; and Jonathan Passmore. Gladeana McMahon, Diane Brennan, Bob Lee, Barbara Christian and Michelle Tenzyk describe the use of case studies for reflective practice.

Katherine Tulpa, CEO and Founding Chair of the Association for Coaching, writes in her Foreword "as the demand and appetite for coaching ripples throughout businesses, societies, and people's personal lives, there is both a moral and ethical obligation that we have as a collective group of professionals to ensure that we are doing all we can to be our best, do the right thing, and to protect those that we serve", and concludes with her thanks for "this valuable piece of work, to support coaches, and the profession, as we continue on our learning journey into the next global era."

September 2021

Physician, heal thyself

For a proverb of any sort to survive, it tends to have more than a grain of truth to it, and having recently re-joined the world of the salaried workforce, I have been reflecting on thoughts of transferability and self-coaching. I'm sure it is true for many of us that however skilfully and successfully we are able to coach and help our clients, applying our own methods and thinking to ourselves is different. My question is 'should it be?' It seems easier to me to be my own 'sports coach' than to approach this area developmentally.

I am continually working with clients through busyness, pressure and work-life balance, as well as addressing issues of time-management and development of an assertive and pro-active mindset. Personally, I am certainly better at this than I was, but there is still significant risk of getting caught in the current of the urgent, potentially to everyone's detriment. As ever, knowing the principles or the theory is not the same as being able to apply them to ourselves or to our presenting situation.

One element that I frequently use with clients in this field is to make a distinction between the noticing and the action. In order for me to act effectively (whether reactively, or pro-actively) I need to have

noticed what is going on. Without that consciousness, the chance of making positive informed choices is much reduced, and as for learning from my experience – no chance! For many, there is a tension here between the desire to be instinctive and 'in flow', and this narrative around conscious choice: can I act quickly enough if that level of consciousness is consistently maintained?

What I observe, particularly in my younger coachees, is a very high pace expectation, which often translates into the 'I don't have time to do that' narrative. The challenge, as I see it, is more to telescope the time delay. In developing awareness, the initial noticing stage may well take place after the event, often leading to the 'I wish I had ….' response. However, this post hoc noticing is not without value, as it can open the door to a shorter time delay, and eventually and ability to notice in real time: a development journey, where conscious choice is not necessarily protracted, but agile and timely.

My recent experience of joining a new organisation has been something of a microcosm of this for me, having to consciously emulate the proverbial sponge, while also giving out clear leadership messages, building working relationships across a diverse group of new people, and actually doing the work of decision making. Noticing is a key element in this environment, whether in people management or organisational learning. Perspective is useful. The bigger challenge is then, what to do with what you have noticed.

So what does all this have to do with coaching oneself? Well, if the desired outcome of such self-coaching is similar to what we aspire to for our clients, there doesn't seem to me to be any a priori reason why the same sorts of approaches shouldn't apply. Of course, the great coaching advantages of partnership and some level of separation are missing, but our highly developed abilities in listening, questioning and observation are just as relevant when turned inwards, as are the ideas of support and challenge. Perhaps two things are needed for such an approach to be effective – the creation of some reflective space in which it can happen, and the trust in oneself to both manage process, and achieve a meaningful outcome.

Q. How easy do you find it to coach yourself?

Q. Are there particular tools you find most effective?

Book review

"The Art of Noticing. Rediscover What Really Matters To You", Rob Walker, Ebury Press, 2019
I vividly remember when at infants' school - a long time ago! - being often commanded by the teacher to "Pay attention". Usually this injunction was accompanied by the requirement to put hands on top of head and sit in silence until everyone in the class was compliant. Rob Walker opens his introduction to this book by quoting the same words from Susan Sontag - except she has used them to advise, on both the creative process and also on living. Rob continues "*To stay eager, to connect, to find interest in the everyday, to notice… these are vital skills and noble goals*."

Short chapters, 131 exercises, meditations, pertinent quotations and references make this book a rich and delightful resource whether to dip into or to read from beginning to end. Invitations include "Make an appointment … with Yourself" - an excellent starting point for Paul's challenge to us to coach ourselves.

I love this book for both its content and its design - and for the vitally alert blue eyes looking out from the front cover…

October 2021

Coach development

Over this summer, with encouragement from colleagues, the Alchemy team have turned our thoughts towards coach development. We discovered that there is very limited available material that explicitly addresses how a coach may focus on their development. So we set out to explore and share our ideas about this topic.

We began by deciding that it might be helpful to divide up our thinking into definable and discrete topics. We identified a number of topics that we consider vital for a coach's development, including: What is at the heart of coaching?; Who am I when I coach?; Five essential components for successful coaching; The coaching relationship; The coaching process; Listen, question, support and challenge; and Reflective practice. The full set of ten topics will be available from Alchemy.

There are more topics which we plan to explore in greater depth that are still work in progress. We will share these in a Base Metal article some time in 2022.

In this article we briefly outline some of the topics listed above and pose a question(s) in relation to each topic.

What is at the heart of coaching? In our view Intent is at the heart of coaching and then eight factors support a coach's Intent. These factors include presence, relationship built on trust, outcomes, learning and change.

