

Exploring an extended role for coaching – through the eyes of an action researcher

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Abstract

This is an account written by a coach, action researcher, organisational development and inquiry practitioner whose main aim is to share an exploration of the power implicit in combining and integrating these four lenses into an extended form of coaching - one that might help catalyse new forms of organisation and leadership.

In my original thesis (Scholes-Rhodes, 2002) I presented my newly formed practice as: "...a practice that encompasses both its own assumptions about the nature of knowledge and about the appropriate methodology for obtaining 'correct' understanding" (p.268) "... a living form of inquiry... an original contribution to an appreciation of inquiry as a creative art" (p.315).

I would like to draw on this emergent understanding to put forward the principles of my coaching practice, initially formulated as the standards of judgement to support my claim to the development of a unique form of first-person inquiry and now fully incorporated into my coaching practice as the fundamental principles upon which my work is built. I would like to take the time to explore where their impact might be both substantial and limited. I would also like to take the time to explore to what extent these same principles can provide the framework for my collective work – an emerging practice, and one in which I aspire to have greater impact.

I am also curious about this notion of exquisite connectivity that was so fundamental to my own transformation (Scholes-Rhodes, 2002). I want to explore how I might be embodying it in my coaching work, and probably more significantly would like to track the evidence of its positive impact for my clients. I'd also like to explore how I'm beginning to embody it in my collective work, if indeed I do, and to begin to formulate some thoughts about how I might embed it further.

And finally, I want to identify the question that will generate the next phase of my inquiry.

Keywords: Systemic coaching; action research; reflective learning practice; collective inquiry; generative dialogue; exquisite connectivity; intentional and attentional space; emotional courage; embedded wisdom; self-transforming organisations; emergent leadership; connectivity.

Introduction

I would like to set out the context from which I am writing.

I have a passion for deep inquiry – for personal insight and profound connections with others. In 2002 I completed the first part of a very detailed study into the generative qualities of dialogue and inquiry, built on a fundamental belief that effective and sustainable organisations can be constructed by self-aware individuals who value the reciprocity of relationships, and who can remain playfully intrigued by the dynamic conversations between personal and corporate values.

Isaacs (1999) highlights this need to focus on the particular and the personal in his introduction to a notion and practice of dialogue. He expresses a belief that: “Dialogue addresses problems further ‘upstream’ than conventional approaches. It attempts to bring about change at the source of our thoughts and feelings, rather than at the level of result our ways of thinking produce” (p. 20).

This helped provide the basis of my Ph.D., which for the most part was completed as an integral part of my role at the time, that of Head of Organisational Development (OD) managing the people implications of a significant merger of two leading players in the Pharmaceutical sector. In 2007 I began to plan my post-doctoral research after a break of almost five years, having spent four years further developing my combined OD, inquiry and coaching practices as an executive coach with a global talent development firm.

I am now starting to reflect on the broader possibilities inherent in our coaching conversations, and am considering the possibility that through these conversations I can help catalyse a ground-swell of connected individuals who together might aspire to create fluid, self-transforming organisations where human connectivity is core. Furthermore, I believe that by combining my coaching with individual and collective inquiry, dialogue and reflective learning practice I have an opportunity to develop an integrated and systemic approach that offers a very powerful and connective means of enhancing an organisation’s capacity to grow and adapt in response to both current and emerging business issues. I am also proposing that this might well be one way in which we might extend the role of coaching, and realise the opportunity to have a significant impact on both the evolving nature of organisations and the emergent leadership that will sustain them.

The strength of the proposition lies in the depth and breadth of business experience that has helped define it, evidenced in the client work I’ve undertaken and endorsed by client testimonials. Some of these clients are present in the paper, described in the form of un-attributed illustrations of the work we’ve done together and shared to evidence how we are collectively striving to create new models for our organisations which will ultimately enable the partnership of people and business to flourish. Throughout the paper I hold myself accountable to the standards of judgement (referred to as the principles of my practice) that emerged through my original doctoral research (Scholes-Rhodes, 2002), and on which I have built my coaching practice. In the context of my thesis I described these as:

- Valuing the transformational uncertainties of self-dialogue;
- Trusting the generative and improvisatory qualities of intuitive questioning;
- Respecting the authority of my own structuring role;
- Developing an awareness of attentive space;

- Speaking with courage and emotional honesty;
- Engaging in affirmative and generative dialogue with others.

With an aspiration to help create a joined-up world I am now putting my energies into working with individuals, teams and groups who aspire to wish to work in joined-up ways that are healthy, effective and immensely rewarding both for them and the organisations they support and lead. It's aspirational, and I know I'm in the very early stages of a very long journey. However, this is an opportunity to invite others to come alongside the experiences of my inquiry and to be open to the potential catalytic effect of both its similarities and dissimilarities with your own practices. I therefore invite you to form your own dialogic and generative response that enables new questions around its meaning, its scope and ultimately its use-value for you (based on the Preface, Scholes-Rhodes, 2002, pp. 9-21).

I am inspired by this call from Leggo (2001) who writes in his paper "A Calling of Circles: Living the research in everyday practice": "Living is the stuff of every day. So, our research ought to focus on a curriculum of joy, a curriculum of hope, a curriculum of ecology, a curriculum of community, a curriculum of living, a curriculum of the heart" (p.17).

