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Dear Reader,

Coaching conversations have the magic of intimate encounters, where something powerful may happen between two individuals, amid a sequence of questions and answers that cannot be anticipated. This makes it difficult for outsiders to learn from them! So this month we are offering you the opportunity to "peek" into a real coaching session. The coach is Ruby Palma, Manager of LIM Philippines.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy  
Editor

**Quote of the Month**

*"After you jump, the net appears."*

Vincent Lauria



Issue 145

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September 2012

## A Coaching Conversation

(How Power Coaching can instantly help an executive in distress)

**By Ruby Palma**

## Background

Melissa is a top executive of a leading consulting firm who provided talent search services for a company I used work for as HR Director. One day, while I was facilitating a workshop for an energy company, I received a frantic call from her to help her sort out her issues. Because I was in the middle of the workshop, I responded to her urgent request by asking her to send me some questions that she wanted me to help her with. I promised to get back to her after the workshop. Later that day, I saw her email. Below are the questions she emailed to me:

1. How do plan for my career?
2. How do I tell my husband about my concerns at work?
3. What opportunities are there for someone of my background and experience?

I emailed back an outline of a coaching conversation which I proposed we hold either by phone or face-to-face. I mentioned that the questions she sent gave me an idea of her thoughts and that we would find the time to answer what was most pressing and relevant. I did not hear from Melissa until two weeks later when she invited me for lunch. Sensing her earnest need, I readily agreed to a one-hour lunch meeting that day.

I saw a calmer and pensive Melissa in that private restaurant a short distance from her office. We quickly exchanged events of the past weeks. It turned out that Melissa contracted an eye infection after our initial call which kept her in quarantine for two weeks. Her two week forced confinement gave her time to reflect on her situation, and she confided, that though less stressed, she was still faced with the same challenges she had struggled with in the past fortnight.

Then the following conversation ensued:

**Ruby:** Melissa, in the next 40 minutes, I will be leading you through a coaching process, I will be asking questions to help you achieve your specific outcomes, and I will help you define and work on your particular goal. The last 10 minutes we will spend debriefing the process and drawing out our next steps. Is this okay with you?

And by the way, so you know, we just spent the past 10 minutes doing a quick check-in.

**Melissa:** Sure, that will be great! (smiling)

I could see from Melissa that she was quite at ease and was enthusiastically agreeing with me as we ordered our food and geared up for our conversation.

### Coaching tips:

**Questions:** By asking the coachee to send her burning questions, the coach provides instant support. The coach gets to understand the relevant and important issues that the coachee is faced with, and it also helps the coachee capture the essence of his/her situation and to share her thoughts.

**Check in:** A process that helps establish the climate of trust which is essential to building an intimate coaching relationship

Contracting: Clarifies the role and the approach of the coach as well as the short timeframe available for the conversation

## The Focus Question

**Ruby:** I want to understand better your situation. Tell me more about it.

**Melissa:** It is now my 5th year in my company and while I have always enjoyed a productive career, and strong support from my boss and mentors in the office, politics in my office has never been as rampant before as it is these days. My boss is playing favorites with another person in another department with whom I have had issues in the recent past. He is giving me the cold shoulder and I don't know why. Moreover, all of my senior mentors have left the company and there is no one right now at work I can trust and talk to. I feel unproductive and de-motivated. I am in fact considering tendering my resignation.

Silence followed. Then she rattled off questions without pausing to hear a response.

**Melissa:** Ruby, when is it a good time to go? Where do I go from here? How do I begin the process? Is there a good opportunity for me outside of my company? I am anxious because I still am financially dependent on this job, but no longer happy. Should I stay? I no longer have my mentors so I don't have anyone to talk to. My boss has never been a mentor; he has never mentored me in the past. I don't think he is the type who would motivate me much less listen to my problems. What do I do?

**Ruby:** Why don't we spend a few seconds to just reflect on these questions, and I suggest Melissa that you frame your thoughts into a single focus question that you would like for us to talk about during our lunch session.

Melissa looked up the ceiling quietly and after about a minute of reflection, stated her focus question: "How do I know when it is best to stay on or if it is time to leave my job?"

### Coaching tips:

Focus question: The best way to address an issue is finding the right question to work on. Problems, typically, are poorly stated, and at times just rattled off in a series of disconnected thoughts. The coach can ask what, specifically, is it about those issues that we want to do, to solve, to create, to implement, to decide on?

Finding the right question is not an easy task, and it may take some while until the coachee agrees on what an appropriate formulation of the question is. However, to have the question clearly defined is time well spent.

## Assumptions, Options, Vision

I repeated the focus question to clarify my understanding. Melissa nodded.

**Ruby:** How much do you value your job?

**Melissa:** I love my job Ruby. I believe this is the career for me, i.e. to be a talent specialist, an expert in this field. So far, I love 70% of what I am doing right now. It is the 30% that is negatively affecting me right now.

