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Dear Reader,

What do movies, theater plays, reality shows and novels have in common? They all allow us to look into other people's lives without being seen. There is natural pleasure in voyeurism, in being able to experience something without being part of it. But there is also learning to be obtained by standing on the periphery.

To honor that source of enjoyment and learning, this month we prepared a seat for you in the corner of a coaching session. Well, the seat is virtual, as is the corner since the session took place over the phone.

What follows is an edited transcription of a coaching session. The coachee has authorized its publication, and we have changed names and details of the location to protect his identity. Interspersed in the text are presented the coach's notes, reflecting the thinking, hesitations and questions a coach may entertain during a coaching session.

Enjoy the session!

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month

"Each problem that I solved became a rule which served afterwards to solve other problems."

*Rene Descartes
(French Philosopher, 1596-1650)*

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A COACHING SESSION (and the Coach's thoughts) By Isabel Rimanoczy

The context

Karl had contacted me for coaching through the recommendation of a friend. I responded sending him an outline of my particular coaching approach⁽¹⁾ and we set up an initial phone call. In that call I answered his questions about the process. He was curious to learn how coaching was different from therapy, so I explained that there are many different types of coaching. The process that I use would focus on specific outcomes which I would help him define, and we would work on those goals, aiming at exploring assumptions and alternatives for solution. He expressed his relief that the coaching would not become a discussion of his childhood or family history.

Many people who are considering a coach wonder about the boundaries between therapy, counseling and coaching. For some it is just an intellectual curiosity, for others it may feel uncomfortable or threatening to engage into a relationship that may go beyond where the person wants to explore. Therefore I find it important to clarify this point when it is raised, and when it is not, to share with the potential coachee the approach of coaching that I will use.

He then asked me if I had done this work for long, to which I responded, and offered to send him my resume.

Sharing thoughts and concerns is an action that creates a certain intimate relationship. Some people feel freer talking to a stranger, while others need to develop trust, in order to feel safe and to be able to speak openly. Promising confidentiality and sharing the coach's credentials can be useful in some cases to build that initial trust.

I asked him why he was interested in coaching, and he replied that he was going through a very stressful period, and that many colleagues and friends had suggested he gets a coach to sort through his challenges. Karl is an engineer in a manufacturing plant in the U.S. Midwest. He is married and has three kids, one in college, two in high school. He asked me if we could do just one session "to try", and we agreed to this approach.

The coaching "conversation"

I: Hi Karl, how are you doing today!?

K: Fine, thanks...Am I too early?

I: No, that's fine. I was getting ready for our call. Do we have 60 minutes, then?

K: Yes...

I: Ok, in order to make the best out of our time, may I suggest you arrange not to get interrupted, by phone, blackberry or someone entering your office. Is that possible?

K: Hmm...Yes, I think I can do that. It's only for one hour...

I: Great. So before we begin, Karl, let me share with you what my role in this conversation will be.

Having sensed his apprehension in our last exchange, I decide to refer to our interaction as "conversations" instead of using the word "session" which for many people is associated with counseling or therapy.

K: OK.

I: I will listen to what you say, I will ask you questions, I may ask for clarifications, I may challenge your perspective or invite you to explore your assumptions. I will paraphrase and summarize periodically to ensure I'm understanding you well, and I may introduce a process or a concept "just in time" when I think it could be helpful to make some progress. And I will be taking notes, so that I may come back to something you said at a later point, without interrupting you when you're talking.

It is key to describe to the coachee what I will do, as well as suggesting how we organize the time. This provides enough structure to create a "holding" environment.

K: Sounds good...

I: I suggest we spend 45 minutes on your challenges, and then use the final 15 minutes to debrief, extract lessons and give feedback.

K: OK

I: So Karl, what are your expectations for this conversation?

K: Well, I've heard good things about you, I would like to share with you some of the stresses of my life, to hear from you how they could be solved, what your opinion is, if I'm tackling them the right way...

How important to always ask for their expectations! Otherwise they would still have them, but tacitly. Now that I've heard he wants to benefit from my "expertise" to solve his problems, it's key that I clarify what I will and what I won't do, and get his approval! Bad coaching experiences are mostly the result of poor contracting.

I: I see. Well, I am certainly willing to hear about it, and I will use my expertise to help you explore your own thoughts, rather than giving you expert opinions. I won't solve your dilemmas, and you may not solve them today either, but we will make hopefully some progress in how you think about them. Is that fine with you?

K: Ok...

I: So, tell me, how can I help you?