My purpose in writing this paper now is multi-faceted. First, it's now eight years since I successfully completed my Ph.D., and I'm curious to know if and how I have progressed. Second, my thesis represented a significant milestone in my life, providing a space in which I was supported in the exploration of my emerging development practice, and I've been left with a feeling that there is much more to understand and say. Third, I'm noticing that increasingly the space I need for reflection and in-depth inquiry is yet again being squeezed out by the commercial demands of my working practice and I need to take notice. And finally, and probably even more important for me, I find myself searching for a voice that can fully represent the possibilities of an emerging and exciting aspect of my work.

I've worked as a coach for nearly fourteen years, and always in a commercial context. For six of these years I was engaged in the development of my thesis, a deeply personal "upstream" journey¹ that provided a safe place in which to both explore and challenge the defining principles of my practice. As these emerged I was also drawn into my own stories of profound connectedness, and formulated the concept of "exquisite connectivity" (Scholes-Rhodes, 2002). At that time I described it as:

...a fragile and instinctive response to the sensory qualities of a living world, a fundamental connection with my own innate ability to form and share music.

I have begun to think of it as a need to find my own space for belonging. It is about creating attentive space in my life, and in my "practice", as a way of "being" in that life that keeps me open to the possibilities of these new connecting spaces. It is about inquiring into the development of my own practice of connected "being." (p.10)

¹ Torbert 2002 – I understand his notion of *upstream* to mean the critical movement in attention that can engender developmental transformation.

I would now like to re-examine this notion of “exquisite connectivity” that was so fundamental to my own transformation. I’m curious to explore how I might be embodying it in my coaching work, and probably more significantly would like to track the evidence of its positive impact for my clients. I’d also like to explore how I’m beginning to embody it in my collective work, if indeed I do, and to begin to formulate some thoughts about how I might embed it further.

In my original thesis (Scholes-Rhodes, 2002) I presented my newly formed practice as: “...a practice that encompasses both its own assumptions about the nature of knowledge and about the appropriate methodology for obtaining ‘correct’ understanding” (p. 268) “...a living form of inquiry... an original contribution to an appreciation of inquiry as a creative art” (p. 315).

I would like to draw on this emergent understanding of my practice to put forward the principles of my coaching practice, initially formulated as the standards of judgement to support my claim to the development of a unique form of first-person inquiry and now fully incorporated into my coaching practice as the fundamental principles upon which my work is built. I would like to take the time to explore to what extent these are now embedded as the principles of my one to one coaching work, and to note where the impact might be both substantial and limited. This represents the very established part of my portfolio, and is therefore much more familiar to me. I would also like to take the time to explore to what extent these same principles can provide the framework for my collective work – an emerging practice, and one in which I aspire to have greater impact.

The proposition

In all of my work I hold closely to the belief that coaching is an educative process, drawing on the embedded wisdom of both coach and client and allowing the insights to emerge in a precious and personal space, inexplicably shaped by the mutual challenge of each one’s sense-making. Through my one to one coaching I have come to recognise this as a highly *intentional* and *attentional* space (Scholes-Rhodes, 2002), laden with immense potential for ontological shifts. Having drawn on Torbert’s work for my thesis (Torbert, 2001) I find his description of triple-loop learning useful here to help emphasise the point: “Triple-loop learning transforms not just our tactics and strategies but our very visioning, our very attention” (p.251).

As I increasingly stretch and test the boundaries of my collective work (team, group and organisational) I recognise that I am also shifting the focus of my coaching, opening up a space in which I might consider relationships and the connection between people as much the primary unit of change as the individuals themselves. This represents a significant shift in my work, and demands that as a coach I know both where and when to connect, that I can hold a sense of the “whole system” as well as the individual systems of behaviour and beliefs. It also requires that I have the capacity to interweave the two. It is within this context that I am proposing to test the founding principles of my practice, first articulated through my thesis and now much more familiar to me in this extended form:

- Valuing the generative and improvisatory qualities of intuitive questioning;
- Trusting the transformational uncertainties of dialogue and inquiry;

- Holding a respectful place for our own structuring roles;
- Attuning to the shifts and turns of the individual, team and collective energy;
- Fostering courage and emotional honesty, individually and collectively, through the “system”;
- Catalysing a deep reflective space for all “leaders” of the organisation to step back and consider simple but profound questions of what matters and has meaning for them;
- Both appreciating and articulating the implicit tensions and contradictions as deep personal values, vision and purpose begin to form a network of behaviours at both macro and micro levels.

When first formulating these principles (Scholes-Rhodes, 2002) I struggled to find a way in which I could both acknowledge and work with a realisation that “I” as researcher (and now coach) can be “immensely fickle, gullible to a multitude of influences and amazingly inconsistent in focus and intent” (p. 134). By combining the models of Bohm (1985), Isaacs (1999) and Marshall (2001) recognised that the flow and focus of my inquiry appeared to emerge from “a personal mix of aware filtering, reflection in the moment and an intuitive sense for the significant and generative” (pp. 134-135).

I also learnt to differentiate between those questions that I might choose to pursue in the here and now and with defined purpose, and to recognise those which I might pursue incidentally and because they have drawn my attention toward them. In the context of my thesis (Scholes-Rhodes, 2002) I learnt to separate them out as my “intentional dialogues” and “attentional dialogues” (p. 135), and recognised that it was this fluid and emergent process that is so fundamental to my work. I referred to it as “generative questioning” in my thesis, “a voice that engages in creative formation, in creating links between discrete aspects of my knowing” (p. 143). In my coaching practice I recognise it as the capacity to hold a connective space for my clients, one in which they can create their own intuitive and *attentional* inquiries, supported by a light touch that respects both my clients’ and my own role in providing structure to their inquiry.

