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Reflective Essay

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Coaching is different in times of crisis: clients face different challenges, they bring up different topics and, as a coach, different questions work well to help clients reflect, cope, and prosper.

Coaching clients who are on the frontline dealing with the unexpected, unfamiliar needs foisted on their organisations by the Covid 19 crisis are being tested as never before. This has led me to reflect on how different their coaching needs are from those which typically arise during “normal business as usual” coaching. I observe that clients are raising different topics as they find themselves dealing with very different challenges. On my side, as the coach, I find that different questions work well to allow clients the time to reflect, to acknowledge, to explore and to develop the solutions that will enable them to act decisively.

Clients are facing very different challenges to those seen during business-as-usual. Circumstances are wholly new and unpredictable. There are often threats to ego, the fear of making bad decisions that make them look or feel foolish, the urgency to take decisions quickly and yet the acknowledgement that snap decisions are rarely good ones. Overriding among those challenges is the fact that the crisis has placed greater emphasis on the need for strategic thinking and solutions.

Some are rising to the challenge with enthusiasm and a true sense of empowerment and agency. They recognise this period as a once in a lifetime opportunity to bring about material change at a point where there is appetite for it and where the art of the possible has been turned on its head and found to be far more extensive than was previously thought. Others, perhaps operating closer to the limit of their capabilities in times of normal operation, find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being looked to but not having the answers to these longer term, highly ambiguous challenges.

In my coaching sessions, clients report keenly feeling the stress caused by having the additional burden of developing solutions for the future of their businesses when so much uncertainty prevails. Coaching sessions typically uncover more fundamental insecurities and perceived shortcomings felt by my clients who find themselves in this situation. The situation can sometimes result in clients operating more “to type” than during business as usual. On occasion, reverting to old behaviours often “unlearned” over a period of time has become more prevalent. One of my clients who, in pre-crisis coaching sessions, has worked extensively on overcoming his shyness to more actively demonstrate positive leadership of his organisation has now found himself increasingly withdrawing to his introvert self at exactly the point where his organisation needs him to step up, be visible and lead from the front.

The sheer number of these strategic challenges can be overwhelming, thus questions which help bound the issues have proved fruitful; **“When so much is uncertain, what do you think the most important thing to answer is?”** or **“With so many competing priorities, which are the two or three that really matter now?”** Also, the answers to these strategic challenges are not always within themselves my clients are finding. Encouraging clients to solicit and leverage the views of their peers and colleagues has helped enormously. “I wonder” questions are useful at all times but never more so than now: **“I wonder - who is good at this type of thinking in your organisation?”**, **“I wonder – who else could help you here?”**.

One of my clients operating in the charity sector recognised the unease her CEO was feeling when faced with the multitude of strategic questions and, as a result of our coaching sessions, proactively offered her help in being the go-to person developing a first draft of options which he could then

debate and discuss with the senior management team before concluding a strategy on behalf of the organisation. She found the whole experience enormously energising and the CEO felt his prayers had been answered.

Secondly, personal circumstances, home life and associated challenges are writing the agenda for coaching sessions as never before. In pre-crisis coaching sessions, my clients would typically raise home related issues less than 20% of the time. In my Covid 19 coaching sessions, it is the norm rather than the exception for clients to mention the challenges associated with their home situations. I would roughly estimate that 80% of clients are doing so regularly now. Clients describe the conflicts they feel at having to manage a challenging work agenda alongside home schooling, caring responsibilities and day to day home management to name but a few.

A simple early question such as **“How are you managing home and work life during Covid 19?”** elicits rich pickings and uncovers many issues clients find it valuable to explore. During one recent coaching session with a beleaguered NHS leader, that first question brought forth a deluge of emotion and pent up frustration which filled the next 40 minutes. The client said they had never felt such value from a session. My speaking time in that one-hour session was probably no more than three to four minutes. Listening, empathising and listening some more provided the value.

Furthermore, what is becoming increasingly clear to me is that clients in high functioning, collaborative teams who could normally rely on one or more of their colleagues to take up the slack or act as support when a particular issue arises for my client, can no longer routinely rely on this support being available. All colleagues, almost without exception, are just about able to function appropriately at work at present. The fact that this is happening for almost all senior team members concurrently reduces the support available at any given juncture for an individual member.

Exacerbating this tendency is the fact that my clients report that peers and junior colleagues alike are reverting to an almost childlike need for surety and reassurance. They are typically deciding much less for themselves than they would under normal circumstances. So not only do my clients find themselves asked to grapple with and resolve the high-level strategic questions posed by the crisis but they find themselves increasingly being dragged into the minutiae of day to day decision making which would under more normal circumstances be the sole preserve of their direct reports.

Questions such as **“Who would deal with that under normal circumstances?”** can often help clients recalibrate and remember that not every problem needs to fall within their jurisdiction. Employees can be encouraged to deal with the appropriate level of responsibility unless there is a good reason not to. Sometimes my clients reminding their teams of that fact has been enough of a prompt for them to do so.

Finally, organisational needs and issues which do not typically stray much into the ken of the C-suite suddenly do so and with a heightened level of legitimacy and urgency. Mental wellbeing may have been a laudable organisational objective for most organisations pre Covid 19. However, it was typically delegated to the HRD for action. Suddenly this topic may become the organisation’s number one priority and make the difference between survival and oblivion.

One of my CEO coaching clients reported to me how being expected to tune in to his employees’ fears and anxieties, demonstrate humanity and often lay bare his own vulnerabilities was the most frightening challenge of his thirty year career to date. He felt ill equipped to do so. Role playing how he might present himself during all staff townhalls helped him prepare his thoughts, his content and, most importantly for him, his emotional response.

Recognising and raising clients' awareness of the warning signs of stress has been a theme far more prevalent of late. I have had many clients assure me "I'm fine, I'm coping okay. I don't feel unduly stressed". Yet when I ask them how they are sleeping, how their physical health is, whether they have noticed any changes in their consumption habits, the list of responses is long and concerning. Many of my clients have admitted to feeling chronically stressed for years surviving on six or fewer hours of sleep. Useful questions have been **"How have you slept since last we spoke?", "How is your body holding up?", "Do you notice any changes in what you are eating or drinking?"** On occasion, straying into the mentoring quadrant of the energy and information matrix by identifying those symptoms as widely regarded evidence of stress can help hold up a mirror to clients and allow them to reflect on the impact on them.

Coaching on the need to pause, take a breath and practise some self-care works wonders in all coaching settings but particularly now. The opportunity to pause is pivotal. Sometimes posing the question at one removed from the individual can help bring a little perspective. Posing the question **"What would a good friend / powerful senior figure who is concerned about you say?"** can unlock the floodgate, free them from the constraints that surround them and elicit a solution of such quality, a peony of such beauty – one that was burgeoning all the time, just waiting for the conditions to bloom.

The current crisis, with its blurring of boundaries between work and leisure time, could result in many tipping over into burnout. I worry about my clients in this regard. Making good decisions now is more important than ever. To take advantage of these once in a lifetime opportunities to change their businesses, or perhaps society, for the better requires cognitive flexibility, the clearest of thinking, the best of their capabilities, the bravery of people who are on top of their workload.

When all around them are hoping for, expecting perhaps, demanding even, clarity, answers, leadership, it can be very freeing for a client to have the psychological safety in the coaching session to say anything, to admit vulnerability, to acknowledge the real fear and to just be. To just sit and be. The relief and value of unburdening is immense. Our supportive silence is the coach's strongest ally here enabling our clients to stop, reflect, gain clarity in their thinking and unlock their energy - witnessing the unleashing of which is the greatest privilege of the executive coach.