**Ruby:** Tell me more about the 70%.

**Melissa:** I am performing well, in fact all these years, I have been exceeding expectations, I meet interesting people and I enjoyed the support of my boss. Though not the mentor type, we discuss matters and I have learned to deal with him in an objective way. I also used to have mentors in the office who guided me. They all have left now but one has just come back yesterday.

**Ruby:** What about the 30%?

**Melissa:** I had an issue with Letizia, a Director in the office. It started when another manager told her that I said "Letizia is threatened by me". Ruby, this is wrong information. I never said that. In fact, I already confronted the manager and talked to Letizia about it. We already reconciled and remained civil to each other. But somehow this has changed things in the office. Politics set in. I feel that my boss since then has been giving me the cold shoulder. He is curt, cold and doesn't spend time discussing matters with me. Sometimes, Letizia and he would be together and I don't know if they are talking about me. He has been giving her a lot of attention and is not treating me fairly. It has been affecting me in the past two months. I feel isolated and just thinking of leaving.

**Ruby:** So that is why when you called me a few weeks ago, you really sounded so stressed. I noted though that you have assumptions about your boss and colleagues at work. How do you know about how your boss is thinking and feeling at this time?

**Melissa:** I don't know. It's just my feeling. (Pauses) Should I talk to him? What do I tell him? He might be offended.

**Ruby:** What actions have you taken so far?

**Melissa:** Not much.

**Ruby:** How important is to you that this issue is resolved?

**Melissa:** Very important Ruby.

**Ruby:** So what has to happen or be true so that things get better? You may take time if you need to reflect on this.

About 30 seconds of pause.

**Melissa:** I guess I need to find out and clarify what my boss is thinking that is affecting our relationship. I know that while he may not be the mentoring type, he has supported me in the past by way of small talk and discussion about business. And this has worked for me before. My boss and I should also talk so I get to validate our work relationship. I have seen others walk out the door as a result of his cold treatment and I know this could also happen to me. I don't like the thought. I know also that the initiative of meeting me will not come from him. And he may be offended about this initiative.

**Ruby:** What would be an ideal situation?

**Melissa:** That I know that I still have the support of my boss and that I am able to share with him my concerns and that I continue to learn and grow in my job.

Then we proceeded to eat quietly while reflecting.

**Coaching tips:**

Lessons from the past: People are not used to consciously trying to see how experiences of the past can aid in addressing a new situation. We tend to rely on our "unconscious knowledge", and miss the good lessons from the past.

Other questions to ask include: What is working in your job? What is not? "Think of a situation in the past, where we were dealing with a similar problem. How did you handle it? What worked; what didn't? And "What should you repeat? What should be avoided this time?"

Get Assumptions: Assumptions are a key component of our behavior. They influence and condition the way we react, the way we feel about situations or people, the decisions we make.

To surface the assumptions around an issue is a way to uncover part of this influence. If we ignore the assumptions we lose valuable information (facts, feelings and opinions that may or may not be true but influence how people act. We need these assumptions so that we can make a more effective plan and has the ownership of key people. The way to bring assumptions out into the open, is to ask for a Stop/Reflect based on the following question:

What are your thoughts, fears, feelings, opinions, facts, questions, doubts, etc about this issue, situation? About your boss?

Frequently this step of the process brings new information into the room. People may express former experiences with a similar issue, knowledge they have about it, or cautions that they feel need to be taken.

I broke the silence by asking Melissa what options she had had given her conversation so far. She said that initially she only had one i.e. to quit her job, but she now has other options. She outlined the following:

1. Maintain the status quo and live with my situation - not a very good one. This situation is draining my energy.
2. Stay in my job and talk to my boss. I need to find out how my boss really feels/thinks about the situation to validate my own assumptions. Assuming that he still trusts me, I also need to be open to him. For my own peace of mind, I also want to share my own feelings. As this is going to be the first time to engage in a difficult conversation with him, I need to prepare. This talk will benefit me because by sharing my thoughts and feelings with my boss, I will be relieved of my current burden. It is not going to be easy for me because I know he will not make the first move.

3. Explore options outside of my company. Though I still value my job, I also need to plan my own career development. I will begin to make a plan for my own career growth.
4. Quit my job. If the above options fail and my boss tells me he no longer trusts me, I know it is time to go.

**Coaching tips:**

Envision Options: This step of the process is about imagining scenarios. It is the "creative" part. This step is a pause in the approach to solution finding. It is important to stress the need of taking time to come up with creative ideas. The act of keeping silence, and of reflecting even on "unrealistic" thoughts, can serve as a motivator for everyone to capture their own "good ideas". The normally unvalued "creative thinking of impossible options" becomes valued.