Early on in my research (Scholes-Rhodes, 2002) I became acutely aware of my own fragility, and began to explore the significance of my expressing the depth of emotional honesty triggered by my self-inquiry. Much of the power and motivation for my continuing inquiry was and still is sustained by “the sheer exhilaration of learning, and the tremendous sense of anticipation as a dialogue is precariously balanced between reflective sense and emergent possibilities” (p. 150). I consider this emotional edge an intrinsic part of the inquiry experience, and now as a coach will carefully hold that moment for my clients when they begin to articulate their own expressive voices.

When working at the macro level of behaviours and beliefs I refer to the scope of this work as *systemic*. This is a new and emerging area of work, and in this paper I want to share at least one example of where I am exploring how an articulate and well-founded, systemic approach to coaching can support clients in catalysing the type of shift that working with individuals and teams alone is unlikely to achieve. This is about working with the connected whole, helping explore the dynamic interplay of beliefs, values and behaviours in their personal, group and organisational forms.

My proposition is that this form of *systemic* coaching has the potential to catalyse and embed a quality of transformation which ultimately will help us shift organisational norms to co-create systems of sustainable partnership and reciprocal value, sustained by the capacity to co-inquire and co-learn.

This type of work demands that as coaches we can hold an image of the organisation as a network and care-fully work with each of the threads as the clients unfold the story. We may begin by focusing on the “I” through one to one work, subsequently or in parallel working with each connective thread as the client maps out their position in what can be a very complex pattern of relationships and collective sense-making, and probably after a period of time working with the “we” that makes up a much broader working unit and one which has exponential capacity for impact.

In order to make it happen I have first had to let go of the potentially false boundaries that we are encouraged to draw around OD, coaching, action learning, inquiry, facilitation, consulting and be convinced that it is both safe and worthwhile to slip across the boundaries and work with a rather more messy integration of them all. This is about living the experience, remaining alert to a changing truth about the work, and in that moment being able to offer the client something unique and highly relevant. Facilitating the work as a coach, and as a coach who is also an action research practitioner, defines the practice in new ways – and it’s those new ways that I want to both explore and evidence in this paper.

I recognise that much of my role is defined by my own response to the clients’ emergent requirements, demanding a capacity to “read” an organisation, the capacity to get fully alongside its broader habits of meaning-making, cultural preferences and any other enablers of leadership. I am increasingly challenged by the need to work with the transience of an incomplete knowledge-base, respecting the fluidity of *knowing* and recognising that I too am intimately a part of any understanding of what might count as knowledge – and owning the impact of that. I also recognise the need to work with the tremendous potential of the intangibles, including sources of motivation and energy, emotional awareness, the quality of relationships, emergent learning and values-based leadership. This is about coaching as a critical business activity, an extended form of coaching that works with all critical aspects of the *system* and helps explore how the organisation is “wired together.”

And there can be enormous tensions in the system, many of them an integral part of the good health of the organisation and helping feed the curiosity and inquiry that can help catalyse new and exciting solutions. These can be heard embedded in the language of an organisation, very often articulated as conundrums that help define the operational norms. An example might be heard in the polarisation of decision-making, such as balancing the choice between a freedom to invest in high-risk innovation and a strict adherence to governance and cost-control. I recently heard a client describe their specific challenge as needing to explore how they might balance the need for compliance (they work in a highly regulated section of the energy sector) and the agility and pace that might enable them help define the future (relating to the unpredictable challenges of climate change).

I often hear similar tensions expressed from a very personal perspective – so many times experienced as a battle between personal values and the implicit values of the collective. Whitehead refers to this form of tension as a “living contradiction” (Whitehead, 1999), his use of the word “living” an encouragement to consider how deep the tension may

go into the personal choices we are making. Full awareness of these choices is critical to our emotional health and well-being, and as a coach I am constantly on the watch for the places in which they may be having most impact.

However, there is also a *dark side*, and we need to be able to discern where these tensions have taken on a pathological nature. By this I mean remaining alert to those patterns of behaviour that disengage and de-motivate, draining the energy out of the “system” rather than replenishing it. It is remarkable how much this is effected by the very teams, groups and organisations that are adversely affected, their collusion evident in the patterning but outside their consciousness.

In writing this paper I am making a commitment to share my learning as I story each aspect of my practice, to hold myself accountable to my principles, and to remain curious as to the creative nature of the practice - and allow new insight to emerge. I intend to evidence my deep appreciation of my clients’ individual and collective potential, and to use the accounts of my practice to help explore how I might generate a space in which communities of people can build a sustainable capacity for growth through individual and shared learning.

I am also beginning to examine the impact that this kind of coaching is having on helping shift the dominant models of leadership, and share an anticipation of seeing this extended form of coaching play a significant role in helping build new qualities of reciprocity, mutuality and ultimately partnership.

