

CHAPTER 8: EMOTIONS IN COACHING

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Case 15: “Stress Mode”

Comment

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Introduction

The outcome of this case was a stressful situation that occurred in a client meeting scheduled by Susan, the coach. I employ an ontological inquiry that focuses on the period between that initial client call and the first stressful meeting. Specifically, I examine the effect of assessments on outcomes.

In an ontological inquiry, how we observe and assess our being requires an awareness of how emotions manifest in our bodies and inform our listening as spaces of possibility, narrative structures, and predispositions for action (Sieler, 2007).

Here I consider that Susan’s “stress mode” foreclosed her possibilities of making a difference as a coach. Stressful situations by themselves need not foreclose possibilities, but for this a coach must be prepared.

1- The *Being* of Being a Coach

When confronted, Susan seemed to assess stress as a “difficult situation” that “she needed to handle.” Perhaps Susan had only regarded “conflict” as a problem from a psychological viewpoint, to be fixed or solved.

- If we view coaching through a psychological or normative lens to diagnose and solve problems, we concern ourselves with *what works*, what’s wrong, and how to fix it. Normative ideals precede problems that should not exist, so we offer prescriptions.
- If we consider an ontological perspective into the nature of being, we are concerned with *what’s missing* or essential for a designated possibility or commitment, and how to create it. Freedom precedes problems, which are inevitable and universal, so we invent possibilities (Block, 2001).

The normative view avoids unsolvable problems; the ontological view expects perceived problems as inevitable in the face of change. Our views affect our observations and conversations—a coach’s two primary resources. What if Susan regarded “conflict” not as a problem to solve but as an essential ingredient for “accelerating a person’s career?”

In sum, from an ontological inquiry, we are concerned not with what’s right or wrong but with what is missing—what does not yet exist that is essential for a designated possibility to become a reality. Problems may be evidence of breaks in predictable patterns that support the creation of an emerging future.

2- Worldview: Fix-it or Future

Fundamentally, Susan's performance as a coach is related to her capacity to observe and communicate. Many of Susan's beliefs reveal assumptions that form her assessments about the reality of "developmental" or "remedial" coaching, her profession, and this client.

These beliefs shape the scope of her work and horizon of possibilities.

- Is Susan approaching this client from a problem-solving or psychological model to fix problems? If so, this reduces "open" possibilities to "closed" probabilities based on predicting the future from the past and improving upon that past.
- Or, is she approaching clients from an inquiry or ontological model that allows for discovery to view an emerging future and shape the coaching from expanding possibilities?

All of these issues point to the beginning: how Susan came to be in that room. For that, we examine the intake process.

From the start, Susan took on this client with an important expectation: a "call to do some developmental coaching." By her own account, Susan "found remedial coaching a 'losing proposition,'" and preferred developmental coaching, when used as a tool "to accelerate a person's career."

This is a common theme among some coaches: is the employer using coaching to "fix" an employee, avoid a problem, or ease someone out?

With very little information, it appeared that Susan listened for and confirmed her expectations in the initial two-party meeting with her prospective client, who spoke "very positively about Kevin and explained that the coaching sessions were intended to support Kevin in his career progression." This was a perfect match for Susan's expectations, without any more information or conversation. It influenced her to schedule a meeting with Kevin and her client, the commissioning manager.

Susan went into this initial client call without an intake process that allowed for discovery of the unexpected. She seemed more inclined toward diagnosing the need or fit: to "support Kevin's career progression" without conversations to bring forth some future possibility to which all could be mutually committed (Flores, 2012).

The effects of the lack of intake process were evident in the session with Kevin. Susan was "caught off guard" at the stressful moment. The effects were evident in the "heavy and uncomfortable" atmosphere and in Susan's expectations about what should or should not be occurring in the room, and about what she "needed to handle." This last concern included a *normative* worldview that assumes stress or conflict needs to be fixed or even avoided, rather than seen as necessary to expand possibilities.

3- Observations and Assessments

This client confirms Susan's beliefs about coaching and clients, beliefs that had already formed strong expectations for that first meeting.

For this very reason, any coaching intervention initially involves an assessment process for client fit. Coaches, being human, are influenced by concealed assumptions, and implicit or explicit interpretations as we assess reality; these influence how we listen and observe. The *being* of a coach (the way we internalize experience) can become fixed by self-assessments that can govern

our minds: our worldview and beliefs about what we deserve and about what's possible (Labarre, 2000) that shape the observers we are, and the conversations we have (Sieler, 2003).

These unexamined, untested assessments can also prevent us from observing possibilities beyond those views; or, more intractably, we believe the views that automatically occur to us must be the facts.

