

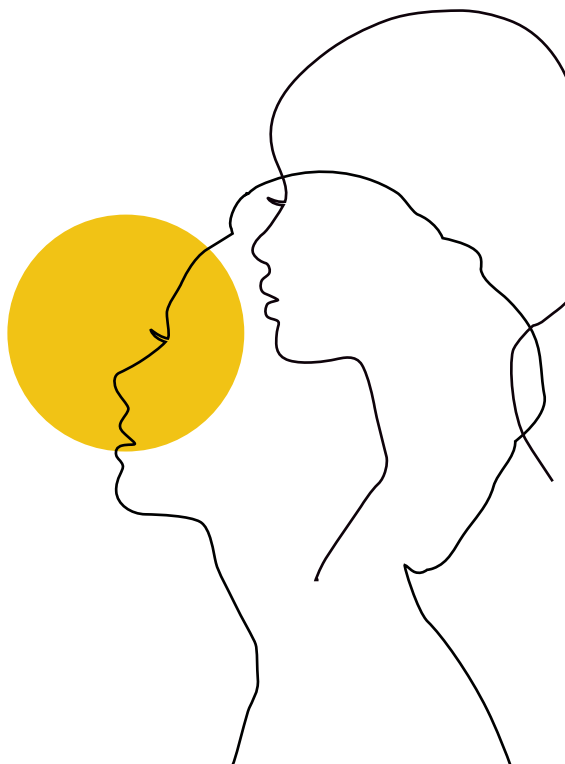
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CHATTER

Learning from Self-Talk in Coaching

Nick Bolton



Studies in Coaching

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in Coaching

by Nick Bolton

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Foreword

NICK BOLTON

How did I get it so wrong?

When I started this project, I had an idea of a book that explored how coaches' self-talk gets in the way of coaching and how they learn to manage it.

It seemed self-evident to me at that moment I thought about the book that the issue of self-talk was one of disruption.

You see, I had been inspired to put this book together after a series of mentoring sessions with coaches in-training in which the barrier to their work with their clients was all *internal*. They were questioning their own value, questioning their client's commitment and becoming distracted by external issues. Yet none of these things were being brought out explicitly in the coaching. The coaches weren't addressing the issues and questions with the client. And so the self-talk was rife, unchecked and disruptive.

Therein lay the seed of my narrow view of self-talk as an obstruction to coaching.

In that moment considering the challenges being faced by those coaches, my mind focused laser like on how self-talk gets in the way of coaching, how it bubbles up as self-judgement, judgement of the client, distraction, a sense of knowing, lack of presence and all these things that pollute the coaching space.

I decided to explore this idea in a structured way and asked for volunteers from my coaching school to take part in a two-month exercise. Each volunteer would coach as normal for two months but

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over that time they would complete a self-evaluation form after each session. They were to reflect on their self-talk and the impact it had, if any, on themselves, on their clients and on the coaching.

They then turned their reflections into a chapter for the book you are now reading by drawing together some key discoveries and the highlights (or lowlights!) of their journey into their own heads.

And their chapters surprised me!

There I was thinking I'd end up with a short book on how self-talk gets in the way and what each coach did to improve their management of it.

What I've ended up with is a much richer, more nuanced and appreciative exploration of self-talk, or as we call it in this book, chatter.

We find here coaches treating their self-talk as a source not only of obstruction (and we have plenty of that evidenced here) but also of wisdom and intuition, humour and provocation, learning and discovery. There are certainly signs of the stern judgments and expert knowing that can creep into coaching but far less than I expected to see. Instead, we see coaches treating their self-talk almost as collaborative partners, playful voices and co-pilots!

We see self-talk appreciated for what it is – not just one thing but a multiplicity of things. Just as any conversation can be helpful or hindering, friendly or aggressive, useful or wasteful, so self-talk exhibits all these qualities too.

And, of course, now I reflect back on my original question to myself, “How do coaches manage self-talk?” I realise with a chuckle what a simplistic and misguided starting point this was. Over all my own years of coaching, I know that self-talk is not something that demands management to avoid disruption. Certainly there are times when it does but at others it's more like a duet or one of those moments in a

musical that two songs are sung simultaneously in a way that the two come together to create something new.