Examining the “truth” of the evidence

By exploring how I am combining and integrating the four lenses of coach, action researcher, OD and inquiry practitioner I am aiming to develop my own insights into how the practice of a coach might help catalyse new forms of organisation and leadership. Outside the boundaries of this paper my bigger goal is to help develop a deep appreciation of our collective potential, help generate a space in which communities of people can explore so much more than they know, enjoy the implicit tensions between innovation and control, and through partnership and shared learning build a sustainable capacity for growth.

It is critical that I address this aspiration – and claim – to have impact. McNiff and Whitehead (2000) refer to it as generating evidence from the data. Very often we talk of the coach/client relationship being of reciprocal benefit, of its being a space in which mutual learning takes place. However, it is always challenging to evidence it, as each coach is restricted by the bounds of a Confidentiality Agreement and the ethical guidelines of their professional body to such an extent that it is difficult to share stories of their client work. The client identity must remain fully protected and can only be storied where the client has indicated their willingness to be referenced. In seeking to share three client stories I have therefore changed their names to protect both their and their organisations’ identities. So, I start with a data dilemma – and a request that you trust my accounts as true.

The nature of “truth” is doubly important in this context. In my original thesis (Scholes-Rhodes, 2002) I sought to articulate the significance of both a “living truth” and a “life truth” and would like to share that articulation here as the basis on which I invite you to evaluate my claims to know:

The meanings are “live” in their ability to shape my learning and growth, deriving their current meaning from their contextual enactment and my ability to hold open a space of inquisitive questioning. These “live” meanings are integral to the development of my capacity as a knowledge-creator. They also give “life” meaning as they emerge as a source of sustaining purpose, a motivating force as I learn to live them more awarely. They are integral to the creative formation and re-formation of my “being,” firmly moving the living images of the pages of my journal into the frame of today’s possibilities and helping draw out the shape of my new “truth.” (Scholes-Rhodes, 2002, p.302)

In the context of the thesis I relied on my journal to access the stories of my practice, telling and re-telling them over time as I tracked the transformative shifts in my *being*. I now work with a similar set of journals, reflecting on my client-work before our meetings, recording both my thoughts and feelings after and between our meetings and exploring the emergent “truth” in parallel meetings with my coach supervisor. So, in sharing the examples I have attempted to step back from the familiar content and view them through the additional “eye” of a coach supervisor and action researcher.

Each of the case-studies is presented through four different perspectives, each one representing the stages of an action research cycle – experiential, presentational, propositional and practical – by way of illustrating a typical action learning process.

This is how the stages are set out, although not always as clearly defined as below:

- The experience as I recall it through my journal (experiential and presentational);
- Critical reflections and insights shared from the perspectives of a dialogue with my supervisor – both peer and external (experiential and presentational);
- The developing and emerging practice as I understand it (as coach) in my role as action researcher and learner (propositional and practical);
- Evaluative dialogues with clients, in which we explore the impact and value of coaching in this way (propositional and practical).

Presenting the evidence

Beth

Beth has always met me within the confines of the city firm for which she works as a Director – our meetings arranged in one of the several corporate hospitality rooms. Ours started out as a rather arms-length relationship, each of us taking a seat at opposite sides of a large circular table designed for ten and Beth pouring the tea from the tray provided. The brief from her manager was quite distinct, yet indistinct, and after two meetings we met as

a threesome to try and bottom² out the real intent. Our contract subsequently dictated four meetings, with clear intentional outcomes.

I use the word “intentional” deliberately here, drawing out the distinction between the very purposeful framing often provided by a client, which often bears little resemblance to the emergent and “attentional” conversation that actually ensues. This human dialogue has so much more meaning for the individual or individuals doing the work. Isaacs (1999) stresses this criticality of attention when he says: “to listen is to develop an inner silence” (p. 84).

I envisage it as the silent listening of musical pauses, a space in which I constantly try to ignore the interference of premature images or assumptions, try to suppress the limitations of my assumed pre-understanding (Scholes-Rhodes, 2002).

And so it was with this framing that I resumed the work with Beth.

I share this aspect of the context to highlight its impact on our first meetings. It felt formal and superficial. I felt we struggled to find a deeper reason for the meetings. Coaching is not a means for fixing or correcting, and it is essential that each individual client has a curiosity and purpose for learning. I felt stuck, unable to formulate the generative question that would catalyse Beth’s own inquiry, and I recognised that the responsibility for her learning was still firmly with me. This was not a sustainable situation and I took it into my next supervision meeting. This happened to be a group supervision session, made up of my professional coach supervisor, and a cross-section of colleagues.

Having shared the experiences of the first few sessions (the experiential and presentational phases of the action research cycle) the reflections from the group were interesting. One colleague commented on the quality of the energy I was transmitting, describing it as heavy and serious. I noticed that I was carrying an overwhelming concern for outcomes, and was curious. This was a significant client for the firm, and I was getting caught up in the need to perform. More importantly though I was reflecting a pressure that I thought I sensed Beth herself evidencing, physically present through her upright posture and her focus coloured by the intensity of her need for results.

It’s important that I pause over this comment relating to physical posture, and the likelihood that it carried a significant message. The physiological mirroring between coach and client can often reveal otherwise hidden data, and it is essential that the coach checks this out before drawing any spurious conclusions. As I too found myself in the same upright posture I noticed how stiff I felt, how constricted my breathing had become, and the extent to which I was losing my capacity to be “attentional.” My proposition was that we were both becoming caught up in the assumed demands of the organisation, and needed to step back and consider what might matter for her, personally and individually.

