# Base Metal...

## January 2023

Alchemy of Coaching

### Introduction

We begin 2023 with a perspective on the role and scope of the coach: Paul draws on his experience to explore how we decide to respond to requests from the client for our opinion. How aware are we; what choices do we have; what judgements do we make; what contracting and re-contracting may be required? Whilst the example is "managing upwards" in the executive context, the issues raised are generic to any coaching contribution. Let us know what you think.

**Paul and Ray** **The Alchemy team**

### How to be "a genuine source of help"?

Over recent years in executive education and development, there has been a large amount written and talked about relating to leadership styles, and the use of coaching (with a small 'c'[1]) as one of the array of choices that a good leader ought to have open to him- or herself. Professional bodies like the Association for Coaching are now offering accreditation possibilities for 'Leader as Coach', and some leadership programmes (notably ours!) include material intended to encourage leaders to consider what these ideas might mean for them, and how they might appropriately apply them in their own leadership. Much of this focuses on the use of a coaching approach in developing staff, building confidence and capability in employees and changing organisational culture towards a more empowering model. This is all to the good.

What I would like to discuss here, however, goes in the other direction. Whether lifetime professional coach or newly qualified practitioner, you have most likely come up against a situation that one might term 'managing upwards'.

> "In an organised world, there are always people with authority over us. Without their consent and support, how can we follow conviction, exercise judgment, use creative ability, achieve constructive results, or create conditions by which others can do the same? Managing superiors is essential." (Dee Hock – from 'Birth of the Chaordic Age')

Fundamentally, this is about working out what you want and need from your boss as well as what they want from you, ensuring good alignment and thereby making their job easier. What is interesting however is when you add coaching skills to the mix in this direction too.

*Q. What successes have you had managing upwards or coaching someone with this challenge?*

Dana Rousmaniere, writing about managing upwards in HBR suggests that "Perhaps the most important skill to master is figuring out how to be a genuine source of help" – a question that one might easily translate across to the formal coaching sphere. I am reminded of that tension that coaches often experience when asked for their input or opinion by a coachee – when do I put myself (and that includes my knowledge and experience) in play for the benefit of my coachee?

I recently had a conversation very like this and felt that direct potential conflict between giving my opinion

1 I make a distinction here between 'Coaching' (capital 'C') meaning a formally agreed, contracted coaching intervention and 'coaching' (small 'c') as the utilisation of a coaching approach outside a formally contracted session.

(which was clearly what was requested), and taking a coaching approach to enable my interlocutor to reach their own authentic view. In my experience, this can be a genuine dilemma, and I'm still not sure whether I made the best choice in this recent specific case. However, from a developmental point of view, I feel positive that I not only noticed in hindsight that I had a choice, but actually was aware of it in the moment and made an active decision to act in the way that I did.

*Q. How might you coach a client presenting with such a challenge?*

Whether wearing a 'Coach' or 'Leader' hat, this awareness is an important part of being able to use coaching skills in real situations, whether formally contracted or not. The question is not just 'when is appropriate for me to coach', but to use Rousmaniere's phrase, what do I judge is likely to be "a genuine source of help"? Critical here alongside that awareness however, is also the continual monitoring of the situation in real time: being clear with myself (and potentially with my coachee too) which hat I am wearing at any particular moment, and actively assessing whether what I am doing is 'working', whatever that might mean in the particular scenario.

*Q. How do reflective practice and supervision assist you with such issues?*

## Book review

**"The Trusted Advisor Fieldbook - a Comprehensive Toolkit for Leading with Trust", Charles H. Green and Andrea P. Howe, John Wiley and Sons Inc., 2012.**

This book is designed to provide a practical guide for leaders and aspiring leaders at all levels who seek to build and maintain relationships with clients and colleagues. It is not written for coaches - indeed, coaching does not get a mention - yet in the spirit of adjacency it has relevance for coaches as much as for leaders. For example, chapter six, entitled 'Listen', begins with the subject of advice-giving: "*In the business of advice-giving, recommendation-making, idea-offering, and selling, it is not enough to be right: you have to earn the right to be right.*" Other topics which touch on the theme of this edition of Base Metal include "*It's not about you*", *Curiosity trumps knowing*", *"You are more connected than you think*, *"Navigating politics*", and, invoking improvisation, *"How moments of truth become moments of mastery*". This is a valuable read for coaches.

## Thoughts, ideas and quotations

"You create other people by how you listen to them." Michael Neill, *Supercoach*.

"It's not what you hear by listening that's important; it's what you say by listening that's important." "The kind of listening that engenders trust - deep trust - is about paying attention." Charles H. Green and Andrea P. Howe, *The Trusted Advisor Fieldbook*.

"My steering him into thinking about his actions was legitimated by the fact that I was in the helper role and we were working on a joint task." Edgar H. Schein, *Humble Inquiry - the gentle art of asking instead of telling*.

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If you are interested in completing a **"Leader as coach" training programme**, as an individual participant or as a cohort from your organisation, please contact us.

Let us know your response to Base Metal articles and reviews. *We welcome guest contributors!*

**Contact us** We look forward to all kinds of communication for **Base Metal**... it's a forum for sharing and learning about coaching. Please do send us ideas, thoughts, suggestions or feedback.

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