

REFLECTIVE ESSAY – LEKE ADEBAYO

You know things are getting serious when questions like “How would you describe your personal coaching approach and what appeals to you about it” start to loom large on one’s coaching horizons!

So, what is my coaching approach?

To be honest, it is not something that has come to me immediately or, even easily. I don’t know what it’s been like for my fellow Animas colleagues but (for me) it has involved a great deal of to-ing and fro-ing, frazzled situations of trial and error, three steps forwards and two (or three) back, diagonal movements in all directions - all encompassed by and culminating in those well-known four stages of competence:

- 1) Unconscious incompetence.
- 2) Conscious incompetence.
- 3) Conscious competence.
- 4) Unconscious competence (hopefully)!

Or, to paraphrase an infamous Donald Rumsfeld press conference during the Iraq War – 1) there are things we don’t know we don’t know 2) there are things we know we don’t know 3) there are things we know that we do know and 4) there are things we don’t know that we do know (because we are so good at it that it becomes second nature so we don’t think about it as we do it)!

After much thinking and hours of practise sessions, I would say my approach amounts to something akin to a three-track process – let’s call it a “Thrin Track Process”. A twin-track plus 1 = Thrin (Track).

What is the Twin Track?

It is a mixture of deep exploratory coaching (1) mixed with process methodologies: exercises, modules, shared theories (2).

What makes up the Thrin?

It is made up of the two concepts described above combined with an enabling and thinking environment so that the client can be (and, carry on to be) the best he/she/other can be going forward. To achieve such an environment, I (as coach) should :

- Give my client due attention;
- Equip myself with incisive questions;
- Operate with my client a spirit of equality;
- Appreciate my client accordingly;
- Move beyond competition and offer encouragement as required;
- Allow space for emotional release;
- Come armed with the full picture and with proper facts (as I know it);
- Create an amenable and enabling locale where my client can become attuned to his/her own thinking;
- Treat our differences of background, personality and worldview as positive aspects and qualitative factors;

- Come to my client with a relatively clean slate and with unconditional personal regard;
- Remove my own assumptions, judgments and prejudices (“AJP”).

Of course, (as human beings), we are not going to be entirely divorced of AJP but the point is to realise and acknowledge their existences so as to factor them in whilst simultaneously making appropriate adjustments. So, as an example – we can all accept that being guilty of “unconscious bias” is not a good thing but the very fact of such self-awareness is a positive factor in itself especially if one is prepared to take corrective or compensating action as a result.

What does my exploratory approach consist of then?

- An exploratory style that seeks to uncover deep underlying issues – something that could be called the “Iceberg Approach”.
- Imagine you are on a ship and see an iceberg. You can see the top of the iceberg and you can see it at sea level. But, what of below the sea level? To see it at this level, you have to delve deeper.
- With clients, I try to discover not just what you can see or what is said but also what isn’t immediately visible or what is left unsaid. So, you are not just looking at transactions with your client at social level but deep down and psychological. What information is missing? What has been left out or forgotten? What is the client avoiding? What deletions or distortions are taking place?
- It includes a holistic approach where I try and address all/multi aspects of the person. As part of this approach I try and allow the client to recognise their own patterns of behaviour which – as appropriate – I will reflect and feed back to them. This style works for me as it displays our human condition at 360 degrees (with all its complexity and unpredictability) and it denotes the context in which we all live in co-existence.

As part of this exploratory style, I try and facilitate conversations that:

- Are honest;
- Are transparent;
- Are robust;
- Are emotional;
- Are creative;
- Are challenging;
- Push boundaries;
- Are real;
- Are hypothetical;
- Are insightful;
- Display multiple perspectives.

And I will encourage existential issues/questions such as:

- Where have I (the client) come from?
- How have I become this person?
- Who are/were the authority figures in my life?

- How important a role do/did they play?
- How do I discount what they authorise?
- Do I ever discount?
- Where am I now in my life/relationships/work/social?
- What are my hopes, plans and aspirations for the future?
- What resources/assistance will I call upon to get me where I want to go?

What appeals to me about the exploratory approach?

- It is not prescriptive: some purely goal-orientated approaches can be pretty transactional (“I want to achieve THIS GOAL by THIS DATE...HOW do I do THAT?”). Whilst, there is a case for this type of coaching, that is not for me (at this stage) and an important factor in me choosing to train with Animas is because of the life transformational aspects of the curriculum.
- It is creative and fluid – the client explores whatever is on their mind at any particular time and I (as coach) facilitate/collaborate/challenge/interject as and when necessary.
- It is rich in variety of things to look out for – there are emotions, thoughts, body language physiology, patterns of behaviour, assumptions, limiting beliefs, perspectives and maps of their respective worlds (to detail only a few).
- It is about the journey more than the destination per se – sometimes, clients just want to be seen or heard. And, as a coach, one has to display the emotional intelligence and sensory acuity that can manifest in: “Just listening”....”Simply holding the space”.....”Not interrupting the silence”..... and producing incisive questions and clarifications to allow clients to make sense of their world.

Process Methodologies (Exercises, Modules, Shared Theories)

I like to combine the purely exploratory with process.

Say a client mentions that she has been living a life that no longer matches her values. You could explore (by in-depth questioning) what those values are but a more compelling method might be to try out an exercise (say, a “Values Test” or a “Wheel of Life”) which could reveal how important various aspects of her life were at that particular stage in the client’s life.

