

The Epidemic of Obedience – Nancy Kline - 12 May 2009

I said in a speech on Friday:

I think it is our responsibility as Coaches to halt the epidemic of obedience, and the unwitting development of the sophisticated victim in our executive clients.

I think it is our opportunity to mature the Coaching profession into a practice that recognises the vital importance to our world of independent thinking, and in doing so recognises who, in a coaching session, is the real expert.

This was a Coaching Conference. It was a joint event in England between The Association For Professional Executive Coaching and Supervision (APECS), and Henley Business School. They were very enthusiastic. But the job is a big one. I did not go into detail in the speech, but here in more depth is what I am thinking about this issue. I would love to know your thoughts.

Here I think is the challenge:

Executives look autonomous. But they rarely are. They rarely are invited to think for themselves. They rarely risk departing from the norm. They carry out the wishes of their bosses who carry out the expectations of their investors. The primary, if not the only real, focus of the people at the very top is on increasing value for investors and keeping their power. Other priorities are fine as long as they don't interfere with this single indicator of success. Or, in the case of the public and non-profit sectors, the focus is on staying in power. Other priorities are fine as long as they support the current leadership.

Profit and power require subtle kinds of obedience by the executive work force. If you are an executive, the closer to the top you are, the more threat you are if you oppose policy, question the system or reveal corruption. The closer to the top you are, therefore, the more obedience is extracted from you, and the more you have to lose by disobeying. Thinking for yourself is not usually the way to advance. It often is punished. There is in a sense more tolerance of your independent thinking if you are lower in the ranks because your thinking can be dismissed easily, and so can you.

This requirement to obey can be said to turn you into a sophisticated victim of the desires and strategies and tactics of your superiors, and of their espoused systems and definitions of success. They pay you lots. They pamper you. They advance you. They give you titles and planes and memberships and applause. But victim you are. Because the moment you think for yourself afresh and ask awkward questions and demand intelligent answers, they expunge you. You know they will. And so you do not ask. And before that, you do not think.

Had independent thinking not been punished at RBS, General Motors, Enron and Abu Grabe, there might well have been very different outcomes.

Coaches of executives are committed (and paid) to help them to be successful inside that system and in that system's terms. They unawares collude, therefore, with the epidemic of obedience, developing in their executive clients more and more capacity to collude and comply, to remain victims in the name of staying at the top of the game.

Coaches too often, and this is the real point, coach the executives in such a way that once again it is not the client, but the coach, who is doing the thinking in the session. They position themselves (never overtly of course, and often unconsciously) as the ones with the answers, the ones, in effect, to 'obey.' Of course, this, too, is artfully subtle. Coaches do not intend to require obedience in this way. They say we are there to help the Client find their own answers. But many of their coaching approaches can place us them the experts, encouraging executives to rely on the Coach's thinking for how best to develop their leadership and success. The executives obey their superiors; they obey the systems of success; and then they obey the Coach. When this happens, coaching does not teach them how to think for themselves. It teaches them more about how to obey.

As Time To Think Coaches we know how to help our clients think for themselves. We need, however, to make it clear from the beginning that that is what we do. And we need to make it clear just why it matters so much.

At first our clients may not feel comfortable focusing on their own thinking. They are used to looking to others for what to think. They are used to looking outside themselves for the signals of success and meaning. But when we communicate successfully the gigantic advantages of their independent thinking as leaders, advantages for the organization and for themselves, and even for the world, they want it. They have always wanted it. Now they see that they want it. They want their own minds and hearts back. And they want a life and world that works well for everyone. And they are willing to do the hard work to make it happen.

I believe that as Coaches it is our purpose and our privilege, and our pleasure, to offer our clients an unalloyed experience of independent thinking. I think this is the time, now more than ever perhaps, to take the lead as Coaches for the liberation of the human mind, most especially the minds of our leaders.