Base Metal...

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Alchemy of Coaching

Introduction

Our article this month takes a directional perspective on challenges that both leaders and coaches continually face, and asks us to consider both how much we recognise, as well as what developmentally we might be able to do to get better.

Paul and Ray **The Alchemy team**

Vertical or Horizontal

I was doing some leadership development work with a corporate client recently where they have a specific agenda at present around the vertical versus the horizontal in various different areas of their business and thinking. Reflecting on this after the event, I was struck by some interesting resonances into the coaching world, particularly where such considerations interface with personal preferences and self-awareness.

In a similar way to an executive, coaches are constantly managing and making decisions about what thread to follow, and how best to achieve desired outcomes (however clearly defined – or not - those outcomes are). Not only that, but those decisions are unavoidably influenced by our own individual preferences. Let's take an example: in a leadership situation, the promoted specialist (who often has a strong practical knowledge base and an instinct to be involved with the detail) may find it much easier to think vertically, and become very focussed on the specific business area, project or challenge that is in focus at the time. And this may well be what the situation needs. However, if the reality would benefit from a more integrative, horizontal approach, this individual may well find that more challenging, needing first to notice that there are choices to be made in this regard, and second to develop an ability to both effectively make them, and lead in a fashion that is in some sense contrary to their own individual preference.

Coaches have an analagous challenge in facilitating a coaching conversation: would it be more beneficial for the client here to explore laterally (whether that involves wider context, other factors, analogy etc), or is a deeper but more focussed dive what is required? The coach has the additional challenge of ethically needing to work inside consent – I may feel that a deep dive is what is required, but if my client is resistant to that idea (or indeed absolutely disallows it), that has to affect my approach.[1] Not only that, but as an invididual coach I will also have preferences about how I think about such matters, and how I prefer to coach in such situations.

Q. Are you aware of any preferences you might have about vertical/horizontal approaches?

Self-awareness is critical here – something that is often an outcome for the coachee, but just as relevant for the coach. If I know that my preference (or indeed my comfort zone) is in the wider context and the 'around' conversation, how can I effectively manage myself and the coaching conversation where the 'deep dive' is required in order to achieve a coaching objective? How can I manage client resistance in such a case, whether that is overt or perhaps manifested in an effort to move off topic and avoid the deep dive? How 'challenging' can I be as a coach?

1 Such coaching can be pretty uncomfortable (for both parties), but that discomfort can also be a major liberating factor in getting at and exploring any underlying issues.

Q. What experience or material can you draw on about managing resistance in such situations?[2]

In a leadership space, we often see the need for the development of 'big picture' thinking, and the leaving behind of a detail mindset. While there is much truth in that, there will be situations where both are required, and to my way of thinking, the ability to function effectively wearing either hat is a key leadership skill. The self-awareness factor comes in recognising the choice points, and making informed and conscious choices about how best to proceed.

It is no less important for the coach to develop the ability to recognise the moment when a vertical/horizontal decision might be required, and to be confident that whichever way seems the most appropriate (regardless of any personal preference or comfort zone), effective intervention can be made towards achieving desired outcomes.

Q. How often do you recognise such choice points in a coaching session, and make a conscious decision about which way to go?

Book review

Challenging Coaching: Going beyond traditional coaching to face the FACTS, by John Blakey and Ian Day. Nicholas Brealey, 2012.

With a forward by Sir John Whitmore, this is a significant book particularly for coaches whose preference might be towards the horizontal. It both reminds the reader of the coach's responsibility to challenge their clients, and provides some structured approaches to achieve more significant and long-term sustainable results. In particular, the concept of the ZOUD ("Zone of uncomfortable debate") is particularly relevant in this sphere: entering which space, Blakey and Day claim, is a "necessary step when working with a coachee to achieve a courageous goal".

Thoughts, ideas and quotations

"Dancing is a perpendicular expression of a horizontal desire." George Bernard Shaw

"The trouble with the fast lane is that all the movement is horizontal. And I like to go vertical sometimes." Tom Robbins.

"We collectively, to get things done, work together as a team. Because the work really happens horizontally in our company, not vertically. Products are horizontal." Tim Cook (CEO of Apple)

If you are interested in the 'difficult conversation' aspects here around challenge and resistance (whether that resistance resides with client or coach), number 19 of our Development guides explores this topic more fully. https://alchemyofcoaching.com/product/development-guide-no-19-tackling-difficult-conversations-effectively-as-a-coach/

Look on our website for our two sets each of ten **Alchemy coach development guides**.
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Our coach development guides, articles, papers and back numbers of Base Metal are available from www.alchemyofcoaching.com

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2 There is material on resistance in Coach Development Guide no 19.