Q. How clear are you about your Intent as a coach?

Who am I when I coach? The Alchemy team believe it is important to take my whole self into my coaching. So I need to have a clear idea and understanding about myself, who I am being when I coach and what impact this might have on different coachees.

Q. How well do you know and understand yourself and who you are being when you coach?

Q. How aware are you about how you do, or might, interact with coachees of differing styles, needs and personalities?

Five essential components for successful coaching. We have come up with a list of what we believe are the five essential components for successful coaching and they all benefit from continual improvement. We can always do them better. The five are Awareness, Creating and holding the coaching space, What do I do when I don't know what to do?, Integrating all my skill and knowledge, and Coaching from who I am and my personality. Whether or not you agree that these five are essential the question below does apply to all coaches.

Q. What plans do you have in place to improve your capabilities for these five components?

The Coaching process. There is a quite well defined process to coaching, even if it is articulated in varying ways. There are: 1. An agreement to work together, a set-up, start and contracting; 2. Agreeing goals, outcomes and approach; 3. Doing the work; and finally 4. Evaluating and next steps.Q. How well do you manage yourself through this or a similar process? What could you do better?

The coaching relationship. All coaching is based around a relationship that is built on trust. Developing a sufficiently robust relationship enables successful challenge as well as support and encouragement.

Q. How could you develop high levels of trust more quickly?

Q. How much time and energy do you invest in continuing to build a trusting relationship throughout a coaching assignment?

Listen, question, support and challenge. Four key skills. They are the bedrock of most coaching sessions.

Q. What actions do you take to improve these four skills?

Reflective practice. This is a critical part of a coach's development effort. By reflecting on what we do, did, and tried to do, together with what happened, we can explore what works and what hinders and make plans for personal improvement.

Q. Do you regularly reflect, in a disciplined manner, on your coaching?

Developing as a coach is important. It is a continual process and we hope these ideas stimulate your thinking.

For more ideas from us or to offer your own, please contact the Alchemy team.

Book review

"Supervision in Coaching: Supervision, Ethics and Continuous Professional Development", edited by Jonathan Passmore, Kogan Page, 2011
Many Base Metal articles explore the coach's development, supervision and accreditation. That we have reviewed this book in April 2015 ("taking responsibility to undertake regular and progressive personal learning and development activities"), in March 2019 (" in the chapter on CPD … guidance on where to find coach training and qualifications") and again in August 2021 (" we continue on our learning journey into the next global era") reflects both our view of the importance of this theme and the apparent scarcity of books which explicitly address it. Hence our Coach Development guides!

"Changing on the Job - Developing Leaders for a Complex World", Jennifer Garvey Berger, Stanford University Press, 2012
This book addresses the need for adult development and personal growth to engage effectively with complexity and advocates the benefits of coaching and leadership development programmes. "Transform your mind? Want to learn how?" Bill Torbert; "…simply the best book on leadership and adult development. Managers, HR professionals, coaches …will greatly benefit from reading this book" William H. Hodgetts; "…a rich, practical, and incisive guide to the relationship between adult-developmental theory and coaching" Robert Kegan. Includes a recipe for Libby's Almond Bread!

November 2021

Now

There are a few occasions when you feel that you are in the presence of something or someone incredible. You get that inner glow, that timeless feeling that fills your entire body. Yearning for more, you crave the relaxed attention shared and the experience that is immersing you. You feel privileged to be there, fully present in the moment of ultimate and luxurious tranquillity.

This time of year, I draw significantly from nature. As the evenings draw in, the autumnal colours lure us to slow down, take a breath and evidence calmness. A single oak leaf falls graciously from the rich canopy, floating to the ground in a timeless capsule. I am reminded about the chapter Nicholas Hoel in 'The Overstory' by Richard Powers. The player takes a picture on his No 2. Brownie of a chestnut tree. This activity repeats on the 21 st of the month, from the same location and at the same time. Starting in 1903, the 12 black and white pictures from the first year gradually swell and, through generations, magically show the cyclical blossom, life's beginnings and endings, as well as the leaf drop.

Our world, our nature is on a cycle. In a five-second flip, three generations of the tree are experienced. A five-second flip where summary is summarized and the only detail remembered is the reaction of silver bromide on the photographic paper- a single point in time.

This is what we do. We simplify our lives by focusing on points and moments that our brains can easily remember and process. We construct our own 5-second flips, but unlike the static No 2. Brownie, we have a choice of what we want to celebrate. We have the option of change to our mindset. Perhaps the No 2. Brownie has been replaced with digital now, allowing us to become more divergent, but this is also a mindset.

Do we remember the middle ground where we are 'in the now', and/or is it the extremes of pain and pleasure that we harbour? How can we focus on remembering the beauty in context?

