Base Metal...

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Introduction

Paul reflects on 'touch points' this month, particularly through the medium of footwear. Probably a first for Base Metal .....

Paul and Ray **The Alchemy team**

Shoes and Shoes

I was watching a TV drama the other day in which there was a thread relating to shoes – a character for whom footwear was significant, with the noticing of what others sported giving an insight into their thinking and mental state. I also had a recent experience where a track driving instructor criticised what I had on my feet (a factor I had not even considered), and where the next time my experience itself was qualitatively different as a result of making a change of shoe.

It seems to me that there are several potential areas of useful reflection into the coaching space when we use this lens of footwear. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is around messaging and assumption, and potentially applies as much to the coach as to the coachee. Am I (or is my client) aware of what the choices made in this regard and what message might be sent as a result, and if we are, is that message sent intentionally? Are those 'killer heels' a choice for my client's own self-image (or indeed self-esteem), or do they have another function in their mind? What assumptions (whether conscious or not) might I make as a result of noticing, and what risks might emerge as a result?

The second observation in this space is perhaps more grounded and less superficial, and relates to my interaction with the context around me, particularly in terms of 'touch points'. To take my driving experience, on that first occasion (partly because the weather was poor), I was wearing trainers designed for hiking, with a relatively thick sole and solid construction, as well as being waterproof. What my instructor was pointing out (though in a way that didn't land particularly easily with me) was that I was depriving myself of a significant amount of feel, nuance, accuracy and feedback through the pedals (a key 'touch point' of car control) simply though my choice of footwear. For the next track driving occasion, I bought a pair of very thin soled close fitting shoes with very little structure, and my experience was transformed. My ability to control very small throttle changes and to feel and modulate braking performance was on a completely different level. As a result, my confidence grew and I was able to enjoy the experience more, and extract more performance from both myself and the car as a result.

There are two things I draw from that on reflection. Awareness of such factors can, and probably should, lead to more intentional choices ahead of situations about whether there are small things that are inside my control that might have a positive impact on both outcomes and my experience of achieving those outcomes. Fell walking (or indeed running) in those very thin soled shoes would likely be both uncomfortable and frustrating, and while I didn't necessarily recognise it, in a very similar way to me driving in 'the wrong shoes'. Secondly (and more widely), reflecting on what might be mediating between me and whatever it is with which I am interacting might be a valuable exercise. How aware do I need to be of the nuance and detail of that 'touch point', and where might there be risk factors in either direction in this regard?

I am reminded too of the lesser known cousin of De Bono's very well known 'Six Thinking Hats' – his 'Six Action Shoes'. The fundamental idea behind this approach is the aim to provide a decision-making framework

regarding choosing the best course of action in any situation. The six shoes he lays out (in terms of type and colour) each represent a different style of action. From Navy Formal Shoes through Orange Gumboots, Brown Brogues and Pink Slippers, De Bono argues identifying the situation and the best course of action enables the individual to tailor that action to the situation by mentally donning the relevant footwear. One of the things I quite like about this (though granted it does not quite have the clarity and ease of the thinking hats) is the recognition that a critical factor in this regard is feel. The challenge for all of us as individuals in our interactions is developing our 'feel' ability, and integrating that awareness into our conscious decision-making processes. If the situation requires a 'pink slippers' approach, wading in with my orange gumboots risks serious damage.

What I am left reflecting on is the idea that footwear (or perhaps more helpfully, 'touch points') is a classic case of managing complexity. I can read signs and expect that others will too, though the assumption risk is significant. I can make choices that might be based on sensible criteria, but those criteria may or may not be the right ones for the presenting situation. The challenge, in part at least, is one of awareness and intentionality, followed closely by agility to change the nature of a key 'touch point', whether for my own benefit alone, or for its potential effect on the wider context.

Book review

As well as **"Six Action Shoes", Fontana, 1995** and **"Six Thinking Hats", Penguin, 2000,** Paul's article has reminded me to revisit two other books by **Edward de Bono**: **"Po: Beyond Yes and No", Pelican revised edition, 1973** and **"Practical Thinking: 4 ways to be right; 5 ways to be wrong; 5 ways to understand", Pelican, 1976.** Also, to remember other books about the importance of thinking, for example, **Nancy Kline**'s **"Time to Think", Ward Lock, 1999**), and **"Thinking Fast and Slow", Daniel Kahneman, Penguin, 2012.** In times of increasingly polarised views and fake news, these books serve to emphasise the vital importance of noticing, questioning, critical thinking, awareness and choice - pertinent for both coach and client.

Then there is the matter of feelings… references from the fields of emotion and neuroscience will await another edition of Base Metal.

Thoughts, ideas and quotations

"If the shoe fits, wear it" - a variant of "If the cap fits, wear it". Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs.

"Curiosity is, in great and generous minds, the first passion and the last." Dr Johnson.

"Write down the thoughts of the moment. Those that come unsought for are commonly the most valuable." Francis Bacon.

"All great discoveries are made by men whose feelings run ahead of their thinking." C.H. Parkhurst.

"Think before you think!" Stanislaw Lec.

"Change your thoughts and you change your world". Norman Vincent Peale.

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