

Coordinated management of meaning

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Purpose

This strategy enables a person's resilient and independent choice making about what to do next when their feeling response is strong enough to cloud their judgement. Bringing to conscious awareness the pattern of feeling, thought and action creates the potential to reshape that pattern. It can be used at any moment in the coaching when the coach notices a repetition of expression of strong feeling emanating from the coachee and the coach hypothesizes that some exploration would assist both to be released from the grip of this emotion. Once released it will show in the coachee coming across to others in more appropriate ways. Looking through a magnifying glass in this way at a replay of an emotionally significant interaction which the coachee has been in can help to create a transformational shift into a new and more useful pattern of feeling, thought and action. This brings an immediate fine tuning of the impact s/he has on others and a commitment to try and mentally step back and reflect, before reacting, when an overwhelming feeling response happens in future.

Description

Many people can respond to strong emotion by reacting in an extreme way. When this happens, careful thought is overwhelmed by the internal feeling experience and by injunctions we have created, in the form of scripts and stories. These scripts and stories are belief systems that guide our

actions and in coordinated management of meaning (CMM) theory these are referred to as contexts.

In any human interaction we create practised patterns of feeling, thought and action that become habitual; mostly we are not fully conscious of them. CMM – a theory of communication – helps us understand that these patterns are coordinated around the meanings we give to them and these meanings are embedded within our belief systems. So in order to change these patterns, which, having become habitual, are rather ingrained, it is our belief systems that require shifting. This can happen when we bring to consciousness the patterns and the beliefs that shape them. We become able to exercise choice, rather than simply react, about how the pattern is connected together. For example, once a belief system has shifted, with the same emotion a different thought may be generated, or with the same emotion and thought a different action may be generated.

Within CMM the contexts containing belief systems are named as follows:

- socio-economic stories
- family scripts
- personal identity stories
- organizational culture stories
- professional scripts
- managerial scripts
- relational stories.

Process

Become attuned to the feelings expressed by the coachee in their talk, in the way they come across and in the feelings and images you have yourself that could be an expression of their emotion. Invite the coachee to explore the emotional content that is coming in to the coaching space by naming it and explaining, tentatively, how you see it may be impacting other things the coachee wants to achieve. Once your invitation to explore is accepted, begin to facilitate a collaborative exploration of an episode of the coachee in interaction in the following way:

- 1 **Utterance** – identify a word or phrase with accompanying emotional content that has made you curious, usually by the force or tone with which this is expressed, or by repetition.
- 2 **Critical incident** – let unfold a detailed description of the episode of interaction, and ask:
 - Who said what?
 - Who responded and how?
 - What happened next?
- 3 **Feeling and bodily response** – name the emotion expressed by the coachee and ask:
 - What would you call this feeling?
 - What did you notice in yourself at a non-verbal level? How did your body react?
 - What did you notice about the other person's/people's body language?
- 4 **Thought (i.e. meaning)** – discover together the meaning that the coachee attributes to his/her feeling and bodily response by asking:
 - How did you interpret what you felt?
 - Is there another time where you remember the same feeling and what did it mean then?
 - Are there other possible interpretations for what it means now?
- 5 **Choice of action** – explore what happened next by asking:
 - What did you do?
 - How did your feeling and your interpretation affect the way you acted?

As you go through this process, you will hear the coachee express the stories and scripts that guided his/her action. This will help you develop a hypothesis about the beliefs within the contexts that are guiding the pattern of feeling, thought and action. Share this developing hypothesis with the coachee, offering it in a tentative way to encourage a dialogue so that the coachee begins to voice ideas about how the pattern could be different, in a process of self-discovery.

Pitfalls

For you to work in this way, a capacity for reflexivity is required, which is the ability to act as an observer to oneself in interaction with another person and, in so doing, to discover and be informed by the response one is creating in others by one's actions. Without this self awareness it would be difficult to analyze the coachee's way of being. Using your capacity for reflexivity slows you down to a point of calm analysis, which helps you discern the minute and subtle detail of the way the pattern is constructed.

Bibliography

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