Base Metal...

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Introduction

Certainty and stability are, it seems, increasingly illusive. Apprehension and anxiety arise for those who can see no clear way ahead. When choice is absent or constrained the benefits of coaching may not be evident. Even when a level of everyday security is present, doubt about the future can erode morale, resulting in demotivation, depression and inaction. Meanwhile some people who are doing well don't expect coaching to be relevant for them. In this Base Metal Paul considers how as coaches we can engage effectively with those who do not recognise value in the coaching opportunity.

Paul and Ray **The Alchemy team**

Action and reflection

As a coach who frequently works on leadership programmes of one sort or another, I find myself, perhaps more often than many, faced with a coachee who has not chosen me as their coach, and perhaps also has not chosen coaching at all. They might present as open to discussion and interested in what the session might bring, but the alternative is just as likely – a coachee who doesn't really know why there are there or what they might gain, or may even be openly hostile to the situation. Depending on our coaching approach and favourite model or tool, the lack of a desired outcome or goal from the coachee might quickly become a barrier that is difficult to surmount, with the likely outcome that the coachee dismisses not just this coaching experience but coaching in general as value-less.

Most of us will have faced something like this across our professional life, and it is all too easy to chalk those cases up to experience, and 'park' the memory as 'that was a bit difficult'. This would be, at least to some extent, a missed opportunity. I might coach myself here in the way that I might have coached others about actively seeking the learning potential from any situation, not least the difficult and unpleasant ones. As a coach then, I might ask myself:

Q: What can I take from this experience?

Q: If and when I face something similar again, what might I do differently?

Many of the leadership programmes I have worked on over recent years have had some sort of thread (whether explicit or more emergent) about leading in and through uncertainty. In our professional world right now, this is a skill that we all need to develop as people and situations shift, and both internal and external factors continually mould and remould the shape of our context and situation. In my experience, coaching has something significant to say in this space, not least because in most situations, I know nothing before a coaching session as to its likely content or direction, and often little about the individual I am about to work with either.

I am sure that we all have our 'fall back' questions to try to assist a coachee who is not able (or not willing) to articulate any meaningful outcomes from the outset. What I'd like to explore here is one level above that, and relates to quality and clarity of purpose. If, as a coach, I am able to assist my client to gain any sort of clarity of purpose, even if that relates only to the next 30 minutes, I have not wasted my, or indeed their time. Particularly in a case of a number of sessions, some answers towards the desired outcomes of the coaching

might be a pretty good outcome.

This prompts me to ask questions about how I can most effectively and helpfully listen to a coachee, and support them in order for them to gain some clarity about desired outcome(s). What might this clarity of purpose look like, and what qualities might it exhibit? How might I or my coachee recognise it when it flits across our mutual path? It strikes me that there may be something here about intentionality, both on my part and on that of my coachee. If there is, how might I, as a coach, hold the space to enable that to emerge for my client?

There is huge potential for insight in this uncertainty, and if the opportunity presents, coaching can be a great opener of possibility. With some carefully chosen powerful questions, the 1-to-1 safety of the coaching space can open up the 'what if …' scenarios that are much more difficult to explore elsewhere: "What unexpected benefits might arise from this challenge?" Or "If you had no fear, what would you do in this situation?"

As I coach, I have to trust myself and the process, and enable my client to do the same in trusting the journey and its potential, however uncertain it may be.

Book review

"The Art of Gathering - how we meet and why it matters", Priya Parker, Penguin, 2019

I was introduced to this positively provocative book during a session at Midlands Central Coaching by Steph Vidal-Hall about Nancy Kline's 'Thinking Environment'. We were shown how to create real listening and contribution in any kind of meeting, and given time to practise to experience this for ourselves.

Daniel Pink, author of "Drive", has described "The Art of Gathering" as 'one of the most transformative books I've read in years'. I have found it valuable in its guidance on achieving clarity of purpose, setting boundaries, involving only those with reason to be there, and how controversy and conflict can be creative. I was reminded of the power of William Isaacs' "Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together" (Base Metal October 2014) and of the processes of The World Café - shaping our future through conversations that matter" (Base Metal January 2015). By employing the insights of "Time to Think", "Dialogue", "The World Café" and "The Art of Gathering" I can increase my capability to engage with those coachees whom Paul describes above.

Thoughts, ideas and quotations

"Maybe the fear is that we are less than we think we are, when the actuality is that we are much much more." Jon Kabat-Zinn

"We give things meaning by paying attention to them and so moving your attention from one thing to another can absolutely change your future." Jessa Crispin

"Leonardo Da Vinci woke up in the morning and made a list of what he wanted to learn that day." Austin Kleon

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