² I notice that this is an odd phrase for me to use – but choose to leave it in the text as I think it reflects the awkwardness I felt as I was drawn into a conversation that somehow felt like a process of objectifying Beth

Another colleague noticed that I shared the story with a very serious expression, devoid of the sense of fun I often brought to our collective supervision sessions. Margaret, my supervisor, asked me to describe Beth, “to bring her into the room” as we often do when we notice that so much is missing from the way in which a client is present. I noticed that Beth and I rarely shared a light-hearted moment. I could very easily describe her deep-throated chuckle and the smile that usually went with it but there was no recollection of a connective moment that might accompany it. I knew that she had children but I had never heard her speak about the youngest child.

I held onto this notion of connectedness, and realised that my own learning through the supervision session had been a reminder of the need to explore the quality of connectivity I am able to generate with and for my client. I also began to listen to my own intuitive questioning and realised that I was holding back from playing my structuring role, something in our conversations alerting me to the need for a very light touch. I had recognised that we were avoiding some deeper questions but through respect for what I assumed was my client’s emotional fragility I was avoiding the intuitive questions that might actually serve her best. As her coach I needed to exercise the same courage and emotional honesty that I believed was lacking in her self-dialogues. It was also possible that I was not yet fully present for her, and I reflected on the learning goal I’d set myself at the beginning of the year. To be fully present as a coach is to know when and how to bring into the coaching conversation a depth of self-reflection that is catalytic for the client, a capacity to notice all the personal ways of knowing and then articulate them in a way that is both connective and transformative for the client. This includes the knowing that emerges through our physiological presence.

As I reflect on the significance of working as a co-researcher with my clients, albeit covertly, I wonder how I might increase my capacity to work with each client’s epistemological framing. I am again struck by the challenges of this question from Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992: “Can a person by telling her story rescue her understanding from both accidental and formal self-misunderstanding and inadvertent self misrepresentation? Can life stories be opened up, as well as cramped, in the telling?” (p. 196).

I needed to work with my new insights.

I prepared very carefully for our next session, making time and space to relax, to quieten the questions that were jumbling their way into my mind, and to feel my way into becoming fully present for my client. We opened the meeting with the usual ceremony of tea pouring, and then we began to check in, following the usual pattern. This consisted of Beth bringing me up to date with activity since our last meeting. As she listed out the tasks, the meetings, the travelling, the needs of the team, her clients, her manager, I felt an overwhelming sense of panic, my heart thumping in my chest and I couldn’t avoid putting my hand up and holding where it hurt.

I shared my own rising sense of panic and then simply asked what support she had in place.

Beth immediately stopped – and in her own silence began to cry. It was as if she had been given permission – to cry, to express her feelings, to share the load. It didn’t matter which, or even if any – the significance was in the release she was evidencing. We shared the silence. When she was ready she talked, frankly and openly. As she talked I felt a new sense of connectedness, a sense of compassion for the woman who was striving so hard to

achieve so much on all fronts – heroic and lonely at the same time. I recognised that something had shifted in my own felt self, and was struck by how powerful the intervention had been. When the coach's own state changes with such exquisite timing then a similar shift can occur in the relational space between the coach and client. In shifting my attention to the overwhelming feeling of her load, and in articulating my physiological empathy, Beth had somehow made a similar shift herself. We had both let go.

Stephen

I first worked with Stephen over a year ago, and he's just contacted me after a break of several months with a view to resuming our work together. He's changed in the time I've known him, and I'm curious to track the changes that might have been catalysed by our coaching conversations. The fact that he has decided to re-engage me, to help him achieve his next career step, seems to indicate a confidence in the work we do together, and as he has also positively reflected on the impact of the coaching in the conversations leading up to our new contract I feel sufficiently confident to assume a direct cause and effect.

The sub-set of the work I'd like to explore here is very specific, and occurred very early on during the original programme of twelve sessions. Stephen was aiming for a position on the newly-formed executive team. He headed up a significant functional area of the business, and had acquired a reputation for keen negotiation. He was described as determined, single-focused, and functionally expert by the CEO. These behaviours and characteristics were clearly valued, and well-rewarded – but to achieve the coveted promotion he would need to develop a capacity for relationship-building, shared outcomes and connected working across functions. This represented a significant shift for him, challenging the very strengths he had developed while operating as a “sole trader” and exploring rapidly what “connected” might look and feel like for him.

Not knowing quite where to start in our first session – it's always difficult when the agenda seems so fixed – I invited Stephen simply to talk. He described his career to date, his wife and family, the new house he was hoping to buy, even the occasional anecdote about events at work. I found him interesting, engaging, and very easy to be with. It was difficult to fully appreciate the disconnected experiences his colleagues reportedly relayed but there was something behind the words that I wasn't quite catching. I began to jot down the occasional phrase, each one representing an assumption or belief that Stephen appeared to be holding.

One recurrent theme began to come into relief. He had very clear expectations of working relationships, sometimes floating to the surface in the form of an assumption about one of his colleagues and at other times rather more well-hidden as a very well-established form of meaning making. As he continued to talk this framework of beliefs began to take on a very tangible presence, almost becoming an expression of the individual Stephen held himself to be. Torbert (2002) gives some insight into the potential significance of this apparent merger of identity and action logic. He draws a distinction between the merger of the two in our early stages of development and their necessary separation in developmental transformation. At this point the action logic of the person or system changes.

