Base Metal...

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Alchemy of Coaching

Introduction

Whether in our professional lives, personal approach (or in scouting!) we are continually told to "be prepared". This month, Paul explores what that might mean for a coach, whether relating to a whole coaching assignment or an individual session.

Paul and Ray **The Alchemy team**

Preparedness

One of the common threads that often appears in coach training, particularly with more novice coaches, relates to preparedness: what does it mean for a coach to be 'well prepared' for a coaching session?

This is something that I have thought about a bit over recent weeks, partly as a result of being extremely busy, and being pulled in various directions by different facets of my work and non-work life. Clearly, at a basic level, I both want and need to be able to be present for my client, and in a mental state to be of use to them, whatever the issue is that they bring. If I am distracted, unfocused or over-tired, I am unlikely to be in a good position to support them, and be 'my best self' as a coach. Most crucially, from where I sit, if I am not sufficiently present in the very early part of the session, it is very difficult (whether coaching in person or remotely) to pick up the non-verbal cues about my client's state which are so important in holding an appropriate and safe coaching space.

In terms of mental preparation however, this is a very personal thing in my experience. I know coaches who will spend a short time before each session meditating, or practicing mindfulness, and this can be a valuable way to prepare. This sort of approach can turn up the coach's awareness and sensitivity and facilitate the detail observation and sensing of where the coachee is on arrival into the session. Knowing yourself as a coach is important here. If you are the sort of person who can easily 'switch hats' and go from 'administrator' to 'coach' immediately, the meditation approach may not be necessary for you, or indeed helpful. For others who need time and choice focus to make the switch, that time pre-session (even if it is a couple of minutes) may well be worthwhile.

What about other sorts of preparedness? There are two scenarios I would like to think about here. Firstly, prior to a first session with a new client. Again there are elements of personal preference and performance here as to how much I might want or need to know about my client as an individual and their context before we meet for our first session. There may, or may not, have been a chemistry meeting and/or some sort of contractual discussion whether with the client themselves or a commissioning party (in executive situations).

Q. How much research should I do about a new client?

For me, there is a significant tension here between the potential positive of understanding something about the client and their milieu before meeting, and the risk of that information becoming prejudicial to how I, as a coach, experience that individual. If I come with preconceptions and assumptions (particularly if I do not recognise that that is happening), how can I be confident that those inputs colour my view of my client, and do not allow me to best serve them as a coach? Meeting our clients 'where they are', and being able to give honest and objective 1-to-1 feedback are crucial elements of effective coaching, and I would not want to

jeapordise that. I must recognise however that my personal preferences to have relevance here, as I also need to be (relatively) comfortable – particularly in those early stages of a first session – in order to be able to quickly build rapport. If that requires me to have done my research, and I am aware of the potential risks, it may well be that such research does serve both me and my client well. If however I am comfortable with not knowing, and find myself most effective 'in the moment', the risk of that preparation may be higher.

There is a similar argument in the second scenario – in an established coaching relationship, what do I need to know before a session? If, for example, I know in advance what the presenting topic is going to be, I might well be able to prepare resources to share, or a model to follow[1]. This risk here, however is that I as the coach impose a framework or agenda over the session before the client has even had a chance to present it. I must be present enough in the session to make conscious and active decisions about this, and decide whether my 'plan' is in fact appropriate or useful – I need the facility to be agile in order to best serve the interests and development of my client.

Fundamentally, it all comes down to how I, as a coach, can be of most use to my client, adding value, and facilitating what they want to achieve, and there is certainly no one model for that.

Q. How much preparation do you do for a coaching session? Of what sort? Have you evaluated where that has been helpful, or where it might have got in the way?

Book review

"Do/ Pause/ You are not a To Do list" by Robert Poynton, The Do Book Company, 2019.

Rob is a colleague of mine at Saïd Business School, and his contribution to this field is a typically open-ended and non-prescriptive volume. His goal is to share his infectious curiosity with what 'pause' might mean for each of us in both our professional and personal lives, what benefits we might gain from exploring and understanding pause, and how we might integrate some element of pause into our busy lives. He draws evidential material from his own background in improvisational theatre and organisational development, as well as insight from a wide range of wider human experience, and what emerges is really an open invitation to experiment, with an assurance that such experiments might just work.

It struck me in looking at this again that a moment of 'pause' might well be a good way to think about mental preparation as a coach, encouraging an awareness of presence in the coaching space.

Thoughts, ideas and quotations

"Breakthroughs don't get planned, they are prepared for." Goitsemang Mvula

"Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe." Abraham Lincoln

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1 In an interesting sense, this has perhaps shifted for those who now primarily coach digitally, as sitting in front of my computer means that I have access to those resources easily, where I am unlikely to have them all printed out and ready for all situations.