K: Well, I think there is something wrong but I don't know what it is...in my life. I cannot sleep well, I am eating more because I'm anxious, I think, I come home late and my family complains I'm not fully present when I'm with them. I have so much work...they don't understand it's not easy...we're having real problems at the plant...we may be closing it if things continue this way, I think we shouldn't, but I don't have all the solutions...my team is very nervous and people in the plant think I know what will happen and that I'm not telling them, but I don't know...my boss is upset that I'm not handling the whole situation better...I really don't know...I was contacted by a head hunter and I didn't call back, I felt I was being unfair to my company! But may be I should just call back, get out of there... I don't know...

I: Wow, a lot is happening in your life these days, Karl! No wonder you cannot sleep. I have a suggestion. One of the things that can be useful in situations like yours is to find one question that you would like to have answered at the end of our conversation today. That will help us get a focus.

It happens frequently: a person has so many concerns competing for attention, that it's not one specific problem, but what creates anxiety is the "big bag" of unclassified problems. Asking the coachee to identify one question is a powerful way to begin organizing and getting a focus for the session at the same time.

K: One question... Yeah... I don't know that I have one question, I have so many questions...

I: So this is what I suggest: it's called Stop-Reflect. You take a minute of silent reflection and jot down all the questions that come to your mind, that you think you would need to answer. Don't judge them, just write them down, capture them all, like in a brainstorming. Once you're done, you can share the list with me, and we can see if there is a natural sequence, and what should be addressed first, does this make sense?

K: Ok, let me take a moment then.

.....

...A few moments later

K: I'm ready.

I: What did you write down?

K: I wrote seven questions.

- How can my family be more understanding?
- Why do I have to carry all the stress alone?
- What should I be doing with my team?
- Should I call the headhunter?
- Who would replace me if I leave?
- What impact would this have on the people?
- What does Jerry (my boss) expect from me?

I: Ok. Now that you've those questions out, is there any one that you feel you would like or need to answer first?

K: Well, I think the last one...What does Jerry expect from me? Because much of my stress with my family, my team, and my doubts about quitting are related to this one...

I: How are they related?

K: I mean, if I would have a better communication with my boss I would know better what I need to do, I wouldn't be disappointing everyone, him, my team, the people in the plant, my family.

'Disappointing'? That is an emotionally laden word. I am writing it down so that I can come back to it later, to explore it. Or should I ask about it now? But as he just indicated his boss is playing such a central role in his stress, let me explore that a bit more first.

I: Why is that question important for you now?

K: Hmm...You know, my relationship with Jerry has always been very good. He hired me 17 years ago when I was fresh out of college, he always believed in me. But something happened that changed it all... he's no longer talking openly to me, he's avoiding me, something is wrong.

I: What do you think has happened?

K: I don't know...It all began I think with an accident we had at the plant, a few months ago. It was an unfortunate event, and the supervisor was interrogated about it. Then we had an audit, the insurance company, the press, the union, a lot of noise...One of the engineers reporting to me, Alan, a very qualified professional who had been in the company for almost 20 years, he resigned... Jerry really liked him. I think Jerry never forgave me for that, he thinks I caused Alan to leave.

This is such a door-opening question! -"why is this important for you now?" It helps to situate the concern in a very specific context.

I: And what do you think?

As he said "he thinks" I'm asking him what do YOU think to open the possibility of a different perspective, although I know that HE thinks that the OTHER thinks so.

K: It wasn't me! Alan was having problems at home, his new wife was putting pressure on him to move to California... but Alan is a very private person, he wouldn't tell that to anyone - but me.

I will explore assumptions here.

I: So did Jerry tell you he blamed you for Alan leaving?

K: Oh no, he would never say such a thing... But I just know that's what he believes. And that's why he doesn't want to talk to me, and now he sees the problems in the plant and thinks I'm not handling those well either. They are unrelated to the accident, it's just that we recently lost a major account because a competitor installed a new technology and offers a better product with lower cost. So we had to review all our production schedules.

I: I hear a lot of assumptions here. You assume Jerry is blaming you, you assume he thinks you're not handling the plant properly. What other assumptions are you holding, Karl?

K: (laughing) Assumptions? Maybe! I also *assume* he thinks I'm not a good professional, that he invested in the wrong person...like my wife! She must be thinking I'm not a good professional, not the right husband, not able to handle my problems...Assumptions...it's funny you call them that.

Bingo! By my introducing the concept of assumptions his statements suddenly became more relative -- not a set of facts out but an interpretation.

I: Why funny?

K: Because I don't know...I was telling you things that bother me, but you call them assumptions, so now I wonder if they are indeed true. Maybe it's just my idea...

I: How would you know?

K: That's the problem, I cannot ask Jerry; he doesn't talk to me. And that's not an assumption! He has been openly avoiding me.

I: Has this ever happened to you before, that he would not talk to you?

