

MAKING COACHING WORK

A traditional way of starting a coaching programme is to define goals and outcomes. This often leads to jumping too early for something seductively tangible, or for the specific "destination" of the goal to dominate at the expense of a deeper and broader exploration and experience. Coaching is essentially exploratory, so it's useful to be able to adapt as the programme emerges, and to have that mind-set from the start.

DETERMINING THE DIRECTION OF TRAVEL

"Remember how we used to dream as children of the delicious freedom and power of being grown-up?"

Ben Zander

Often when I ask clients "what do you think this coaching is about?", they readily move away from a goals discussion to something more fundamental and profound. For many what's important is a desire to explore, and to discover potential and shift as a result. They want to build self-awareness, self-acceptance, discover what's possible, what's emerging. For these people a different or additional way of scoping a coaching programme is useful. One which can reflect a sense of trajectory and journey. One which considers who you are "becoming", and who and how you will "be", as well as what you will "do".

I suggest creating a *Manifesto* – to make manifest, a declaration of intent, motives, views - typically focussed on growing a (less tangible) capacity for "being", rather than "doing". A current (medium term) statement of shift, or direction of trajectory or travel. Most usefully written from the perspective of being there.

Manifesto sits in the camp of inspiration and passion. Bringing it into reality will often take you to places of discomfort, to edges of experience and boundaries of comfort. The idea has some similarity with the yoga tradition of *Sankalpa* – setting an intention or resolve. One of the beautiful aspects of the *Sankalpa* practice is that it starts from the radical premise that you already are who you need to be to fulfil your intentions, you don't need to change who you are. All you need to do is focus your mind, your thinking, your action, your being.

In 'The Art of Possibility' by Ben and Ros Zander, the authors present the idea of Giving an A. Ben Zander only takes A students, giving each an A grade at the start of term, on the condition they write him a letter dated eight to nine months later saying why they deserved that A - describing who they will have become, what will have shifted. Zander's approach is partly in reaction to the less than helpful practice of fitting performance ratings to a curve. Rather he quotes Michelangelo who apparently said that "inside every block of stone or marble dwells a beautiful statue; one need only remove the excess material to reveal the work of art within". Zander gives his students an A, to "transport ... from the world of measurement into the universe of possibility", to reduce performance anxiety, to enliven, and, I think, to allow a little magic to happen.

So I suggest you first give yourself an A, then write your *Manifesto* for this coaching programme as a letter to yourself, dated at the end of the programme, or 9-12 months from the start. Questions to consider (neither an exhaustive nor prescriptive list): what has the coaching been about, who have you become, what has shifted, what capacities have you developed, what capabilities do you have, what are others noticing and saying, ...? Write everything from the "future present" tense. There should be no hopes, or intend to's, or will's. Write it all from the tense of what you did, and most importantly who you became.

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WHAT GOT YOU HERE WON'T GET YOU THERE

“The defining trait of leaders that successfully grow and navigate critical change is the practice of regularly reviewing their structure of thinking and form of leadership. Simply put, these great leaders understand that what got them to where they are today, is unlikely to get them to where they want to go next”

Alastair Kidd and Tony McGuire

Great and really effective leadership has a depth of quality more than know-how and behaviour. Particularly when reaching for ambitions, and navigating development and growth, the inner nature of leadership becomes more critical than the outer action aspects alone. A natural reaction when finding yourself at a point of change or challenge may be to repeat what made you successful previously. This is at best a continuation of the difficulties that are already being experienced, at worst failure to move to the next phase of growth.

At this moment, you must examine your own belief systems, ways of thinking and doing and, of course, your own leadership. Such introspection and reflection does not come easily to many leaders and often requires intervention and support working with a coach.