But before we absolve self-talk completely, let's ask this important question.

Even if we assume that self-talk can be many things and not always disruptive, is it useful, appropriate or fair to be having two conversations at once in the coaching space? Is my comparison to the musical a fair one or does the client really demand our full, unadulterated presence? Can a coach be truly present when self-talk is chundering away?

We often hear in coaching the idea of the coach being fully present and reaching, with the client, that still quiet place. There's an almost mystical quality given to this and a sense that somehow it's where the coach needs to be. That, if the coach and client don't find that still quiet place that they haven't truly arrived at most holy of holies in coaching.

Let's assume for a moment that this is as critical as it's often described. Then does chatter disrupt that? Are the two mutually exclusive or can the coaching and the coach move between these different states? Indeed, should the coach be striving for a constant state of the still, quiet mind? Or is that simply unrealistic?

I am reminded here of mindfulness and that an *attachment* to the still, quiet space is disrupting in itself. Reading the coaches' stories here, I am struck by how many of the coaches allow the self talk to surface and allow it to flow out again. In other words, there is a mindful acceptance of chatter that is an important lesson.

Striving officiously to battle it, to create the still, quiet space, to be something that you're not being in that moment seems a far more disruptive activity than simply letting it be. And thus my starting question of "managing self-talk" disappears.

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This was an unusual and somewhat scary experiment for the coaches to take part in – not so much for the self-reflection but to put themselves out there, admitting their fallibility and allowing others to see in to their internal world as they experience coaching.

And for that I want to thank my coach-authors.

I am always impressed by how the contributors to these books are able to reflect upon, and so eloquently capture, their fleeting thoughts and words in a way that so beautifully opens up the world of coaching to the reader. It takes courage to write a chapter for a book like this. It's easy for us as readers to make our own judgements about the coaches here, assuming that they should have more patience with the client, not think so critically or even give themselves some slack. Yet, what we are seeing here are very human reactions to the frustrations born in any relationship.

It is tempting and attractive to think of coaches as somehow different, more evolved: in control of their emotions; utterly non-judgemental; dispassionate; always present; able to see the bigger picture and so on. Yet what is so much more marvellous is to see that coaching happens between two very normal human beings who come together for a time and take a journey that conjures up thoughts, feelings and changes in both parties. This is the true magic of coaching. And it's what I love about coaches. They are normal people for whom, like anyone, self-talk rises to the surface at unexpected times, sometimes helpful sometimes not, yet who maintain a space focused on the growth, discovery and journey of another person.

What these chapter show me is that it's not how we *manage* that self-talk but what is learned from it that marks out the coach as a great explorer of all the relational information open to them.

Catherine Williams

"I am a qualified coach, I have my diploma, my practice client feedback is very good. I'm on top of the world. I am living my passion....

So why am I now so scared as I am getting ready to welcome my new client?

Simple - she is my first paying client! Will I be able to justify my fee? Will I be good enough? Why is she late? Oh no she's not late, my clock is fast. Stop panicking!"

My inner voice is chatting non-stop leaving me no room for constructive thoughts ahead of seeing my first paying client. She arrives....on time. We go in the room, I offer her some refreshment, I introduce myself and I go through the confidentiality, what coaching is about... It feels as if I am filling time, as if I am talking in slow motion, as if my inner self is trying to slow down the inevitable.... the session! It's all in my head of course. And then we start.

I want to know what brings her here, I am asking her a couple of questions to make her feel at ease, to build a rapport, to make her feel safe and get into the session. She looks at me, she says 'ok' and she starts.... I opened the floodgate, she can't stop, she speaks a mixture of broken English and her native language. After a couple of minutes tears appear in her eyes. 'What have I done? Why did I make her cry?.... stay calm, stay calm.... Do I let her cry? Do I bring the tissue box in? Do I speak now? Do I try to reframe the situation? HELP!!!'

My internal dialogue is raging on. I am the coach I have to remain focused. I decide to let her carry on until such time when I feel it is the right time to take a deep breath and explore. I didn't have to do that. She just stopped. I let a couple of seconds go by and I thanked her.

