

The presenting issue isn't always the real issue

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Purpose

Often the coach needs to look beyond the surface performance issue to deeper, underlying issues. The temptation is often to get into problem solving around the surface issue instead – and the sponsor may want you to do so. This strategy is about finding out what is really going on for your client, which may unlock transformational change.

Description

In this exercise one needs to engage with a client and explore their underlying feelings, challenges and issues. It is one where you avoid problem solving and allow the client to discover the real issues.

Process

Engage first in an exploration of your client's sense of things. Use open and probing questions and careful listening to take exploration and understanding deeper. Stay in tune with your client in this process by reading their level of energy and engagement. A low level of energy, defensiveness and confusion are tell-tale signs that the immediate issue may mask deeper concerns.

Follow your client's own feelings; questioning, challenging, affirming, as necessary. For example, one client who was seen as difficult and defensive by colleagues had a very

low opinion of her line manager. In exploring this, she said strongly that he did not deserve her compassion. The choice here was to challenge this view or to leave the client to 'sit' with it. Doing the latter is not favoured by problem solvers, but it can be very powerful. Emotions, once surfaced and seen clearly by the client, can have unexpected results. In this case, the client's view had changed by the next session. She found that the act of acknowledging her lack of compassion had shifted her feelings.

Once you find tangible emotion like this, keep it in focus for your client. Ask them to describe the feeling, put it in context with the surface issue, explore its origins and ask what it would be like to feel differently. For example, this same client felt a strong antipathy to her peers. My intuitive sense was that she was boiling inside about something. I asked what was going on for her at that moment. She described a fear of the internal politics and, crucially, of being found out. I detected a new level of disclosure and encouraged her to explore her feelings further. She then revealed for the first time a low self-esteem and a lack of personal fulfillment in her life. This was a breakthrough moment for her to the real underlying issue.

It is important following such breakthrough moments to recontract: agree new, more fundamentally important coaching objectives that reflect the deeper issue. The organization's surface agenda may no longer be immediately in focus, but it is more important to help your client address their own real issues. In that way, clients are most likely to find out how to live up to their potential and do the best they can.

So adjust the focus of enquiry with your client. Above all, keep questioning, listening empathically and affirming your client in what is likely to be new territory for them.

Pitfalls

- Trying to solve the immediate problem.
- Giving up on enquiry too soon.
- Pushing to go deeper than your client wants.
- Offering interpretation and meanings of your own.