Alchemy of Coaching

Base Metal...

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Introduction

Life fraught by busyness, endless tasks, dilemmas, distractions, rush… Coaching can provide time to pause, to breathe, to become present, to relax, to notice, to focus, to feel, to think afresh, to hear and be heard, to become aware of the difference between doing and being. In the piece below, Paul explores how coaching contributes opportunity and permission to connect with self and others.

Paul and Ray **The Alchemy Team**

How coaching can help us focus on what matters most

I have spent quite a lot of time recently both thinking about and focusing on technology of various sorts. All of us, organisations and individuals alike, face a continual cyber-security threat, and one which is only getting worse at present with the rise of AI driven agents searching indiscriminately for system vulnerabilities. Increasing amounts of our professional lives are dependent on electronic devices and e-communication, and our wider lives are often governed by our smartphones, whether through the compulsion to doom-scroll on social media or the more prosaic element of needing to ensure that all of our devices are suitably charged and available at any time (what those with electric cars will recognise as the device equivalent of 'range anxiety').

It struck me this week that coaching has something to say on this matter, and indeed something quite significant to contribute. I am reminded of a period during my final exams at university where an enforced period of focus on something other than my revision and preparation was a very helpful thing. Unlike many of my peers, I chose to continue that commitment through my exams (unless I was actually in one!), as it provided both structure to my day and some mental respite from the stress and focus of continual preparation and exam performance. Every day, at a specific time, I had to go to rehearsal, and as a musician in those moments my focus could not be anywhere else than on the work at hand. Not only, what notes am I supposed to be singing, but my place in the ensemble, and the input of conductor and organist into our collective music-making. It was a mental oasis that allowed me to put down the big things and live in the moment of activity, and also enabled me to give myself the permission[1] to do that in a healthy fashion.

All too often, taking a break from our work quickly turns into personal recrimination, or even guilt at 'not doing what I'm supposed to be doing'. Empowering oneself to choose and accept the break (or alternative activity) as necessary and positive is a large step on the road to mitigating the risk of burnout. In my experience, this is where the concept of 'work-life balance' frequently ends up in an unhealthy place – "I am *supposed* to be doing X, but I'm *actually* doing Y, although mentally I'm not really in the right place for either".

1 For me personally, that permission piece was just as significant as the time itself.

Coaching can be extremely helpful in these sorts of scenarios, and for more than one reason. Clearly, enabling my client to actively consider questions of potential burnout, and strategies for mitigating the risk is valuable. Similarly, exploring questions of balance and focus, and activities that 'feed the soul' (as well as those with an element of wellbeing or a family focus). Perhaps most crucially however, coaching can provide the means to disconnect (just for a while) from the noise and clamour of our technologically driven lives, and offer an old school opportunity to connect one-to-one with another human being. It allows the space, and gives us each the permission to build a mutually beneficial relationship that is outside of everything else that swirls around us, and focus together on what matters most, now.

Q. How much value should we put on this in our modern society?

Book Review

"Do/Pause - You are not a To Do list", Robert Poynton, The Do Book Company, 2019

Paul's discussion reminds me to return to this book, first reviewed in Base Metal June 2019 by Ian Saunders. **Do/Pause** addresses our wellbeing and sanity, delivering its promise to provide "practical tools to help you create new habits or make more significant lifestyle choices" so you will "discover ways to reset and regenerate; deepen your thinking and experiences; take back control of your time; reconnect with other people - and yourself." In his review Ian wrote: [Robert's] 'goal is to share his infectious curiosity with what 'pause' might mean for each of us in both our professional and personal lives, what benefits we might gain from exploring and understanding pause, and how we might integrate some element of pause into our busy lives. He draws evidential material from his own background in improvisational theatre and organisational development, as well as insight from a wide range of wider human experience, and what emerges is really an open invitation to experiment, with an assurance that such experiments might just work. I was particular struck by a distinction he makes, drawn from improv actors, between 'Action' and 'Activity': "Action is what they need to create a story. It changes things - for the characters they are playing and for the audience. A simple line like 'It was me' or 'I'm pregnant' is action because it changes our understanding. This is different from 'activity'. Activity is stuff happening. Activity may be busy or fast - one character chasing after another - but it doesn't make a difference to the story. The difference is important. You can't create a story or engage an audience with activity."
In the context of our busy lives (i.e. activity) helping our clients find the action would seem a great goal for us as coaches, with potentially transformative outcomes.'

Thoughts, ideas and quotations

"Why am I so busy?" Haemin Sunim.

"Even a small pause every now and again can make a real and lasting difference." Robert Poynton.

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