Base Metal...

April 2023

Alchemy of Coaching

Introduction

Whilst coaching may in part be an aid to answering "What next?" neither the coach nor their client has a crystal ball with which to foretell the future. In this edition of Base Metal Ray investigates the nature and role of intuition in the coaching experience. What do coach and coachee do when the way ahead is unclear?

Paul and Ray **The Alchemy team**

Seeing further

Human kind has existed very briefly in the history of Earth. Our entire evolution as a specie has occurred 'in the blink of an eye'. Science is a very recent development. Astronauts remind us of the fragility of the ecosphere: we are 'at one minute to midnight'. As change accelerates we are challenged by our limited capacity and capability to conserve and regenerate the conditions we need to survive. Our future is problematic.

Last month I read, with great interest, "Seeing Further - The Story of Science and the Royal Society", edited by Bill Bryson. The scope of this book is described on the cover as "An inspiring celebration of science past, present and future" (Melvyn Bragg). Of almost 450 pages only the last 16, by Martin Rees, focus on the future. What has history taught us? How much do we heed what we have learned? We can extrapolate and forecast, within the bounds of uncertainty. How significant is the difference between 'know about' and 'know how'?

Doubt about what the future holds is often reflected directly in the concerns which some clients bring to coaching. Such doubt can also be explored as a metaphor for our practice. In Alchemy of Coaching we have posed a question for the coach when coaching: "What do you do when you notice you don't know what to do?" Of several possible answers we prefer acknowledging our not knowing.

Q. During a coaching session, what do you do when you don't know what to do?

A commonly reported response from coaches is that they connect with their intuition - rather than knowing rationally and cognitively what to do next, they sense what will be appropriate in this particular moment. A comment, a question, a chance to seek feedback, a request for the coachee to summarise, a time for silence… Whence comes this intuition? How reliable is it? Whilst it may, now or later, seem positively inspired, is it to be trusted? It may arise from integrated knowledge and skills derived from much practice and experience (e.g. 10,000 hours). Or it may emerge from no discernible source. Sometimes the intuition is the client's own insight. Coaches and clients may call this phenomenon 'magic' - the gold from base metals marvellously materialising in the crucible.

Q. What is your experience of 'magic' occurring when you coach? For you? For your coachee?

Research reveals that we have 'many brains' - multiple brains in the head, including the amygdala and the cerebral cortex; our heart brain, much loved by poets, artists, musicians, enthusiasts and leaders; and our gut brain, the biome for multitudinous bacteria which influence our mood, disposition and state of health. When these brains are in harmony we are likely to feel at our best and experience flow and congruence.

Q. How much do your various brains contribute to your vitality and presence as a coach?

Research also shows that most decisions are essentially emotional - made through feeling rather than logic;

and that quick decisions may be flawed. See, for example, Daniel Kahneman's "Thinking Fast and Slow". What are the implications for our intuitions? David G. Myers writes about the powers and the perils of intuition. His chapter entitled "Thinking without awareness" includes reference to "something as simple as speaking" which we do without having to think about how to speak, or the playing of a concert pianist who does not consciously select every note to play. Comparison could be made to our autonomic system which maintains and regulates our breathing. In a highly complex world we can function only by relying upon habits which we learned and developed to allow us to operate without thinking every time. Problems arise when we are thoughtlessly on 'automatic pilot' in risky situations and fail to pay due attention.

Q. How do you experience your own 'unconscious competence' when coaching? What may be at risk?

In our February 2023 edition we asked about reflective practice. What are the opportunities and difficulties in reflecting on the role of intuition in our coaching? How do we experience our own intuitions? Do we notice those of our coachee, and, if so, how do we respond to them? If your practice is characterised by support for "Time to Think" (Nancy Kline) or by use of silence, how much depends upon the questions you use and how much upon your full presence and attention?

Q. How can/do you know when your coachee is 'done' and the session is best ended?

If you are working towards wisdom and mastery, what part does intuition play in your awareness of self, other and the coaching process?

Q. What thoughts and feelings does this piece raise for you? Share them in our LinkedIn group…

Book review

"Intuition - its powers and perils", David G. Myers, Yale University Press, 2002.

This is an entertaining, well-written, informative, research-based book exploring the amazing power of the human mind and the perils of both intuition and analytical thinking. It demonstrates that intuition can be the source of valuable insights and can dangerously mislead us.

"The magic happens in the silence - a guide to the art of reflective coaching", Rosie Nice, Rethink, 2022

Much more than an updated exposition of the GROW model which in part inspired it, this book contains principles, methodology and practical ideas to inform our coaching, derived from the author's twenty-five years of coaching and training coaches. Each chapter addresses a particular question: woven together these questions provide the basis for evoking the 'magic' of productive coaching and coach development.

Thoughts, ideas and quotations - from David G. Myers: see above.

"Science is the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition". Adam Smith.

"The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart." Helen Keller.

"How much do we know at any time? Much more, or so I believe, than we know we know!" Agatha Christie.

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.

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