INTEGRAL CHANGE; PROJECT AND CURRICULUM

The reason so many change efforts fail is that the more invisible, insidious, emotionally wrenching quadrants of personal and cultural change are often left out of the equation.

paraphrased from Bob Anderson

Coaching, certainly ultimately, is about change, and for any change effort to be successful it needs to address each of four quadrants from two intersecting dimensions: individual/collective and internal/external:

- **Individual-Internal:** This is your inner reality of beliefs, values and assumptions, of cognition, psyche, spirit and identity. No substantive change is possible without attending to your inner world and consciousness.
- **Individual-External:** This is the place of skills, techniques, frameworks, behaviours. Change can often quickly take place here, although with limited longer-term impact and growth on its own.
- **Collective-Internal:** This can be thought of as culture or what makes the group the group. It is the often unspoken, world of shared beliefs and assumptions, of how things are done, of what matters and what is taboo, myths, symbols and invisible dynamics of forces that influence the group, the systemic conscience. This is not about what's laminated but what's lived!
- **Collective-External:** This is the domain of processes, procedures and organisational design, of technology and workflows, of team structures and meeting.

There is a distinction between what we're up to in the world (Project) and the self-work that is required of us (Curriculum.) Development is accelerated through the interconnectivity of these two tracks. Project and Curriculum require and support each other, unfolding over time. Paying attention to either to the exclusion of the other creates problems.

paraphrased from Doug Silsbee

Many clients come to coaching initially with a focus solely on Projects or the External. My encouragement is that you shift your focus and also include (perhaps prioritising at the beginning) the inner work: the Internal and the Curriculum.

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TAKING THE MASTERY PATH

“We fail to realize that mastery is not about perfection. It’s about a process, a journey. The master is the one who stays on the path day after day, year after year. The master is the one who is willing to try, and fail, and try again, for as long as he or she lives”

George Leonard

Mastery is a useful attitude to adopt for the kind of learning, growth, and development associated with a coaching programme. In his wonderful book ‘Mastery’, Leonard defines the five keys as:

1. **Instruction** - get the best instruction you can in whatever you attempt to master.
2. **Practices** - rather than a destination, it's the experience of being "on the mat" that counts.
3. **Surrender** - to the demands of your discipline and your current level of proficiency in order to reach a higher or different level; let go of limiting ideas about yourself from the past.
4. **Intentionality** - the mental game; engage in your experience of yourself; be intentional about your practice, your actions and thinking.
5. **The Edge** - be prepared to go beyond your comfort zone and self-imposed limits; be prepared to step over, across, beyond.

PRACTICES FOR SUCCESS

“Without changing your thinking, methodology is just technique, and practice is simply imitation.”

Peter Block

The great thinker Margaret Wheatley advises us to “let go of the comfort of a quick response and instead, in the spaciousness of your mind, welcome in everything: thoughts, feelings, sensations”. Many breakthroughs came as the result of “relaxing the mind, allowing things to dwell without the need for resolution”, then seemingly from nowhere “ideas and feelings self-organise into insights”.

The benefits and experience of coaching are increased and intensified through intentional preparation and reflection. Committing to steps or actions between sessions maintains your focus and promotes active inquiry and forming of new habits and capacities.

Regularly write or visualise what you commit to practice, explore or do. Make this as specific as possible. Think about the hurdles or edges and resistances that might hold you back. Consider what help or resources you might need. And get clear about how you’ll hold yourself to account?

Actions is important, after all “being” is not much use unaccompanied by “doing”. Let the direction of your coaching though be determined by your *Manifesto* (the possibility you dreamt of), and let the path followed be from the Internal and the External, the Curriculum and the Project.

GETTING GOING

Take some time to reflect on your *Manifesto* and to develop your thinking about this coaching programme. If you’re facing something that seems to hold a lot of complexity or confusion, then starting small, with modest ambition, is likely to offer less resistance and allow you to find some footholds to explore from. In these cases maybe first consider one small very clearly defined change: ‘if only one thing was improved as a result of our work together, what would it be?’.

I look forward to beginning with you