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Coaching as Organisational Development



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Systemic Modelling:

Installing Coaching as a Catalyst for Organisational Learning

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In this article we introduce the background to our organisational coaching process, Systemic Modelling, outlining where it comes from, how it works as a cornerstone of organisational development work and some practical examples. We present a case study with one corporate client to illustrate how it can be implemented, plus the results of our first evaluation. We use stories, metaphors and examples to track the shift in thinking of a group of senior managers from a silo-mentality, blame or defence culture to networking, collaboration and creativity. We conclude with a reflection on the whole process and the impact team coaching had on organisational learning.

Keywords

Coaching, organisational development, Systemic Modelling, metaphor, stories, culture change, organisational learning, clean questions, emergence

Background

According to Dixon (1994) "The essence of organisational learning is the organisation's ability to use the amazing mental capacity of all its members to create the kind of processes that will improve its own". This definition informs our work with coaching as organisational development.

Our work using coaching with groups began in community and youth work, where resources are tight and individuals don't have significant budgets for one-to-one work or long-term interventions. We believed our clients would achieve maximum sustainable change for the smallest budget if they adopted change processes and

used them with one another to create coaching networks or learning communities.

One of the most successful coaching techniques ... encouraged individuals in groups to explore ... through client-generated metaphors

One of the most successful coaching techniques we tried encouraged individuals in groups to explore any idea, behaviour, problem or outcome through client-generated metaphors. This technique, called 'Symbolic Modelling' (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000; Hill, 2004), is based on the premise that client-generated solutions using their own words – and, crucially, using their own metaphors – will be more resonant to the client than expert advice and will enhance their self-efficacy.

The technique is based on asking certain 'Clean' or content-free questions to ensure that the answers are client driven. For example,

Client : The same problems keep coming up over and over without the push needed to address the cause.

Coach: And that's the same problems coming up over and over like what?

Client: Like a water wheel without enough water.

Coach: And coming up over and over like a water wheel, and without the push needed to address the cause, and what kind of push, is that push?

Client: Like we need to hike upstream and see what other water sources we have access to and then relocate the wheel there.

Clean questions are particularly useful for keeping assumptions and prejudice to one side and paying attention to what is said

To make the most of available budgets in our community and youth work, we began to apply Symbolic Modelling to small groups. We discovered that this simple process led to accelerated group learning. Clean questions are particularly useful for keeping assumptions and prejudice to one side and paying attention to what is said. Questions are curious instead of accusing, collaborative rather than competitive. This, in turn, fosters listening skills and a non-judgemental attitude to each contribution and gives everyone access to the diversity and wisdom of group members. Our experience suggested the approach was accessible to everyone, from disaffected teenagers and the long-term unemployed to senior managers in corporate settings. Groups were able to apply clean coaching protocols to new situations and create coaching networks.

We adapted this technique to use in organisations and we call it 'Systemic Modelling'. This reflects our main emphasis on making a difference to the collective, or the system, as distinct from the individual. Working in metaphor is helpful because, in our experience as coaches, we have found that people in organisations often have very limited ways of discussing problems, outcomes and actions, and can become distracted by competing for position, silo-thinking or sly put-downs.

To illustrate how 'Systemic Modelling' works, we present our case study of an international manufacturing company.

Systemic Modelling with a corporate client – the pitch

When invited to pitch for the work, we used 'clean questions'

This organisation had not undertaken management development training, coaching or learning in 15 years and had a modest training budget granted by the chairman of the board. When invited to pitch for the work, we used 'clean questions' ourselves by asking, "What would you like to have happen"? This revealed differing priorities amongst the Training Steering Group (TSG) of 10 senior managers and different opinions about the desired training and its business aims. We used the situation as an opportunity for them to experience our process in the moment, asking them clean questions to create individual models of the problems they perceived in the business and the outcomes they desired. We enabled them to clarify one another's statements before objecting to them; and to voice the assumptions or fears they were holding. As a result the TSG chose us over the other pitches, stating that they had been able to explore potential conflict with an openness and ease that had surprised them.

We began with the following intentions:

1. Instigate practical changes at individual level.
2. Bring individuals together in groups to practice with each other and embed co-coaching as a relational tool.
3. Support the way individuals use new skills and better relationships in the organisation.

