

Making the right connections

Murray Thomas

Murray Thomas, a member of The OCM's Executive Coaching Faculty, explains why making the right connections can make a significant difference to coaching outcomes.

Making connections is a really important part of coaching. It begins with the way in which you and your coachee connect and leads on to how coachees then connect with themselves. It follows with how your coachee connects their learning with what's important to them and how they then apply that learning. It's also about how you, as the coach, make connections for yourself as a result of a coaching assignment.

My recent experiences with one particular client, Justin Van der Pant, a senior General Manager within the John Lewis Partnership, demonstrated the significance of making the right connections. I would like to share my observations on how we connected, together with some reflections from Justin on the experience.

How did I and my coachee connect?

When we were at the contracting stage, I was struck by Justin's openness to change and his strong motivation to perform to the best of his ability. Both these ingredients are hugely advantageous to one's capacity to learn. Justin was both curious and in a positive emotional state, both elements highlighted by Lucas (2001) as good indicators of a readiness to learn. He was also relaxed and easy in conversation, with a ready sense of humour – appropriately self-deprecating – and a wit that showed good insight into both himself and others. I sensed that our connection was going to lead to a positive and enjoyable coaching relationship. And so it proved to be.

How much of this was good fortune or how much due to both of us recognising and valuing the benefit of creating good rapport, I am not sure. What I do know is it's a two way process – a coach can't create that connection by themselves. However, a coach can and should help set the

conditions for positive rapport to occur by looking for signs of a connection and by seeking to nurture and build upon it.

We were also connected by a clear common purpose in the objective of our coaching assignment and by the understanding of the roles that we each occupied. That connection was underpinned by a desire for a successful outcome – from Justin in wanting to make the most of a development opportunity, from the organisation in getting the most from a valued leader and from myself in wanting to meet the needs of both. The value of a successful outcome was important both in personal and commercial terms and was understood by all parties.

Justin says *"Murray and I connected right from the start of our relationship. We had a common understanding of large companies, operations and shared a determination to make a difference in the most pragmatic way possible; one which wasn't built just on hypothesis. In addition, and really importantly, we got on well and respected each other."*

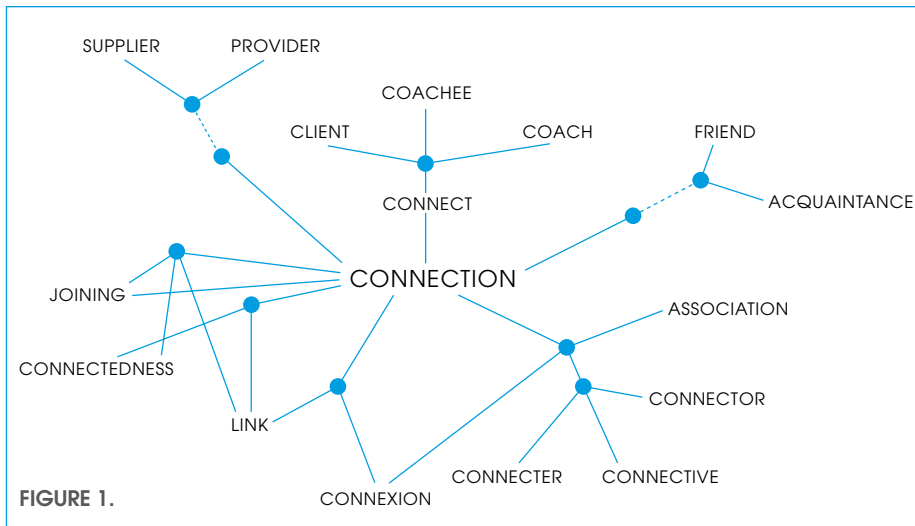
How did my coachee connect with himself?

