

TIME TO THINK

COACHING IN A THINKING ENVIRONMENT®

by
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It is surely true, as E. C. Meadors said, that "there is no greater crime than the waste of a single human mind." Every coach would agree. In fact most coaches would say that their greatest satisfaction, their reason for coaching, in fact, lies in the moments when their client's mind is not only saved, but soaring. Coaches' conversations with each other teem with this commitment.

But how many coaches, would you guess, actually know how to free the human mind in front of them? How many coaches are driven to find out how much further clients can go in their own thinking before they need input from the coach? How comfortable are most coaches if the client never needs input? How many coaches can track the proportion of the client's talk to the coach's at about 12 to 1?

How long, would you surmise, most coaches deeply listen before they speak? Five minutes? Three? How about 30 seconds? How many coaches are truly comfortable with silence?

And how many coaches know how to set the mind free of untrue limiting assumptions -- cleanly, elegantly, and in record time?

How many coaches provide the quality of attention possible by never taking notes?

Some. But not nearly enough. Most of us accumulate knowledge, skills, models, maps, theories and inventories. We are qualified. We are, in fact, "armed for bear". But in all of this, we often don't know how to be with clients in such a way that they think for themselves. We don't actually know how to provide the conditions for them to breakthrough to insights, perspectives and strategies essential to their optimum progress, but unavailable from us.

It is just possible that the most fundamental coaching expertise -- and the most advanced -- the skill without which no coach should make a move, and from which all other skills and tools should spring is the creating of a Thinking Environment. The client's own thinking should come first. And often, surprisingly often, it is all that is needed. In this sense, as coaches we are paradoxically essential and irrelevant.

This process is both simple and complex. There are many variants. But here is one:

Ashley had her eye on a promotion. She talked for ten minutes about the position. Then she said, "I want this job. And I am capable of doing it really well. But you should see the competition." She paused. She looked down. I focused my attention on her, and my interest on where she might go with *her* thinking. I said nothing. About 30 seconds passed. She looked up. "Going for it is going to be scary."

Again she was quiet. She looked away. Many more seconds passed. "I think that is it," she said. "I am scared."

I thought of questions to glean more information; questions to guide her; insights to offer; history to explore. But instead I asked, "What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?" True to the nature of the human mind, Ashley, in the presence of that question, had many more thoughts. She talked for ten more minutes. Clarity increased.

She was quiet. She looked up, "What I want most from this session now is to prepare for the interviews. That feels terrifying. But that is what I want."

Every coaching theory would have an approach for this moment. But I chose one to keep her thinking for herself. I asked, "What are you assuming that is keeping you from preparing for the interviews?"

She knew immediately. "I am assuming that I might not get the job. Because even if I ace the interview process, they still might not choose me."

"Yes," I said, "it is possible that you might not get the job. But what are you assuming that causes *that* to stop you from preparing for the interviews?"

She thought about that. "I am assuming that if I hold back, I can blame the failure on not going full out. That's it. I am assuming that if I go full out and then am rejected, I will be lost."

"Do you think it is true," I asked, using her words exactly, "that if you don't go full out and then are rejected, you will be lost?"

Ashley was quiet for nearly a minute. I stayed interested in where her thinking was going.

"Objectively true?." She looked up. I said nothing. "No," it isn't true," she said. "It can't be. In fact the opposite is true. If I hold back, I will have let myself down. Then I would truly feel lost."

"So what is the true, liberating assumption?" I asked.

"What is true," she said, "is that if I go into full flight, I win no matter what."

Ah, the unpredictability and eloquence of the client's own words. And now, the most elegant thing of all (linking the liberating assumption with the session goal), the Incisive Question – again all her words. "If you knew that if you go into full flight you win no matter what, how would you prepare for the interview?"

"Oh," she said, without hesitation, her eyes full of light and her voice energetic, "I would..."

Ideas tumbled from her. She aced the interviews.

"I am glad I got the job," she said six months later. But I know that more important than getting the job was seeing for myself that full flight is winning. That opened a new world to me. I use that question still. It works many places."

Ashley produced that result herself. My ideas for her, my other questions, my other tools paled beside the power of giving her uninterrupted attention and helping her construct the Incisive Question. Both generated the insights from inside her. It was she who found the answers. She needed me in order to do it, yes. But she needed me to be the expert in creating a Thinking Environment for her. She needed my attention and my very few, carefully targeted, questions.

She needed me to have the courage to trust her intelligence.

AS A COACH

TO CREATE A THINKING ENVIRONMENT:

DO:

1. Recognise that your key expertise is to create the ten conditions under which you clients can think for *themselves*.
2. Be more interested in where you clients are going with their thinking than you are determined to share yours.
3. Be more interested in what is real and true for your clients than you are frightened of being proved wrong.
4. Recognise that you are simultaneously essential to you clients, and irrelevant.
5. Consider it success when your clients conceive ideas better than yours.
6. Ensure your clients that you will not interrupt them.
7. Wonder what more they think or feel or want to say. Ask. Ask again. And again.
8. Know that this alone may be enough to result in a successful session.
9. Recognise the universal block to thinking and action: untrue assumptions.
10. Master the building of Incisive Questions™ to remove them.
11. Understand the difference between an assumption and a belief.
12. Have the courage to trust the intelligence of your client.

DON'T:

1. Interrupt your clients.
2. Assume you must, or even can, think for them.
3. Define helping as speaking, intervening, "doing for."
4. Paraphrase your clients.
5. Just wait to speak, rather than truly want to know what more your clients think.
6. Regard the "listening part" of a session as just the beginning. It is the core.
7. Feel successful only when your clients do what you think is best.
8. Deflect clients from feelings.
9. Assume their thinking is over the minute they are quiet or say they are finished.
10. Tell clients what they are assuming.
11. Regard the words "assumption" and "belief" as always interchangeable.
12. Trust your own intelligence more than your client's.
13. Take notes (unless your client demands it).

CASE STUDY

Russell hired an Executive Coach when his organisation's national rating fell to Level One. He had just become Director. He was shocked at the rating and thought that the assessment was unfair. But he also knew that he had less than a year to salvage the situation. So he focused on the changes necessary to bring them up to Level Two by December. Out of five levels, two was still low, but it would restore hope to the Governors, re-engage the teams and secure his job for at least a bit.

In his former position he had experienced several coaching approaches. This time he chose the Thinking Environment. "I want a genuine catalyst for my best thinking," he told his boss. "I want to know that the coach truly wants the solutions to come from me and knows how to make that happen. I am confident that my group and I can turn this ship around. But we need to think like geniuses to do it. I don't want a coach who does "facipulation."

Russell spent on average 70 minutes of each two-hour session thinking without interruption and with "catalytic" attention from his Coach. He explored, analysed, clarified and hypothesised. He strategised. He recognised flaws in the current structure. He faced his own failings. Out of this free exploration came focus and key ideas and action lines. And in all of this the Coach had said only two things. 1) At the beginning: "What would you like to think about today, and what are your thoughts?" And 2) each time Russell's thinking stopped: "What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?"

Russell spent the remainder of each session then focused on a still unresolved issue. The Coach asked him questions to determine 1) the key untrue assumption stopping his progress and 2) the true liberating assumption. Using Russell's exact words to construct an Incisive Question™ the Coach provided the perfect structure in which Russell could break through to new levels of insight and imaginative, workable ways forward.

Occasionally Russell asked for the Coach's ideas. The Coach gave them, succinctly.

Out of 120 minutes the Coach spoke for a total of 11. Out of Five Levels of performance, Russell's organisation rose to Four.