Step 1 – working one-to-one

We began the intervention with brief one-to-one coaching for the TSG to help them think systemically about the business, clarify their goals and elicit metaphors which described the clients' current experiences of their organisation (see Box 1 for our Clean Questions and their responses).

Box 1: "Right now, the company is like what"?

"A series of cogs spinning, some of which are connected to each other, others which are just spinning at really high speeds. They are engines and activities in their own right but aren't connected to other activities which would drive output and successful outcomes on a wider scale. The inability to connect and gain momentum sometimes leads to a feeling of powerlessness and fatigue."

"Like an oil tanker charting a river, avoiding hitting the sides, other boats and mud banks. Occasionally it gets stuck and then it's really bad. We put all the effort into avoiding the sides i.e. when there's a service issue, all the effort goes into dealing with that issue, however you could still bump into another boat or something else could go badly wrong. Everyone is rushing around trying to solve the problem but not actually dealing with the issue which is that the river is too small for the boat and it needs to find open water. Unfortunately all the crew are following maps/charts and compasses when really they just need to look out the window and see what's there. We've got it to a critical level, we operate well for a while but we're not very good at operating when something else throws us off course."

"Rudderless and heading for an iceberg and keep saying, we'll get so much better, the liner is heading towards the berg and we're going to hit it because no-one believes anything's going to change."

individual metaphors hold the structure of the problem as a whole 'story'

These individual metaphors hold the structure of the problem as a whole 'story'. Listening to each metaphor gives a sense of what's happening for that individual in a succinct and easily understood way. Members of the TSG were able to read one another's metaphors in the training group with curiosity, humour and interest and develop a joint understanding of the current situation.

We then elicited metaphors describing what each individual wanted to have happen (see Box 2).

Box 2: "If the company were to be evolving in a way that was just right for you, it would be like what"?

"A winning crew in a rowing boat of eight, pulling at the same time in the same direction. All going at the same speed, as fast as they can because if you do not, it doesn't quite work, the oars get in the way or the boat goes to one side and doesn't go straight, and it never completes the race as a winner. Sometimes when we don't win the race we need to go back and work out why we didn't win the race, what happened, what didn't happen, and what we're going to do differently to prevent recurrence."

"I'd like to work together cohesively and come up with a common direction – to be as one. To be coming up with some new ideas about the business, instead of going the same cycle year after year. They [the board] would be like the captain on the ship, they'd decide on the direction and the crew would do the rest. We're the first officers and we get to decide how to get the ship from A to B on the most efficient route."

We looked for patterns repeated in their metaphors

Step 2 - Moving attention from individual to whole group

Next we wanted to 'chunk up' their attention to group-level analysis. We looked for patterns repeated in their metaphors. From what the individual members of the TSG were saying, what would we conclude that they as a group believed? What were the majority of them concerned with? We found that some key themes emerged:

- Lacking direction / leadership
- Inconsistent messages
- Wasting resources

We observed ten cross-departmental meetings during which these themes were confirmed by staff behaviour. We observed that:

- Air time was shared evenly between a number of individuals. There wasn't a clear leader.
- 76% of questions were closed (required yes/no answers).
- Of these, most questions were directed at individuals rather than the whole group, which limited members' ability to learn from each other or collaborate.
- 47% of action items on the agenda were not yet completed, however there were few challenges or enquiries as to why. The most common response was "We'll push that deadline back".

- Despite lack of action, there was a distinct absence of feedback. Seven out of ten meetings had no feedback whatsoever.
- People were rarely thanked for a job well done.
- Meetings did not begin with clarification of meeting purpose or an opportunity quick round for each person to share their expectations.

This showed us that, in keeping with the TSG's metaphors, teams were neither operating effectively as hierarchy nor as a collaboration. There were inconsistent messages about deadlines, a lack of leadership and no clear direction provided.

The key themes in the TSG's desired outcomes were:

- Increased feedback
- Consistent decisions
- Consistent direction
- Unity
- Realising potential
- Fun

they applied clean questions to create a shared metaphor of what they wanted to happen

We fed these themes back to members of the TSG who agreed these as the team priorities. Then, building on the previous one-to-one work, they applied clean questions to create a shared metaphor of what they wanted to happen, together with specific action points to enable these outcomes to be achieved. As they used clean questions with one another, they were in effect coaching – facilitating one another's thinking, as well as learning from one another. The quality of the conversations is akin to dialogue (Isaacs, 1993).

