Base Metal...

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Alchemy of Coaching

Introduction

For this edition Paul writes about his experience as a conductor of choirs. He explores the nature of rehearsal and draws comparisons with coaching, highlighting the process of coaching, the importance of contracting, and the essential parts played by rapport and trust. Read on to discover what his insights on gaining and maintaining trust might mean for your coaching - and let us know your thoughts.

Paul and Ray **The Alchemy team**

Rehearsal

As a professional musician, I spend a significant proportion of my time in rehearsal. However, not all rehearsals are equal (or indeed similar), and I find myself talking to my singers frequently about where we are in a particular rehearsal journey, what the plan is, and where I see the focus needing to be at any specific point. There are also major factors to be considered relating to the location of the benefit of the rehearsal time – for whom (as well as for what) are we working at any point in time.

Working as I do primarily with amateur singers, there are multiple 'skins in the game' that as a director I must be aware of, and try to balance. At a fundamental level, singers are there by choice, and need to enjoy the whole process of rehearsal through to performance. If they don't, they won't continue to come. However, as in all walks of life, choirs are diverse groups with individual interests, wants and needs, some of which (but perhaps not all) need to play into an ongoing process. I clearly cannot please all of the people all of the time, but I have to please a decent proportion for a decent percentage in order for the group to survive. So, the work we do in rehearsal (which, let's face it, is a large proportion of our collective time together) must fulfil this basic criterion.

Progress and challenge are also important parts of this context for me as a director, as a group that stands still and simply repeats its approach will likely wither on the vine. A good level of challenge is a motivator (though too much can be very stressful), not least from the satisfaction of success in an endeavour that felt difficult at the start. Rehearsal is therefore about progress towards a goal (in this case a performance), though that progress is very rarely linear in my experience. I have said many times that with a given piece, there is often a lightbulb moment for each singer where something that they have been struggling with, all of a sudden starts to make sense. There are also likely to be lows where for whatever reason, things just aren't working. The difficult challenge in that situation is to trust the process (and enable those less aware of said process to trust it too).

The oft omitted element here is that rehearsal is also there for me as the director to explore and hone my (and our collective) interpretation of what we are working on. While I will go into a new term with ideas and intentions, I cannot allow those to be set in stone, given that I am working with a group of individuals, in a context, over time, towards a shared goal. My mindset is critical here as a leader, needing to balance direction and clarity with exploration and freedom in order to create both my art and the collective work that emerges from an ensemble.[1]

So, how might this read across into the professional and coaching space? One critical area for me is around this idea of 'trusting the process'. As a coach, our experience (and indeed our training) tells us that a coaching intervention can work; can be transformational even. However, how often can the coach see that path or outcome straight away, let alone the coachee? This is where both the contracting piece and the building of a basis of rapport and trust underpin the entire intervention. Without that fundamental trust in the individuals (and this has to run both ways), there is little chance of either party being able to trust the process, thereby minimising its chance of success. As a coach (or musical director) I also have to trust my own process in order to bring others with me on the journey towards our collective goals, whatever they may be.

Q – What might it mean for you to trust more in your own process, and how might you communicate that to your coachee?

Book review

"The Speed of Trust - The One Thing That Changes Everything" by Stephen M. R. Covey with Rebecca R. Merrill, Simon & Schuster, 2006

Stephen R. Covey is well known for "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" and "First things First"; he wrote the foreword for his son's book on the importance of trust. In that foreword he likens trust to the aquifer which in both business and life feeds the wells of innovation, complementary teams, collaboration, empowerment… My sense is that the world is much changed since 2006; the need for restoration of trust is now acute. Covey's proposition is that "contrary to popular belief, trust is something you *can* do something about. In fact, you can get good at creating it!" In chapters covering self-trust, relationship trust, stakeholder trust and inspiring trust he addresses questions and behaviours to engender, sustain and extend trust. Whilst the context of the book is mostly framed in terms of business and organisations, the principles are applicable to every kind of human relationship, including mentoring and coaching.

Thoughts, ideas and quotations

"If part of the goal of the conversation is to *improve* communication and build a relationship, then telling is more risky than asking." Edgar H. Schein, *Humble Inquiry*

"How can we build trust? One approach is to open ourselves up - to challenge and suggestions; to compromise; to the possibility of being wrong or of not having all the answers." Sam Chittenden, *Rhyme & Reason - The Poetry of Leadership*

"Build trust as you go. Cultivate a trusting group climate where speaking the truth is valued and shared ownership is the goal." Henri Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless, *The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures*

Let us know your response to Base Metal articles and reviews. ***We welcome guest contributors!***

Contact us We look forward to all kinds of communication for **Base Metal**… it's a forum for sharing and learning about coaching. Please do send us ideas, thoughts, suggestions or feedback.

paul@alchemyofcoaching.com **ray@alchemyofcoaching.com**

Our coach development guides, articles and papers are available from www.alchemyofcoaching.com

[1]In the November 2023 edition of Base Metal, I wrote about my 'PRP' model – Practice, Rehearsal, Performance, which is also relevant here.