Based on this understanding of Torbert's work it seemed critical that Stephen develop an awareness of these deep-set beliefs. He had come into coaching with a clear purpose, and with clear feedback from his peers, team and CEO that he needed to do something differently if he was to achieve his goal. I wasn't sure at this stage whether he had considered deep issues such as his identity, nor had we discussed yet the ways in which he might wish to develop as a leader. We were in the early stages of developing our relationship and so there was a judgement-call to make – a structuring decision to make.

I didn't share the notes during that session but did revisit the work of Goldberg (1998), "The Art of the Question," in which she describes the concepts of "Judger Self" and the "Learner Self":

The Judger Self orients itself to the world according to the belief that an individual should be able to achieve his version of what is right, good, correct, and acceptable in any particular arena of life, and at all times. With these rigid and impossible stands, the Judger Self places itself in a position of constantly seeking to confirm that it is right about its judgments. Any doubt about these standards or opinions might be experienced as dangerous by threatening to undermine or challenge the entire cognitive system upon which they are based.... The Learner Self is secure and fully self-accepting. Since it need not focus internally to find out if it's OK, it can afford to direct its attention externally to learn, connect, produce and create. The Learner Self recognizes that it makes choices constantly and this gives it a great deal of personal power. In taking responsibility for itself and its choices, the Learner Self garners the strength and possibilities that only this mindset can extend. It responds, rather than merely reacts, to whatever life throws its way. (Goldberg, 1998, pp. 147-148)

In this same work Goldberg draws attention to the many distinguishing characteristics of each, and how they are especially evident in the kinds of question each will ask themselves and others. She also puts forward the proposition that questions encoded with "Learner" presuppositions can help clients shift to the world of the "Learner Self":

...with its invitation and promise of more spacious possibilities. In other words, the right question, asked in the right way, at the right time, and to the right person (especially to themselves), seemed to offer clients the potential of a transformation in experiences, behaviour and possibilities. (p.145)

Intuiting that Goldberg's concept might provide us with a useful framework I decided to print out the list of apparent beliefs and assumptions I'd made during our first session and share it with Stephen at our next session. I also prepared a copy of the descriptions of "Learner" and "Judger" selves, again with the intention of sharing them with Stephen.

I carefully contracted with Stephen at the next session. Trust is essential in the relationship of coach and client and I needed to find a way in which I could respect Stephen's decision whether to work with the material or not. I explained how I had listened during our first meeting and handed him a copy of the summary. I had headed it "Shared with the sole purpose of generating some curiosity."

Stephen appeared stunned. We maintained a long silence. I wondered whether I had taken a step too many – but at the same time trusted Stephen's capacity to deal with the feedback. He reflected for a very long time.

When he was ready he shared a story about the time when he'd belonged to a cycling club. He talked about the friends he'd made, about enjoying keeping fit and then about the time when he'd decided he couldn't belong any more as he would no longer be guaranteed first place. He'd subsequently lost touch with his friends. I asked him how he felt about that. He began to express it as a sense of imbalance, his work encroaching into all the hours of his life and his sadness at not being there for his daughter at the end of the day. He began to rationalise the situation, reflected some more, and then recognised out loud that he was making sense of the world primarily from the perspective of a "Judger Self." I did not need to speak.

One by one he described the choices he had made in his life, and was continuing to make. We examined each of them – gently and with curiosity. He began to add to the list of unhelpful beliefs he had accumulated over a lifetime, and one by one laid them out to challenge. As he structured his inquiry I listened, noticing how the pace had slowed, appreciating his emotional courage and honesty, and delightfully sharing some of the humour he was beginning to express. It was if he were freeing himself from a habitually restrictive way of being and stretching out into the energising newness of his own choice.

This opportunity to pause and reflect is providing a moment to recall the experiences tracked by Jaworski (1996) in "Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership," where he speaks from within his firm belief that he has both the freedom and capacity to be himself, his "highest self." In that moment in the coaching I began to appreciate the reciprocity that lies deep in the developmental relationship of the coach and client.

I can only describe it as one of the most catalytic moments of my coaching work. The learning was tangible, mine and Stephen's – and for Stephen it was immediate. Our work together was now clearly defined as Stephen picked his way through the framework of belief that had helped construct his life up to this point and with great energy and enthusiasm began to reconstruct his story (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). We worked together through each cycle of action inquiry, Stephen bringing into our sessions his ongoing challenges from his current role and I as his coach facilitating a process of self-inquiry. This is what gave a structure to the programme for the next few months.

As we worked together during the year it also became evident that it was critical that Stephen could evidence delegation to his team if he was to be successful in the board appointment. He was struggling with one particular member of his team, and although he surmised that his actions were possibly contributing to the problem he had not yet managed to stand far enough back to discern the real issue. He described how he would keep a copy of the negotiated contracts in his desk and cross-check against them every time this individual reported a successful outcome. It was causing him to work long hours, constantly cross-checking this individual's work. I asked what his "Learner Self" might advise him to do. He smiled and in the next session reported that he had now deliberately taken on a "mentor" role with this individual and that they were both benefiting from the new relationship, each learning from the other. My only intervention had been the question.