K: No, never! Well, yes, once. But it was a different situation.

I just looked at the watch and we have talked for 39 minutes. Rather than going into the details of that other event, let me try to guide the conversation a bit more into lessons from the past.

I: Probably a different situation, yes. But do you recall what you did to break the silence, the avoidance behavior?

K: Oh yes, I wrote him a note!! That was funny, because I wrote a memo stating all the times I tried to reach him and that he wouldn't make time for us to meet. I just listed them and asked for a

meeting. It worked!

I: Is this something you could do again?

K: Actually, I think so, I think I could do that...and then I can ask him about my assumptions, as you say.

It's time to go back to the trigger-question.

I: Karl, the question you selected at the beginning of our conversation was, "What does Jerry expect from me?". Where are you now in relation to that question?

K: Actually, that's what I should be asking him when I get the meeting! It will be better than just guessing.

I: We've spent close to 45 minutes. Do you think this has been helpful for you?

K: Absolutely! I think I'm clear on my next steps now, I will write the memo to Jerry tomorrow and ask for a meeting, and I will share my assumptions and ask him what he expects of me at this turbulent time of the plant. I will prepare a few more questions before that meeting. I like to go prepared to meetings so I get what I look for.

I: Fine, so if you're OK, we would end this part of our meeting now, and get to part two, the debrief and feedback. Are you ok?

K: Yes, no problem. I'm pretty happy now where we've arrived at.

I: That's good. Now Karl, I will ask you to do another "Stop-Reflect" and write down the answers to the following questions

- a) What was most helpful?
- b) What was less helpful? or What do I wish you would have done differently?, Another way of looking at this questions is to ask What should Isabel do less of, do more of, avoid doing in future?

...A few moments later

K: I'm ready. What was most helpful was that you asked me to write down one question. Although I couldn't write down just one, I wrote many and that was a very good exercise, to see I had many. Also it made it easier to select one; as I told you I like to have focus in my meetings, and that confusion was really making me mad.

Another helpful thing was when you said the word 'assumption'. It changed my perspective immediately. I never thought of my concerns as assumptions. I realize that not all my problems are assumptions, but I think I need to start reviewing which ones may be. And do something to confirm them before I get too worried. Even at home probably!

I also appreciated that you listened carefully, and that you gave me the Stop -Reflect, You gave me

time to collect my thoughts. Life goes normally at such a speed that I don't have time to "stop-reflect". May be I should review that too.(laugh)

I: Sounds good. Anything else that was helpful for you? I'm asking you because it helps me to understand what works best for you. Everyone is different, and if I know what is helpful for you I can keep it in mind if we have another conversation. This is something that you can do when you are talking with others, too. Ask them if you're being helpful, and why or why not.

K: Hmm! I hadn't thought of that. I guess I could. When I am talking to my team, I don't have anything else written down. One thing that we could do differently next time is may be to schedule a bit more time... I felt a bit rushed and I wished I had more time to think out loud about Alan, what my role there was, what I may have done wrong. It has been on my mind since he left...


I: No problem, we can arrange for that next time if you want. Now a final question, Karl. Which of the things I did today, which of the things you experienced, do you think you could try out yourself?

K: Do you mean that I become a coach!?! (laugh)

I: I mean that there may be simple things, like asking what worked, that anyone can do; it's not only coaches who can do this!

K: Hmm! Well , I liked the assumptions thing. I think I will be alert when other people are making assumptions, and I can ask them if they are indeed only assumptions. I also liked writing down the questions, as opposed to the problems. When people come to me with problems, I can say "What is the question you want answered?" It will be fun to try it out... (laugh)

Closing remarks

This coaching session had an additional component to what traditional coaching is. It had the dual purpose of offering support and creating a learning opportunity - about coaching itself. The way this was done was by allocating time for a debrief and feedback, which allowed both coach and coachee to step out of the "content" and jointly reflect on the process. This coaching session worked at three levels. At the first level, it addressed a problem and tried to make progress on it. This is what Chris Argyris calls the "single loop learning". At the second level, we addressed what made it work ("double loop learning"), in order to be more aware of it. At the third level, we looked at how what was *learned* that could be applied in other situations (which we call "triple loop learning"). This particular approach to coaching follows the Action Reflection Learning methodology, which aims at purposely transferring skills to the coachee. 

[1] See <http://tinyurl.com/38th9e>.



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LIM News is published by **LIM**, Leadership in International Management
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Editor: Isabel Rimanoczy - Editing Support: Tony Pearson
21205 Yacht Club Drive, Suite 708, Aventura, FL 33180 - USA - Ph/Fax: +1
(305) 692-4586

E-mail: newsletter@LIMglobal.net - www.LIMglobal.net