Soon, organisational members began reporting that they were behaving differently towards each other outside the training environment and in relation to business needs. This first manifested itself in a round of what we call 'clean feedback', through which people started to give one another information that had previously been consigned to corridor conversations.

We also asked them to start using what we call a 'Clean Set Up' to get together before meetings and coach one another to be clear on their outcomes for the meeting and to share their agendas. The 'Clean Set Up' is a specific set of clean questions designed to elicit outcomes and explore differing expectations.

By the end of this phase their attention was still very much on applying the coaching tools in the way they had been taught.

Step 3 - Moving from group to organisation

The next step represents a key transition in using coaching as the vehicle for organisational learning. In order for the group's experience to make a difference organisationally we believed we had to:

- Get the board's agreement that the coaching processes were acceptable to them in order to support the TSG to apply them in live meetings.
- Train the TSG to facilitate each other in the way we had facilitated them. This enables them to apply the coaching processes to new arenas outside the training room and develop business credibility.
- Provide more members of the organisation with a similar experience to approach the 'tipping point' (Gladwell, 2002) at which enough people are communicating like this for it to become 'the way we do things around here'. This involves training managers to pass on the processes to their teams leading to a cascade.

*We broke down ...
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We asked the TSG to take live business issues and coach one another in threes to develop greater understanding of the outcomes and shared responsibility for achieving goals. Each member of the group took turns at being the focus. We also worked with 60 more managers in the company in group sessions. We broke down some of the tools of Systemic Modelling into workplace-relevant strategies which could be easily cascaded throughout the system, namely asking open questions, eliciting metaphors, setting outcomes and providing feedback. We trained these managers in groups of 15 to 20, each with a TSG member present to achieve 'train the trainer' outcomes.

As with the TSG, we allocated these managers to smaller groups of three-to-five to practice coaching on live issues between training sessions. We asked them to take small real issues such as meetings or presentations and coach one another to create an outcome for the event, including the responsibility they'd take for maintaining their own state and what resources or support they needed. There was no leader in these groups - each individual was given equal time. We were confident at this stage that their senior managers, the TSG, would support their forays into new ways of thinking and communicating, leading to a high level of training transfer.

Indications of change

Six months after the training we returned to the company and interviewed members of the TSG. We asked them what had worked well, what had not worked well and what changes they had noticed since the training. We also elicited a metaphorical model for their current experience of each other (Box 3).

Box 3: "Currently, the TSG is like what?"

"Everyone is aware, the training has woken us up and made us aware that we are working together and everyone is on the same boat."

"We were like a string vest, the relationships had holes in them and wouldn't hold water. Now there are fewer gaps and we genuinely try to support each other."

"It got us a lot closer, more casual with each other, people don't go off on one, less turf wars."

"Silo-mentality has been eroded."

"When anyone speaks there's less drama, a lot more conversation - I notice it in meetings they are amazingly calm, we're all together and we know we are."

"More of the previously unspeakable issues are coming out in meetings rather than corridors!"

Data suggest that training groups in coaching skills impacts group behaviour and group relationships

Results of a survey to managers who attended the later training suggest they were using the following Systemic Modelling techniques:

- Using Clean Set Up at in-house meetings: 77%.
- Using Clean Set Up at client meetings: 56%.
- Using Clean Set Up during interactions with peers: 46%.
- Using Clean Questions in meetings: 49%.
- Using Clean Questions during interactions with peers: 44%.

Both sets of data suggest that training groups in coaching skills impacts group behaviour and group relationships. Through improved communication they are more likely to be able to access each others' expertise in, for example, the cross-departmental meeting where 76% of questions were previously closed. The kinds of dialogue that the implementation of these processes inspires should begin to change the learning culture in the company and impact at the organisational level. The question now is 'How would we know?'

What else could indicate that organisational learning has occurred?