Why might that be more compelling?

Firstly, it is something different and difference can nearly always be refreshing but (more than that) it allows the client to become even more engaged and have even more “Buy-In” into the coaching process. Note that I do not carry out an exercise simply because I’ve run out of things to discuss or questions to ask. I would engage in such a process based purely on what the client himself/herself has touched upon and what I (as coach) have picked up on.

A client of mine (let’s call her ‘Linda’) visibly lightened up when we carried out a Wheel of Life exercise. She was wondering what to do with her life after moving to London from the US and her uncertainty and inaction was partly based on what she described as a lack of confidence. She had studied law in the US but had disliked what she considered the worldview and values of her law school and class mates. The environment had been too materialistic for her liking and her colleagues

had come across as too driven and ambitious. Although, she was a very good student academically, she felt she lacked the confidence to speak out when called to in classes.

From engaging in the Wheel of Life, it reinforced her beliefs that contentment and helping people were much more important to her than wealth and material success. And, that reinforcement – which came through an independent process (i.e. a coaching exercise) – was life affirming, she informed me. So, off she went to search for a career that involved values more attuned to her way of thinking.

What other results have this exploratory/process approach brought?

- A. A client (let's call him 'John') – came to me with a huge list of goals and outcomes. He had been ill quite a lot in the recent past so he wanted to accomplish many things that he felt he had missed out on. In addition, he had been seeing a therapist for what he called his “damaged past”.

Although the exploratory approach is open to conversation moving in all directions, I do try and pin down my client on a particular topic now and again. It can be easy for a client to jump around issues and by doing so, avoid discussion of sensitive areas which need to be discussed. There was specific time when he did this in session 3 and after about a minute of me being totally silent, fully present and holding the space, I reflected back on this to him. He replied that that was how his mind worked.

This pattern had continued in the first three sessions but in session 4, I noticed a marked shift. I pointed out that (hitherto) he had been mainly concerned with the past but now (and, suddenly) he was thinking of the present and future. He replied that he had just wanted somebody to hear his story, to understand what he had been through so that they could comprehend and appreciate the efforts he was making to transform his life.

- B. Whenever “contracting” to take on a client, I normally have a conversation around audio-recording the sessions. With one particular client (let's call her 'Jackie') I noticed a slight reluctance. That was enough for me to re-assure her: if she didn't want me to record, I would not record. I think it may have been the right decision. The situation was that Jackie and I were freelance colleagues (outside of the coaching arena). Although I assured her of absolute confidentiality, I felt a nagging sense that she might not have been entirely forthcoming in our sessions if she felt her words were being recorded.

Assured of total confidentiality (as there was no recording), we were able to fully explore her relationships with her family (especially her father) the early years in her career which was full of missed opportunities and in which she (in her own opinion) had coasted, her transition from the professional world to the entertainment one and her anxiety and lack of confidence about achieving even median ambitions in the latter world.

The conversation about recording developed an immediate rapport which led her to open up deeply about numerous matters and allowed us to explore areas that we might not have touched on otherwise.

What have I learnt about myself through this coaching approach?

There is a quote from Yannick Jacob which goes along the lines of “**Who you are is how you coach.**”

I must say I think that is brilliant! It certainly works for me.

I believe that the exploratory side of me is the creative side of my character. I like throwing myself into the unknown, enjoying the journey without a definite or prescriptive sense of impending destination. Whilst you may have a vague sense of where you are going, it is not set in stone and you set off on a true voyage of discovery.

A little bit more Christopher Columbus – a little less Google maps and Sat Nav!

The (vague) journey could be happiness but, what does that happiness mean, let us explore it. It could be contentment but, what does that contentment look like, let us discover it. It could be success but how does that success manifest itself – let us see going forward.

BUT, there is another part to me:

- A part that wants to be professionally effective.
- A part that wants to add value - for parents, to a spouse, siblings, family, friends, acquaintances and clients.
- A part that values some form of objective structure and measurement.

Which is where the process part comes in.

How do you see this approach evolving and influencing your coaching practice going forward?

That is a good question and the honest answer should be “I don’t know”.

But, if I were to hazard a guess, I believe it would involve a lot of experimenting, there would become less demarcation between exploration and process so that the coaching becomes infused into a seamless, holistic whole.

There were a number of times when I could feel some frustration from some of my clients. They had come to me because I had asked if they had wanted coaching and they had answered in the affirmative. At our “contracting” stage, we had had numerous conversations about what they understood about “coaching”. I had explained the differences between coaching (life and performance), mentoring and counselling. I had stressed that coaching (as I wanted to do it) was non-directive and non-advisory as opposed to mentoring which was more instructional (like sports coaching).

They thanked me for my explanation and acknowledged that they now understood the difference.

However, once we were in the “heat of the battle” (so to speak) all of the above seemed to go out of the proverbial window for them. After much exploration, after funnelling down and deep diving, after horizontalizing and verticalizing (to get them to provide solutions for themselves), I discovered that what some of them REALLY WANTED was actually mentoring! They wanted someone to guide them, to lead them, to advise them and actually provide solutions for them.

This taught me a huge and important lesson – everybody is different. I think I will (going forward) have both a coaching practice and a separate and distinct mentoring practice.

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References – (1) Nancy Kline’s “Time to Think” (2) Animas Diploma 5 Module Books