For me, this is about the experience. It is about what is happening at that moment in time. I mentioned the single leaf drop and 'remembering' this. Is it in my 5-second flip? Perhaps it could be at the moment as this led me to a different thinking pattern for in that moment, I was changed. Philosophically, I let go of the past and the future. I fell as one with the leaf - experiencing the gentlewindrush and directional randomness that was so welcome. To experience this, I stopped and let myself be at one. I was busy, but the leaf permitted me to be at one. The leaf was my actor, my permission at that moment in time. Tomorrow, the inner glow could be from something else, perhaps the heron I see frequently flying above the Grand Union Canal or the woodpecker seeking ants in our garden.

Just perhaps, the surprise is something unexpected. That feeling is most agreeable.

Simon Hague
Coach - Disruptor - Supporter - Supervisor

Book Reviews

"The Overstory" by Richard Powers, Penguin,2018
Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction 2019, and described by Ann Patchett as "the best novel ever written about trees, just one of the best novels, period" and by Benjamin Markovits as "An astonishing performance…Time matters differently", this book is a "must read", remarkable in its construction, and message.

"The Power of Now", Hodder and Stoughton, 2001 and "A New Earth", Penguin, 2005 - both by Eckhart Tolle
These bestseller books take us to the essence of being present.

"Naturally Mindful" compiled by 11 authors, Leaping Hare Press, 2016
150 pages of short quotations for reconnecting with the natural world and finding wellbeing.

"Every Day Nature" by Andy Beer, National Trust, 2020
Subtitled "How noticing nature can quietly change your life" this is a delightful collection of daily readings through the seasons, created to invite us to find beauty in the everyday.

December 2021

How to Lead

Channel 4 recently broadcast a conversation between England football team manager Gareth Southgate and Mercedes Formula 1 team manager Toto Wolff. These two leaders, widely recognised and respected on the international stage, were prompted by questions set for them by Channel 4. The purpose of the discussion was to uncover what they each felt to be important about how to lead and manage effectively - from which we can learn. So what do they believe and do which works? Paul, Ian and Ray have listened to the broadcast and are heartened by what was shared. The principles and practices which both leaders embody resonate with our view in Alchemy of Coaching about what really matters and makes the difference; a view developed over many years of individual, team and organisational development by Alchemy and by Transition Partnerships. At the heart of this is the idea that as a leader, my job - rather than to lead, manage or supervise you as I would prefer to be treated - is to the best of my ability to treat you in ways suited to you such that you are able to perform at your best. Here, in our words, are some examples gleaned from the Channel 4 conversation. You may like to search for the recording and go back to the source!

In a competitive environment pressures are enormous. The leader requires intelligence about the enterprise, vision, desire to win, and empathy with all of the people. Of the many important ingredients which make up the effective leader, personal authenticity is essential. This means more than the leader being true to themselves: they must also have respect for all of the different individuals, each with their own personality, characteristics and problems. This is why empathy is required. “Leadership is about them, not about you.”

Asked about the changing environment and expectations of people, Southgate and Wolff recognised that authority through position is not enough to engender respect. The leader who expects people to be team players has also to be a team player. People contribute at their best when motivated, and that motivation comes from within. The leader notices and responds to what motivates each individual. Money is not a sufficient motivator, especially in settings which already command high remuneration. Leaders and managers may unintentionally demotivate their people: a team talk or motivational speech may not be needed - it may be counterproductive, annoying and distracting the person who is already motivated. “Make sure not to demotivate people. This is about you - let it go!”

To be the best, create a safe environment which encourages - this includes encouraging calculated risks. Have really honest conversations - which will vary according to the individual. The best people are those who behave with integrity, in alignment with their values. This means that there will be conflict to be expressed, explored and managed, hence the need for attention and honesty. People will respect the opportunities given to them. They deserve world-class training and facilities. Leaders and managers need to know what’s required, in behaviour and resources, to evoke excellence.

The conversation between Wolff and Southgate distils the essentials for leading and managing, revealing close alignment between their respective views and practices. Their insights serve well for challenging and uncertain times, when co-creative collaboration and committed teamwork are vital. David Brent (The Office) and Dilbert (workplace cartoons) demonstrate what is not wanted from leaders. We think it timely and refreshing to have practical guidance from real leaders in highly public, pressured roles with huge responsibility who are dedicated to leading well by example.

Q. How is this relevant for my coaching? What can I apply?

Book Reviews

“Living Leadership - A Practical Guide for Ordinary Heroes” by George Binney, Gerhard Wilke and Colin Williams, Prentice Hall, Second edition, 2009

Described by the authors as “*a book for people at all levels who make organisations work*”, this book shows how by getting connected, getting real and getting help we can create the relationships necessary between leaders and followers appropriate for the context. Leaders focus on the people around them. They are effective leaders to the extent that they are real with, and able to release the capability of, the people; to acknowledge not knowing, to shift thinking and resolve issues which previously have been stuck. The age of the heroic leader is over; many people can be and are leaders.

“Leadership Coaching - from personal insight to organisational performance” by Graham Lee, CIPD, 2003

From a psychological perspective, this book address the challenge of authentic leadership, and shows how coaching can guide the process of increasing self-awareness and creating lasting change. The author offers a model for exploring actions, cognitions and emotions in relation to dimensions of the context for change. Case studies are provided. This work is a resource for leaders and coaches to create space for learning, personal development and transition.