

# Sometimes coping is as good as it gets

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## **Purpose**

Coaches usually feel a desire to help clients improve their personal effectiveness. Sometimes circumstances make it very hard for the client to do more than survive through a crisis. This strategy is about recognizing when to adjust away from improvement goals and help your client just cope.

## **Description**

Sometimes a client can be in a difficult situation with no obvious way forward. This strategy helps the client to stay with the current challenges and at the same time to become more resourceful.

## **Process**

First, help your client explore the business context and the degree of pressure they face. Explore how they see the personal challenge of change and improvement. Though change does not come without pain, the risk sometimes is that pressure and pain will overwhelm the client. The challenge is to recognize what support the client most needs in the moment. Explore this openly with the client. Then agree coaching objectives.

While exploring these objectives, keep your senses fully open throughout the coaching process to your client's

experience of pressure and their personal resilience. Events might take a sudden turn for the worse, or the client's resilience might rapidly erode. Some clients will readily display the pain and emotion they feel in the safety of the coaching conversation. Many others find it very hard to do so as it can feel like personal weakness.

Your challenge is emotionally to resonate with your client to engage with the impact of the pressure they feel and to explore whether coping is the most effective immediate strategy for them. This is the moment to help your client recognize whether or not their needs from coaching have changed: personal improvement may have to take a lesser priority.

For example, one client was struggling to lead his team effectively and dealing with an unpredictable and aggressive boss. He wanted to address how his drive, intellectual confidence (but weakening self-confidence) and lack of 'feel' for the organization culture were getting in his way. But soon the relationship reached a breaking point. When I explored his feelings about it, his greatly increased upset and pain were very clear in the safety of the coaching relationship. I learned that in the organization he was behaving defiantly and aggressively. He recognized that this 'default' behaviour would make things worse and agreed that personal survival was now uppermost in his mind. We agreed that, though there was still much for him to learn about his personal effectiveness, continuing to focus on perceived leadership flaws would risk adding to his stress, and get in the way of a personal strategy of thoughtful coping.

In such circumstances, agree new objectives with your client and use the process to help them fully to accept the reality of the pressure they face, to create reflection time to manage emotional distress and to plan how to operate effectively at work to minimize further damage. In other words, to live with the reality of the pain, but finding resilience in thoughtful coping.

## **Pitfalls**

- Not letting go enough of the performance improvement agenda.
- Over or underestimating the impact of pressure on your client.
- Not allowing enough space for pain to be safely expressed.