A couple of months before the end of the programme Stephen was successfully appointed to the position on the executive board. He was ecstatic. The CEO contacted my colleague, who manages the account, to offer his congratulations to the coach. Just nine

months later Stephen has been nominated as the CEO's future successor, and now has the next phase of his development plan to work on. With the CEO's endorsement Stephen and I are now working together again as he prepares for this next stage of his career. I'm looking forward to our learning sessions.

In both of these examples of one to one coaching I can track the specific and catalytic questions that have helped shape the nature of our conversations. These are the questions I refer to as generative, each formed from a quality of attention that enables me to intuitively frame a question that causes the client to shift their perspective. In Beth's case I drew attention to the lack of love and support in her work – in Stephen's I drew attention to the ontological framing that was impacting his ability to connect.

Trust and respect are implicit in our relationships, helping create a connective space in which we can each be fully and emotionally present. It takes courage, on both our parts, and I'm especially intrigued by the impact of sharing my own physiological experience of carrying Beth's immense load. It was as if I truly felt the physical embodiment of her angst, and in that moment was able to explore another facet of the "exquisite connectivity" that is so critical to my work.

Tops and Middles – enabling a senior management group

Just over two years ago I took on an eighteen month transformation programme for a client that had a much wider scope than any coaching work I had done to date. The programme was made up of team and individual coaching for the CEO and his executive team, individual coaching for a group of fourteen senior managers who reported directly to the executive, and three group coaching sessions for this same group of senior managers. I put together a team of four coaches to deliver the work, including myself.

We started the work with the senior managers nine months into the programme, by which time we had spent a considerable amount of time sitting alongside the organisation and had begun to formulate our own understanding of what might be needed to help develop this group. We saw them as holding a critical role in the transformation programme and had a detailed diagnostic view of what might be their critical enablers and blockers. This was derived from a combination of 360 data, psychometrics, input from the CEO and the executive team, and our own organisational knowledge. We also had guidance from the HR Director relating to the behavioural shift they needed to bring about.

I worked closely with a colleague to design a coaching intervention that would address both their individual needs and their collective needs. The design was based on three group coaching sessions, each a day long, supported by five telephone-based one on one coaching sessions. It's important to note that although these managers were a group, rather than a team, we still considered it important that we worked with them to develop their collective identity. This assumption was based on our own experience and backed up by my understanding of the model presented in the work of Barry Oshry (2007), *Seeing Systems – Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life*. He talks of this type of management team as being the "Middles" in an organisation, unsupported "loners," neither members of the "Top" (executive team) or "Bottom" (the operational staff), and not even connected to one another.

According to Oshry (2007), to find oneself in this “Middle” group is to feel torn by the system – individuals feel weak, confused and powerless. They are often pulled between conflicting needs, demands and priorities of those above them and those below them. “Middles” receive little positive feedback, never quite doing enough for anybody. Oshry continues to describe their condition quite starkly:

Middles are often seen by others as confused and wishy-washy, as having no firm opinions of their own. And Middles have no independence of thought and action; they don’t know who they are. Some Middles seek their identity by aligning themselves with tops, internalizing their goals and wishes. They become more top than Top, thereby alienating themselves from Bottoms. Other Middles align themselves with Bottoms, identifying with them and championing their causes, and thus alienating themselves from Tops (who can’t see them as sufficiently “managerial”). Still other Middles bureaucratize themselves, creating such hurdles and hoops for others to jump over and through that others tend to avoid them as much as possible. Finally, there are those Middles who, in trying to be fair, responsive, and even-handed with both Tops and Bottoms – and with all others who make demands on them to simply burn out in the effort. (Oshry, 2002, pp.66-67)

Not surprisingly we saw it as part of our role to both help articulate what might be their dominant worldview and work with them to achieve a critical shift from one of disempowerment to an increasingly empowering perspective.

One particular exercise stands out from the whole of the three days as significant. I had set up what we refer to as a team sculpt, described by Hawkins and Smith (2006) in their chapter on group supervision (p. 184) as a means of re-enacting a team client situation but used here to catalyse a depth of understanding of the “system” that was being enacted in the room by this group of senior managers in their “Middle” role. We had not at this stage shared Oshry’s model. I asked the group to set out chairs to represent each member of the Executive team, including the CEO. It was important that they use the placing and spacing of the chairs to represent the connections, disconnections and spaces between these “Tops.” As they began to agree on a final lay-out we invited them to reflect on what they saw.

The new insights were striking and totally unanticipated. They had evidently mapped out some powerful relationships in the room, and had very clearly noticed the alienation of certain members of the Executive. These individuals in turn were seeking to bridge both “Tops” and “Middles” but without success, and as a result were acting out roles that both confused and concerned this group. The CEO was prominent in his position of isolation, with the backs of some of his Executives clearly turned away from him. It was a powerful picture that we knew had to stay in the room.

After a brief pause I then asked each of the group to very carefully place themselves alongside their Executive colleagues, looking clearly at the implications of their positions and ensuring that they also depicted the relationships they might have with each other. It’s hard to describe the tension in the room – or communicate some of the deep distress felt by this group when the scenario was complete. I can feel it even now as I write about it – a shiver of realisation that an immense issue had been brought into the room and that it needed our full and collective attention.

