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Finding The Edge

Going beyond traditional coaching and challenging our clients to face the FACTS

In his article, “From wimpy to edgy,” Thomas Leonard, co-founder of the International Coach Federation, stated he had “never met a very successful coach who didn’t have the edge.” He defined the edge as a no-nonsense component in the tone of your voice, having a very sensitive ‘b.s. detector,’ and sharing an honest opinion. Ironically, if you examine the core coaching competencies of the very organization he co-founded you will not find any reference to these edgy qualities amongst the 70 behaviours that are listed. So what has happened to our edge as a coaching profession and how do we reinstate its role and purpose in our work? These questions have been the focus of our work over the past three years as we have spoken, written and researched in this area.

If we trace coaching’s ancestry, we find that the development of our profession has been accelerated by using many of the person-centered, supportive approaches from the associated discipline of counselling. This has undoubtedly served coaching well to a degree as it is now a mainstream development intervention in personal and organisational life. However, we believe this therapeutic legacy is now holding coaching back from the

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edge and preventing coaching from becoming the transformational, global force that it has the potential to be.

For example, the traditional notions of being non-directive, holding to the coachee’s agenda and building rapport are common foundations of coaching, but these principles come with limitations and risks, particularly



when applied in an organisational context. There is the risk that the coach colludes with the coachee, ignoring the reality of other people’s perceptions. Irrelevance can occur if a coach holds strictly to the coachee’s agenda and the conversation becomes detached from the wider organizational context. How many coaches have asked themselves in the midst of a coaching session: “How did we get here and what on earth has this got to do with the people that are paying me to be in front of this person right now?” Finally, there is the risk of self-obsession – focusing only on the individual’s short-term needs at the expense of the longer term, collective good.

Coaching conversations that are purely supportive are like being in a ‘cosy club’: there is a lot of attending to the coachee, acknowledging and accepting them. This is necessary, but is not sufficient. More is needed to create a fundamental and sustained change. There is the need to challenge – to compel the individual to confront current reality and meet the changing expectations of all the stakeholders involved. It is time to move away from a focus on person-centered, supportive coaching and balance this with a systems-centered ability to challenge.

We propose a conscious, intelligent use of support and challenge so the coach can dynamically shift depending upon the circumstances and environment. Take the metaphor of a train on a track; it can only go backwards and forwards and on a limited gradient. Compare this with an all terrain vehicle, which has the power and ability to

go in any direction as the environment changes. Without knowing, the coach is like a train on a track, only able to go one way. However, if a coach develops awareness of the val-

about the ability and choice of the coach - one default style is limiting whereas a repertoire of approaches is robust and effective.

So what are the skills that we

the essence of challenging coaching into five cornerstones known as FACTS coaching. In this acronym, the five letters map onto the following behaviours:

“Our stance is that it is time to move away from a focus on person-centered, supportive coaching and balance this with a systems-centered ability to challenge.”

ue of challenge they will be more like the all terrain vehicle, being able to serve both individuals and the sponsoring organisation more effectively to create sustainable change. This is

coaches need to develop to challenge more effectively and restore the edge? Through our coaching experience and observation of the economic and social trends we have distilled

Feedback – Providing challenging feedback that informs and inspires, and ensures that praise and recognition for a job well done are balanced with honest feedback on mistakes, learning, and failures.

Accountability – Coachees are held accountable for commitments and to the coaching contract without blame or shame. Accountability is extended from personal commitments to alignment with the values, strategy, and ethos of the wider organisation. The coach anticipates the

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rising tide of accountability in the world at large and is a role model this behaviour in their daily work.

Courageous Goals – Moving beyond rational, incremental goal-setting models such as SMART, to goal-setting that engages the right-brain attributes of courage, excitement, inspiration, and transformation. These are the goals we dream about achieving, but often never start.

Tension – A constructive energy, tension can be used to optimize performance without risking burnout. The coach uses different interventions in the coaching conversation to calibrate the tension and dynamically adjust it to ensure peak performance.

Systems Thinking – The coach

explores the “big picture” context of the coaching conversation to raise awareness regarding the longer term, knock-on effects of personal behaviour on the wider system. The coach acts to represent absent stakeholders and bring their voices into the coaching room.

Many coaches claim that they already challenge and practice many of the above behaviors. However, we would encourage coaches to ‘turn up the volume’ on these skills and enter what professor Cliff Bowman referred to as “the zone of uncomfortable debate” or ZOUD.

As the name implies, entering the ZOUD always feels like a risk, but if we do not have the courage to do

so then the bigger risk is that the coachee will not get to the heart of the matter and trigger transformational change for them and those around them. To speak your truth boldly yet compassionately can reveal the ‘elephant in the room’ that has persistently blocked change and suppressed potential.

We believe it is time for us coaches to individually and collectively rediscover the edge of our profession. In so doing we will recapture the pioneering spirit of inspirational role models such as Thomas Leonard.

We challenge you to challenge more. What is your edge? Are you willing to step up to it and accept the coaching challenge? Are you willing to face the FACTS? ●



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