Melissa realized that she has to prepare herself for that conversation and to be prepared to benefit from the positive outcome as well as to be able to take the consequences, in case things don't turn out as she expected. She also noted that she has the capacity to influence the situation and that after her planned meeting with her boss, if her concerns are not received positively or if no subsequent change ensues, then she knows that the time for her to make a career move outside of her company, has come.

## Next Steps, Debrief

**Ruby:** What are your thoughts about your next steps?

**Melissa:** I will prepare for my discussion with my boss. May I request that we review my outline in preparation for her meeting with her boss?

**Ruby:** Sure, email me your outline or script and I offer to set another time for meeting before your meeting next week, if you need to.

**Ruby:** How has this session been of help to you?

**Melissa:** Oh a lot, Ruby. It has helped me organize my thoughts, deal with my emotions and helped her see possibilities other than the one she had in mind when things seemed so overwhelming.

**Ruby:** The process we just went through was a brief Action Reflection Learning (ARL) power coaching process, a question driven approach which started with a check-in, contracting, framing of the focus question, checking assumptions and lessons in the past, envision options, identifying next steps and actions.

**Melissa:** It is so helpful, Ruby.

**Ruby:** Lastly, as mentioned to you (looking at my watch showing two minutes past the hour we said) we are closing the session with a debrief to capture lessons and make conscious our

actions, and behaviors. This way, we ensure learning happens and we extract important things we may have to do differently if necessary, moving forward.

**Melissa:** I feel much better now. My insight Ruby is that though my next step is not going to be easy, I will have to take some risks. The meeting with my boss will not be easy for me because I will be doing this for the first time, but I know it will be necessary. Thank you for your time and, despite the short notice, for fitting in time to listen. I will still need your help. I will also send you my resume for some advice. I will really have a lot to think about.

**Ruby:** On my part, I think we need to allot a good time for our next meeting and not be rushed in between meetings.

#### **Coaching tips:**

Next Steps: In putting a plan into motion, it is important to identify immediate next steps either to plan, implement or to monitor progress, to offer support to those involved in it, and to evaluate results along the road.

Debriefing: Before the meeting closes, we advocate "Stop/Reflect" and ask how the process has been helping or what we can do differently during the process to re-set the course of action and extract valuable lessons.

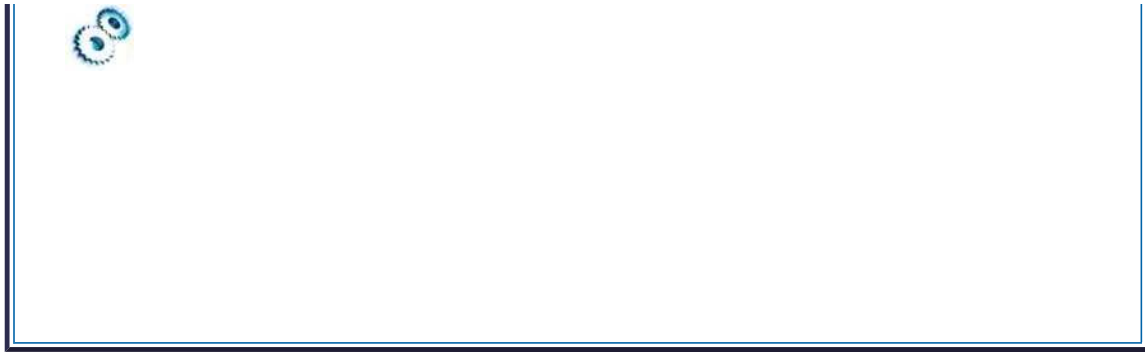
Later that day, Melissa sent an SMS that her boss is set to leave for Malaysia in two day's time. He will return after one week. "This gives me the perfect time to prepare myself better."

### **A post-script from Ruby says:**

Two weeks later, I received an update from Melissa. She called me just before she and her boss were set to meet. I just found time to send her an encouraging message. She called me again as soon as she got out of her meeting with her boss. Melissa sounded quite happy. She excitedly related that the script she prepared was well received. Her message, she said, included her expressing her continuing commitment to her job, her concerns as well as her need for mentoring and support from her boss. What she got in return happily surprised her. Her boss reaffirmed his strong support for her good performance, business development, as well as growth as a professional. He also shared with her his disappointment with some members of her team. He proceeded to give her a litany and dominated the rest of the discussion with his expectations and advice. This sounded very familiar to Melissa who, because she had better prepared herself was able to manage her expectations from her boss. She found a way to cope and focus on the positive aspects of their conversation i.e. her boss' continued support for her. Melissa added that she now understands her boss' changed behavior and she recommitted to bringing her team members up to speed.

Melissa was once again profuse in her appreciation for my help.

I took the opportunity to offer her our ARL coaching process and for her to propose to her boss if she could take a continuing coaching support from a LIM learning coach. She agreed with my proposal and will present this as an option for her continuing leadership development.



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