As the group looked around they began to discern a pattern of alliances that was divisive, the withdrawal of some into the security and loyalty of their own teams and the deliberate self-projection of others to take their place alongside their executive colleagues. This was a moment when it was critical we held both the learning for the individuals and held open the space for their collective exploration. In that moment I recall feeling a profound sense of connection with the group, knowing clearly that I was holding within my structuring role the multiple lines of inquiry while also taking care of the group process. The level of trust was high, as was the vulnerability of the individuals, and in that moment I knew that the group had moved on. They seemed to be speaking as a collective, appeared to be developing the courage to articulate what they were noticing and learning, and as they noticed their colleagues' distress took responsibility to care for and attend to them. They were very much in control, empowered to take whatever next steps they collectively and individually agreed.

The significance of the day can only be defined by reflecting on the depth of their understanding, by remembering the power of their learning, and by recalling the images of the "system" they embodied in the room. It somehow seems limiting to share the way in which they finally agreed to record the output of that day. But this is how they did it, drawing together their understanding around the following four bullet-points:

- We are not working interdependently, and don't know how or where to do it differently;
- We don't have an operational map of our role in the transformation;
- We are being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of projects, tasks and initiatives;
- We have insufficient collective strength to enable us to regain control.

Something happened for the group that we did not anticipate and which we could not define. It's tempting to claim that the organisation's transformation was itself transformed as a result of our work together. However it is probably safer to assume that there will be ongoing catalytic change that over time will develop an energy and momentum of its own. There certainly was an impact. A sub-set of this group subsequently took the drafting of the operational plan into their own hands and successfully presented it to the Executive team. Their work was recommended to the Board. One individual was promoted as a result of the CEO recognising her contribution and drive to help move on the transformational agenda. Another member of the group was seconded to head up a major project on a client site. Their learning has been profound, as has ours, and I have no doubt that there is still much more to achieve with this client.

Conclusion

I am tempted to share many more case-stories but would prefer to form the paper around just these three. I set out to explore how I might be extending the embodiment of "exquisite connectivity" in my work, and through both one to one and systemic case stories have evidenced qualities of connectivity that have had significant influence on our work together. The conversations have been self-transforming, both individually and collectively, and as each of the clients has focused on the beliefs that help form their worlds they have stepped forward and taken control of their own sense-making. Emotional courage has been critical to their learning, allowing each of them to step out and explore parts of the journey

that have neither been comfortable nor happy places to go. But the results have been sustained, new conversations have started and new leaders are beginning to emerge.

I need to remind myself just why I do this work. I feel that I can allow my attention to become distorted by the yo-yo pulls of emotional extremes – one minute cocooned in the pleasure of it and in another, immersed in self-doubt and frustration. I know that I feel passionately about helping create a new paradigm – a space in which organisations can enjoy the vibrancy of human pleasure and interaction, where relationships are about reciprocity and mutual support and learning. I defined it so clearly in the aspirational introduction to my paper that I still wonder, curiously and with astonishment, at how strongly I feel the need to re-state it.

I really do believe that organisations – public and private sector – can become increasingly aware of themselves as human communities, and bring an enhanced interest in, and attention to, the qualities of their interactions and relationships. Just as in communities the organisation cannot act and live in a vacuum. Each individual brings a complex network of connections into the hub of their collective working, unknowingly in some cases generating new strings of connections through conversation, collaboration, team-working and the all-present complex network of power structures. And it is all too easy to replicate the dysfunctional connections that we know both outside and inside the hub (the organisation), which in turn catalyse new issues and challenges for colleagues (inside) and stakeholders, family and friends (outside).

So how does this paper aim to share how I am endeavouring to work with these challenges as a coach?

I find myself wanting to leap to a detailed and lengthy exposition, impatient to share the passion and enthusiasm. But I feel held back, cautioned by a conversation with a colleague earlier today. He suggested that I was sitting firmly and squarely in what we both understand as “expert” mode – my *voice* expressing certainty and confidence in my proposition that “this is how we ought to be approaching an extended role for coaching.” I felt immensely frustrated at being reminded yet again that the dominant paradigms of coaching do not yet embrace my proposition. I sense that I might be being invited to draw up battle lines and make a personal commitment to try and replicate the qualities of relationship and learning I experience with my clients.

As evidenced through the case-stories these are deeply respectful spaces in which I seek to hold a space for inquiry and emergent learning. I pay attention to my client – fully and without intent. I am “attentional,” both to the immediate client in front of me and to the larger client within which the individual is placed.

I toy with this idea of intent and attention – and recall the in-depth understanding I developed in my thesis. I can see that I lose that light-handedness when it becomes too precious for me to deliver against an explicit contribution. In those cases I can become dominated by the intent – and thoroughly lose the connective energy between us. In the cases of both Beth and Stephen I know that the first few sessions drew me into this paralysis. So, does that mean that a lighter hand, an even greater capacity to balance the

intentional with the attentional, may catalyse the emergent agenda much sooner? It's very possible.

I also notice in re-reading the case-stories how significant the different qualities of *connection* are – the client with their own story, the relationships built with each client, the emotional space created by an acutely aware group.

And now the new questions are emerging. How can I work with the *whole system* of this practice to achieve the influence I'm seeking? How can I pay attention to all the moving parts as I carefully place my generative questions at a juncture where I anticipate energy and response? And how can I fold this experience into the knowledge-base of my work?

I'm not sure there is one single question that will help propel the next phase of my inquiry - but I do know that I shall continue to ask this: "how can I continue to share my passion for deep inquiry as an essential and intrinsic quality of my practice and work with those qualities to help positively influence my clients' emergent models of organisation and leadership?"

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