Base Metal...

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Alchemy of Coaching

Introduction

In this edition, Paul invites us to consider elements around the coaching space, and that space itself, and what influences those elements might have on both parties, and on potential outcomes. In particular how is this relevant in the contemporary space where so much one-to-one work is conducted via online video.

Paul and Ray **The Alchemy team**

External Factors

As coaches, whether when working with our clients or thinking about our own development, our focus tends to be internal. What issues are presenting in my coachee? Where might I assist their thinking process? How can I improve and develop a particular area of my coaching practice? One area that is often neglected however is the influence of external factors on us as coaches, how they might affect our coachees during the actual work and any impact as a result on the likely success of a coaching assignment.

In a face-to-face scenario, the surrounding environment can have a profound effect on both parties, from elements of relaxation and distance from the everyday (particularly in the workplace), to comfort and distraction. Some questions that might be useful to consider:

- Am I as a coach entering my coachee's space, are they entering mine, or are we in 'neutral' territory? What effect might each of those three scenarios have?
- What choices are open to me (and indeed my coachee) about seating and location within the space?
- Is there furniture between us (and is it being used – a table on which one or other party is taking notes for example)?
- If there is a screen or a window, is it in an eyeline and potentially a distraction?

Any or all of these factors can have a significant influence on engagement, focus and ultimately outcome of a coaching encounter. Coachee preference may vary, and in certain circumstances the risk of additional unconscious bias can be significant: imagine coaching a CEO in their impressive office, where he or she remains in their senior position behind a substantial desk, and the coach is relegated to an insignificant high-back chair. Or a scenario of a pointedly formal individual being coached side-by-side on a coffee shop sofa. With a new assignment, such physical elements often become 'default', but there are many situations where conscious thought on the part of the coach and a suggestion to make a physical change can be transformational in the coaching relationship and the potential for its success.

Q. How often do you consider the physical space in which you coach?

Such considerations are also relevant to some degree when coaching online, and potentially for both parties. Virtual backgrounds can be a useful tool in many scenarios, but can also act as a distraction, particularly if one of you moves around a lot – the algorithms tend to deal better with side-to-side movement than forward and back. The location of the camera can also be a significant factor in how individuals feel about what they see on the screen, whether that relates to the view of their interlocutor or their view of themselves. I personally find that certain configurations and settings on whichever platform can assist my engagement greatly, whether that is ensuring that the window showing my coachee is bigger and more prominent than that showing myself, or checking that my eyeline into the camera matches the area of the display that is showing my coachee. While it

may not be hugely noticeable, a small difference here can have a profund effect on my coachee's feeling of being seen and heard.

It is an obvious point, but in this digital space, distraction can be a major issue for either party – how many of us have pop-up notifications running most of the time, whether the arrival of an email, a direct message or some calendar reminder. Similarly, it is perfectly possible for a coachee (or indeed a coach) to seem engaged and looking 'into the camera' while in actual fact they are looking at something completely different on their screen. How we all use the technology to enable while minimising distraction is a significant challenge, and those who coach a lot in this digital sphere might be well advised to develop strategies to draw attention to such risks if they occur, being mindful however that a direct challenge may risk harming a building rapport.

The other significant factor here is audio quality. Any of us that have been in hybrid meeting scenarios will have experienced that however good (or not) the video stream, if the audio is poor, engagement is very significantly affected. Microphone quality and placement matter. Small things in this virtual space can make a big difference – when all is well, everything can proceed unhindered (and often unnoticed), where a relatively minor issue can become an irritant very quickly, and harm the coaching interaction.

Q. Do you curate your digital coaching space both from your own and your coachee's point of view to maximise engagement?

I'm reminded of Edward de Bono's 'Blue Hat' – as he puts it 'thinking about thinking, and the one that all too easily gets subsumed or even omitted. Similarly, the useful distinction between content and process might be relevant here too. We often talk about 'holding the coaching space', and as coaches, we should consider that space itself, as well as what takes place within it, in the service of our clients.

Book review

"Six Thinking Hats", Edward de Bono, Penguin, 2000.

This is a classic text, presenting de Bono's process aimed at helping groups work more effectively when debating an issue. Engaging written and clearly presented, the structure and approach if adopting a metaphorical coloured hat which carries with it certain characteristics is a model that coaches can also utilise. Once engaged with, it can also feed a very effective shorthand of referring to a particular hat colour to either highlight an observational angle, or suggest an alternative approach. An approach well worth being familiar enough with to both describe and utilise.

Thoughts, ideas and quotations

"There is no question that the objects that surround us impact our experience of the world." Katherine Center

"Do all to change your environment; don't allow your environment to change you." Israelmore Ayivor

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