Base Metal...

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Introduction

With Christmas close, Ray reflects on how this time of gifts evokes opportunities and questions for coaches and clients - and reviews a book which celebrates the importance of play for our development and wellbeing.

Paul and Ray **The Alchemy team**

Why play?

At the much enjoyed Midlands Coaching Central Christmas Social June Hogan provided creative games with a coaching theme - a great way to have fun and share ideas for our development as coaches.

At a recent meeting of ALF - a community of practice for Action Learning Facilitators - Lucy Hawthorne explored with us in an engaging session how we can bring playfulness into Action Learning. This reminded me of the principle from Generative Coaching for the coach to be *compassionate*, *fierce* (as with 'Fierce Conversations' - real, committed, challenging) and *playful*. Lucy recommended Stuart Brown's book about the value of play for learning and wellbeing throughout life. Play is not only for children, nor only for Christmas!

Q. *What is your playfulness quotient - in life? In your coaching? Has it changed? Is it changing?*

During my childhood there were no computers, no mobile or smart telephones, nor a television in my home. Whilst we did have toys, and the wireless to listen to, most playtime depended on whatever imagination and improvisation we could summon - whether alone or with playmates. Hours were spent outdoors, including venturing further from home. In our garden the Bramley apple tree became a pirate ship, a castle, a hideout, a hilltop. I would spend hours up that tree, immersed in my imaginary escapades. I assisted my brother to build a den beneath the tree and would often go there - a quiet place for retreat and reverie, even as daylight faded. The better to enjoy myself when the weather was cold or wet, I became an avid reader, visiting the public library every week, venturing from the children's section to discover the much larger collections. Here began my fascination about the world and the source of the exploits I constructed for myself long before I was able to travel far. I brought my full allowance of books home each week and dived into them. I recall my mother's insistent interruption when I was so immersed in a book that I had not heard her repeated requests that I lay the table. Christmas was very special - I would be awake very early, impatient for the excitement of presents.

Q. *What do you recall about playing as a child? What insights does this evoke?*

I notice from my nostalgic recollections of play that what I was experiencing was being in a state of flow - in the zone, fully engaged, unaware of time passing, completely absorbed and fascinated. This state of being has been associated by researchers with enjoyment and contentment - and in some settings with mastery and peak performance. Great teamwork has been correlated with everyone in the team being in that shared state.

Q, *What is your experience of being in flow? On your own? With others? When you are coaching?*

Part of my work involves leading sessions with post-experience students to discover how in their workplaces they can create and sustain cultures (ethos, the way we do things) for quality and for innovation. In organisations and business school programmes employee engagement is a fashionable topic, considered to be part of the solution to the problem of low productivity. My view is that responsibility for achieving employee

engagement is not a task for managers and supervisors, rather it is an outcome of a healthy culture - one where a developmental mindset contributes to discretionary effort and positive contribution. Where people are exhorted to try harder, to be more disciplined, to do as they are told - a command and control, carrot and stick climate - rewards and punishments will result in distorted results and diminishing performance over time. When the leader has a developmental mindset and acts accordingly, leading by example, there is a greater chance for the positive culture to grow. One of the constraints working against this is relentless pressure for pace and results - especially when this is regulated by targets. When such targets are Imposed, and especially when they are arbitrary, reluctance, resentment and demoralisation are likely to occur and become pervasive.

Q. *What is your experience of organisational cultures? How is this relevant for your coaching?*

Sometimes we, and our clients, are driven by goals, fear of failure, and an imperative to achieve them.

Q. *How do goals help or hinder you or your clients? What are the alternatives?*

I have found value in being able to acknowledge what is missing and what is not working and learning to be real and express my feelings. I recognise my preference for positivity and have become better able to notice how I sometimes allow my sense of humour to distract me and others unhelpfully. These patterns in my behaviour are the legacy of coping and surviving when I was young - when my curiosity and imagination were not sufficient. Learning to change my state has helped me to reconnect with being a playful child - to choose to explore, to enjoy and improvise, and to reconnect with my strengths - and connect with those of my clients.

Another Christmas gift, during a learning group meeting, was the reminder to "do what you love to do, and do more of it". Recalling what I loved to do as a child provides clues for who I am at my natural best - in flow.

Q. *What do you love to do? To be? Who are you at your playful best? How do you coach at your best?*

Book review

"Play - how it shapes the brain, opens the imagination, and invigorates the soul" by Stuart Brown MD, with Christopher Vaughan, Penguin Group, 2010.

Author Stuart Brown is a medical doctor, psychiatrist, clinical researcher and founder in the USA of The National Institute for Play. He explores the essential contribution of play to our health and wellbeing, defining play as "any kind of purposeless, all-consuming, restorative activity". He provides many examples of the function of play for creativity, motivation, relationship and learning. He asserts that "the opposite of play is not work, it is depression." This book is engagingly written, accessible, and covers many aspects of living pertinent to coaching, including parenting, play at work, the contribution of play to creativity and innovation, and how play is recreation. Highly recommended for coaches and clients!

Thoughts, ideas and quotations

"Play helps you regain the mind of the child, and better deal with the major problems and challenges we all face." Bowen White.

"...what mattered was to be on the move...searching, changing, becoming." Elif Shafak.

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