From a psychological perspective, assessments are reports on past behavior or events; from an ontological perspective, assessments are critical declarations about what kinds of possibilities for action are opened and closed for us in the future. The future is paramount as a commitment and as a possibility. In addition to saying something about what we observe, assessments reveal who we are as observers, and shape how we declare action for the future.

As coaches, we can mitigate getting swept up in assessments, and refine the observer we are for future possibilities, by testing our assessments through an *intentional intake process*, and by *grounding assessments*.

Intentional Intake

Generally, the intake process is often overlooked or reduced to a minimum of steps before the "real work" begins. However, if we view the intake *as* the real work of expanding discovery versus narrowing by diagnosing problems, we can expand possibilities for all parties to bring forth a future possibility to which all can be mutually committed.

For example, "being involved and committed to the process" is important to Susan, yet it was never addressed, explicitly or intentionally, in the intake process, nor was it a condition of that first meeting.

The intake gives clients the important choice of whether to commit or not, and creates the relationship space for engaging difficult conversations to leverage unpredictable issues in the face of stress. In Susan's situation, it was unclear when that choice occurred between all three participants.

Instead, Susan left that initial interview with an implicit understanding and unexpressed expectations about the goals and direction of an engagement, yet without having tested them with each participant invited to the upcoming meeting. She did not see the potential for confusion in such a meeting with two colleagues from the same company, each with their own observations of the organization, and each with their views about how they see themselves in the organization's future.

Moreover, what led Susan to forgo the same meeting with Kevin that she had with his manager? Did she assume facts about Kevin, which led her to assess that she was prepared to have a three-way meeting without first interviewing Kevin? Did her assessment of a client-fit cause her to forgo questioning the manager's expectations about Kevin's "career progression" or inquire after any concerns?

In sum, the lack of intake found Susan influenced by assumptions and assessments that became *automatic* predispositions to *action*. Failing to take account of them by means of an intake process limited her possibilities for action as a coach.

Being Grounded

Another option to refine who we are as observers involves grounding assessments, to test the underlying assumptions, evidence, and beliefs that form our assessment about ourselves, others,

and reality. From the beginning Susan seemed guided by her assumptions about the “developmental coaching client,” which had already determined her client profile preferences. They also influenced what she listened for and directed her course of action. For instance, she

1. found remedial coaching a “losing proposition” involving people trying to mitigate risk who are less engaged.
2. preferred developmental coaching when used as a tool “to accelerate a person’s career” instead of “retarding the fall.”
3. believed that unless there was something glaringly wrong and easily fixable, achieving change can prove too challenging.
4. found it difficult to change the trajectory of a career or performance issue when it was already on a downward slope.
5. expected that everyone was committed to the process of developmental coaching.

It is unclear whether Susan’s specific (underlined) assessments were formed long ago, and/or whether they were tested against recent evidence. Further, it is not clear whether Susan was aware of the ways assessments shaped her viewpoint or capacity to listen, or, generally, whether she related to assessments as grounded or ungrounded, or the degree to which they affected her self-assessment (being).

What is clear is that her assessment about coaching, the manager, and Kevin placed her inside a small space of possibility, listening for narrow and predictable expectations, and perhaps missing other cues until stress was obvious in the participants’ verbal and body language.

Susan was thus left at the mercy of any automatic assessments in the meeting. She tried “to tease out the real issue... and re-establish communication between them, giving Kevin the opportunity to respond” but seemed caught off-guard by her own assessment of a “difficult” and “stressful” situation.

Our influence as professionals is correlated to whether our assessments are grounded or ungrounded. To ground an assessment, Flores (2012) offered the following questions that lead to action:

1. What is my *concern* for making this assessment? (What do I want to *accomplish* with this assessment? To what end am I making this assessment?)
2. Which *domain* of action am I restricting it to?
3. Which *assertions* can I provide to support or refute this assessment?
4. What *standards* am I committed to?
5. What *actions* are now possible?

Grounding assessments is “an extremely useful procedure in coaching, if [someone] seems ‘caught’ in a strong negative assessment about someone else, and/or in a core negative self-assessment. We [also] can be blinded by our positive opinions and may lack prudence...about people with whom we have had little previous experience” (Sieler, 2003).

4- Possibilities and Next Steps

Susan can still intervene. She can inquire into why the manager didn’t raise his concerns earlier or she can re-engage him privately.

More effectually, Susan might view this break in a predictable pattern as evidence of an emerging future. She might suggest pausing this session and meeting with each person individually. A pause offers time to secure important information, and perhaps an opportunity to reset the engagement.

Without the freedom to explore a commitment from the future, and the courage to ground long-held assessments that form our beliefs, “problems” can limit what is possible in addressing difficult conversations, and thereby lead to stressful situations.

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