

COACHING AND THE PARADOX OF CHANGE

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Coaching appeals to our motivation to enable positive change in the lives of others. As coaches we see what isn't working for people and want to bring about improvement, removing the road blocks and fixing what's broken. And yet this motivation has something of a dark side; one which needs to be understood and carefully navigated if those practising coaching are to have the greatest agency and be of greatest service.

One significant aspect of this dark side is the fear of not adding value, where adding value means helping the individual solve their problem, whether it is achieving their desired interpersonal influence, fixing their bad time management habits, and so on. This wish to fix may be subtly encouraged by many of the well-known coaching models, where talk of goals, targets and action plans predominates. My worth as a coach comes from helping the client make progress with their goals. While there's nothing inherently bad about this, it can result in coaches missing an important piece of the puzzle.

In this is a vital point for us all, whether coaches or not: that to encourage lasting and sustainable change requires us more often than not to get our heads around a whole lot of things that we might naturally prefer to avoid.

We all tend to hold views or expectations of how the 'world' should be. Let's call this our Vision (V). Then there is the Reality that we experience of how things actually are (R). When $V = R$ we might call this the definition of happiness! For example, I delegate a piece of work to my subordinate who subsequently produces it on time and exactly as I wished it to be. Perfect! The trouble is that life is not like this. Most of the time $V \neq R$. This is what we experience personally and encounter continually with our clients. Indeed, we might even say that a large part of leadership (and even life) is about how we respond when we experience $V \neq R$.

NOW HERE IS THE POINT: THERE ARE ONLY THREE POSSIBLE OPTIONS WHEN $V \neq R$.

V Keep → R Change

This is the default approach for many, which in the coaching context means we focus on helping the client to get what they want; seeking to influence Reality to come back in line with Vision. There is of course an important place for this approach; we need to support people to develop effective skills and behaviours; to become more resourceful.

V Adapt ← R Stays

This is the less-travelled and less-taught path of accepting the uncomfortable reality and adapting thinking. This is something many of us tend to avoid or even actively resist, not least as it can feel like we're giving up on what we want and have felt to be important. It requires us to change our cherished perspectives. And yet it is often the essential first step to being able to engage in doing the real work of change.

V Keep →  ← R Stays

This is the experience of many who show up to coaching, and where they remain stuck. They won't adapt their vision, and they can't change the reality. The consequence of this is of course inner conflict (frustration and stress), which often results in external conflict (relational challenges).

Simply spelling out these three options can itself be helpful as we ask ourselves and our clients what must be accepted, and what can be changed.

On one memorable occasion I was with a young city lawyer, deeply frustrated with her impossibly long hours, finding herself continually letting down family and friends. We paused to acknowledge the seemingly intractable nature of the situation. Refraining from trying to find a quick fix, we unpicked the role and calculated the hours actually required for each element of the role. As we did the maths, she was confronted as if for the very first time with the concrete reality of what her role required. It was as if she had been in denial until now. Whilst uncomfortable, the impact of the realisation was immediate; she was able to relinquish her struggle to change the unchangeable. Having experienced a profound mindset shift, she was opened up to exploring the dilemma in a new way. "So if this is what the job really requires, and you are committed to staying at this firm, how might you re-arrange your life so you can meet your most important personal commitments over the coming year?" This became a turning point, and a surprising source of freedom from stress and frustration as she allowed herself to plan her schedule and make commitments within the limits of possibility.

This young lawyer's challenge provided for me a valuable early example of the $V \neq R$ principle. Since then I have worked with many whose challenges feel more profoundly personal and where 'V' is more robustly defended. These include individuals with attachments to long-cherished social roles and identities, and people with deeply embedded relational patterns that no longer serve them. And yet in each case the principle and the approach is the same.

Gestalt therapists and OD practitioners have long understood this principle, which they describe as the 'paradoxical theory of change'. Briefly stated it is this: Change occurs when one becomes what she is, not when she tries to become what she is not. Until we as a coaching community are willing to enter the discomfort of $V \neq R$ ourselves, to hold the space gently for our clients as they stay in the messiness and discomfort of what is, and not just what we wish to be, and to compassionately explore the conflict, we will miss what may be the most valuable contribution that we can offer.

Contact us to discuss how coaching can support you and your team to embrace positive change.
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