It would be highly arrogant to suggest that individuals are not properly connected with themselves until a coach comes along and helps them to connect up – like some mental magician. My belief is that invariably the connections are already there but individuals sometimes find it difficult to recognise that by themselves. In Justin's case, a key issue was his belief that he wasn't as sufficiently empathetic as he would like to be nor, indeed, as others might want him to be. His initial description of himself in this respect was in terms of something that was absent or missing from his management repertoire – of a disconnection with others. In part this was due to his strong orientation to focus on the task and on achieving results which sometimes led him to miss signals on how others around him

may be thinking and feeling. However, when we explored this aspect of Justin in relation to the rest of what he knew of himself, and some data from recent psychometrics, we found that we could trace a variety of other links that made us think differently. Amongst these were Justin's good level of insight, both about himself and other people. This ability was possibly stronger on reflection than occurring in the moment, but it was nevertheless a positive attribute. In addition, Justin possessed a healthy level of curiosity, which often led him to ask whether he was missing something when he didn't share someone else's perception.

Thinking about these aspects of himself helped Justin recognise that he had more capacity to be empathetic than he might otherwise have supposed and that perhaps the issue was more around how he chose to demonstrate empathy. This reframing of the issue was significant in two ways. Firstly, it enabled Justin to focus less on just the basis of perception, both his and other people's, and reflect more on what he could access of his present self that might be helpful in showing a different aspect of himself. Secondly, the process of enquiry and exploration supported a change in reflective learning which provided a good means of enabling the coaching dialogue to make progress on other issues that Justin wanted to address.

"One of the joys of working with a coach is having the time to explore areas which you otherwise take for granted. Murray questioned me on a number of these and explored more deeply where he didn't believe my responses were congruent with the evidence from psychometric tests or from what he knew about me and my values. Murray presented these discrepancies in an open and non-confrontational way and combined this approach with useful reflective exercises, which helped to give me a much better sense of perspective on my insight and empathy."



than he might otherwise have done, and to confront inconsistencies that he might not have noticed or recognised. However, this description of our connection only covers primarily the mechanics of the coaching process. It says nothing about connection coaches continue to make for themselves and about themselves in terms of who they are and what they do.

So in coaching Justin, I learnt that my effectiveness is inextricably linked to my ability to connect with my coachee and that although this can't be forced, it can be optimised. That this sense of connection can be a great source of motivation and aid to my ability to focus on my coachee's needs and to help them get the best outcome, which ultimately delivers the best outcome for the client. Finally, that the satisfaction I derive from these connections continues to play a large part in sustaining me in my purpose as a coach – to paraphrase Timothy Leary "Turn on, tune in – get connected!"

References:

- Lucas, B. (2001) *Power up your Mind*, London: Nicholas Brealey
 Heron, J. (2003) *Helping the Client*, London: SAGE Publications

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How did my coachee then make the connection to what he was doing?

This new sense enabled Justin to see that he had existing capabilities that he could leverage differently and create a different outcome. The connections were already there, they just needed to be recognised and deployed. We discussed what Justin could do with this insight and he elected to try a coaching style of approach with one of his team with whom he felt he struggled to be empathetic. We spoke of the power of questions and I offered the concept of Heron's intervention types (2003) to categorise the different styles of approach, from directive to facilitative, to help Justin consider what sort of questions might be helpful. He made more of a conscious effort to leave his "baggage" at the door and to work from the perspective of his colleague – to share his insights to better read their position and to use his curiosity to prompt questions that helped them work out their own solutions.

The outcome was seemingly highly successful in terms of how he described the response of his team member and he, therefore, adopted a similar approach with the rest of his team to good effect. My sense was that Justin had developed significantly in how he managed his interactions with others. Specifically the

way he used his confidence in his insight to engage with others through positive enquiry to counter his earlier preference to concentrate on task to the extent that he felt less empathetic. Coaching had helped Justin to trust his intuition and gave him the means of being more observant around his behaviour, especially during critical contacts, and to respond to others in ways which demonstrated that he was more mindful of their position.

"Being more confident in my insight of others has allowed me to be more open and connect at a deeper level. Using my curious nature, and asking more questions, has helped my coaching style and has led to better engagement from my team, peers and manager. Listening to others verbalise their thoughts and encouraging them to do so has led to a greater sense of empowerment and ownership – a win-win outcome for both me and those I seek to influence!"

What did I connect to?

As Justin's coach I was concerned to ensure that I maintained a connection with him that allowed me to both support and challenge him. Support him through deploying the usual approaches of collaborative coaching, and challenge him to think a little harder and deeper