We are especially interested in evidence of emergent (Johnson, 2001) new behaviour, such that the original material we delivered had been modified or applied in a new context. One of our own metaphors for how this works is that of learning to cook. At first we ask them to stick to recipes, measuring accurate amounts and following instructions to the letter. As they learn and become cooks (coaches) they begin to experiment, and can put dishes together that don't follow recipes but do work well in terms of combining flavours. Thus, having trained the groups to use a few, very tight processes we sit back to watch how those begin to affect the flavour and culture of the company. In our experience, we find that this takes time and that the organisational culture has to remain open to the processes introduced during training for this to take place. The processes operate like feedback loops, such as in Senge's (1990) Learning Organisation, instituted as formal routes for information,

From metaphors of

being stuck and directionless they have moved to metaphors of change and transformation

rather than informal learning via 'corridor chat' or 'pre-meeting meetings'.

The changes we expect to see in the company presented in the case study should begin to manifest in their metaphors, which we can collect at a variety of post-training intervals. The following metaphors collected from managers are interesting comparisons with those from the start of the project. From metaphors of being stuck and directionless they have moved to metaphors of change and transformation.

Box 4: "Currently, the company is like what?"

"A chrysalis undergoing change."

"A volcano – lots of activity going on inside, active and strong, but still a bit volatile."

"A large oil tanker beginning to change direction."

"On the brink of some major cultural change for the better."

"A wild animal that is slowly being trained."

We have evidence of people adapting the Systemic Modelling techniques

We should also begin to see evidence of change in the behaviour of employees during meetings and with each other. So far we have evidence of people adapting the Systemic Modelling techniques. While many interviewees report finding the formal structures of the techniques difficult to use in every meeting, a quarter of respondents reported in the interviews something similar to the following:

"We don't always use Clean Set Up. But we do go round the room and ask everyone what they want to get out of the meeting."

This adaptation suggests that people have understood the principles of the Clean Set Up and that they have begun to cook without the recipe book. They have begun modelling each other's outcomes and have adapted coaching principles into a formal organisational event, thereby improving the effectiveness of meetings. While many are still using the recipes, it is early days and we find it can take up to a year for the work to 'go native'.

We sought practical examples of ways in which these improved relations had helped towards achieving business outcomes. One member of the TSG brought a project team together to coach each other around a long-term business problem which everyone had moaned about but no-one felt responsible for. Instead of waiting for a fellow Director or Board Member to be 'in charge', he realised he could 'pull together' the heads of relevant departments to model solutions together. This was a huge step away from the culture of helplessness, status quo and silo-thinking evident from their initial metaphors. Finally, as one group member said:

A huge step away from the culture of helplessness, status quo and silo-thinking

"The project was like opening up lines of communication that wouldn't be there normally – our whole communication is easier and more beneficial – almost like a balloon, it goes up and the balloon going up just means there's more around it, there's more space in which to have this dialogue, more

space in which to ask “what would we like?”

We will revisit this company to observe meeting behaviour when there has been time for the behaviour change instituted by those we worked with to filter through to those we didn't work with.

Organisational members have to be able to do with each other what we have done with them, otherwise we remain the experts

Conclusion: what are the critical elements of a Systemic Modelling project?

For us, the key difference in working at the individual level and translating that to the organisational level is autonomy; organisational members have to be able to do with each other what we have done with them, otherwise we remain the experts, consulting to their system but never enabling the new behaviours to become part of it. We promote autonomy in three key ways:

- Peer-to-peer coaching practice: we assume that they need to practice using the skills themselves at the 'conscious competence' level before they can unconsciously develop new behaviours.
- Role modelling: throughout the training and coaching we remain exemplars of our own process. We acknowledge our assumptions, ask questions and trust that each contribution made by a participant has value.
- Avoiding taking a position of expert in the system: When we find themes and patterns in behaviour, either individually or with groups, we feed this back in order to encourage debate and ideas for solutions. Nothing is secret, or 'unspeakable'. This encourages openness and expertise within the organisation which are key to the system being able to 'model' itself.

emergence at the organisational level is possible when you bring individuals together and show them how to apply coaching skills at the group level

We've tried to demonstrate in this case study that emergence at the organisational level is possible when you bring individuals together and show them how to apply coaching skills at the group level. Systemic Modelling brings specific coaching skills to the company as a whole. Rather than becoming a series of processes, it begins to create new relationships. We believe that it is in these relationships of trust, open debate and feedback that the organisation begins to learn. In that respect, introducing coaching skills into an organisation wasn't just a feature of the organisational learning project, it WAS the organisational learning project.

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Nancy and Caitlin are co-directors of Training Attention Ltd. You can read more case studies which demonstrate the breadth of application for Systemic Modelling on our websites:

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