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I made no judgement on my client, I made a judgement on myself, on my apparent inability to control her tears or for that matter to have started her tears, still trying to figure out what I had said that might have prompted her tears.

Although from the outside I looked controlled, I was shaking inside. And then the strangest thing happened. She thanked me! I asked her what she wanted to thank me for. She simply responded 'for listening without interrupting me'. I then realised her perception was that I had created a space that gave her the opportunity she needed to flush out her demons in order to create her future. I had allowed her to do that whereas my own perception was that I let her carry on only because I felt helpless and not in control.

She felt safe. She trusted me. Without trust you're finished before you've even started. She was strong yet she was sad. She had let the negatives in her life take over everything positive she had achieved. 'How can I change her mindset?' 'She's not ready for time line therapy yet'.

I will always remember this session, it helps me visualise how distorted perception and judgement can be and in this instance how influential self-talk can be.

During our sessions, when I felt she was going back to her negative comfort zone I would ask her to relay the same story using more positive words. It was like a game. She liked the idea of a game. The effect was immediate and her face would light up. 'Hooray, I'm getting somewhere!'. 'Thank you self-talk. You've helped me this time. Well done'. When she struggled with the language she would tell me the word in her native Spanish and I gave her the English translation. I suggested to write a list of positive words in Spanish, find the English translation, learn those words, put them up in various visible places in her house and use them in abundance. She started to walk taller and she would use positive words more often. When she did, I complimented her. This wonderful lady really touched me.

With this client, my inner chatter was very active and all over the place. We can use our doubts as an excuse for not doing what we should be doing but if we give permission to our self talk to give ourselves a pet talk when we have doubts we can teach ourselves to get out of them. If I forget something at home when I set off in the morning, I have two choices. I can call myself a loser for forgetting something and then everything I do that day would turn sour or I can say to myself 'well done you've just remembered you forgot something' and feel good about it and the day will be positive.

Judgement and Intuition

Time for another client. I am looking forward to meeting him, I feel great.

He has a firm handshake, he is a confident city guy, looking for his next job, having been made redundant. He seems relaxed although a little formal. He tells me all about his achievements, his accolades, his promotions.

As I am listening my inner voice suddenly kicks in in a brutal manner.

- 'Cocky, yawn yawn yawn'. 'Tell me something I don't know' 'blah blah blah'

- 'Catherine Stop it, you are judging'

- 'Why should I stop? He is so full of himself. He is the perfect example of the city culture and why I left the city'

- 'How can you say that? You are a coach and because you worked in the city you will build excellent rapport with this client'

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It just took a couple of seconds for my inner chatter to have a full argument. I am judging, I am temporarily incapable of blocking everything else out.

How do I recover from this situation? 'Has he noticed I am bored?' 'No he's too busy talking about himself - Stop it (again).

It sounds like this first session was a complete disaster, in fact it was quite the opposite. I had asked the wrong question or had I? I allowed my client to talk about what he was looking for. His monologue made me realise that his career was his life and in doing so he had forgotten who the real person behind the career man was. He talked to me as he would to a headhunter. Serves me right, I asked the wrong question.

When he paused, I jumped in.... quickly! I thanked him and complimented him on his achievements. As I am talking my inner voice is saying to me 'I need to find out more about the man behind the mask' I asked him what his interests outside work were. He goes to the gym and plays squash. Where does he play? What division is he in? 'Yep, he's definitely competitive'. This small talk about squash was my tool to recover and reframe, and to formulate my next move to explore further. I felt there was a lot of bravado hiding something that could be key.

I learned he had been sent to boarding school abroad. A very smart young man he had been offered scholarship. However he saw it as abandonment. He was being sent away, he felt rejected by his parents. All he wanted was to be with his family. He worked incredibly hard to earn their love, he was longing for their love.

He was not having coaching to deal with his new unemployed status. The city life and status is a vehicle to get closer to his search for his parents' affection, he so desperately wants to find out why he was 'abandoned and rejected'. His cold mask is a barrier he set up to disguise his hurt and to not get hurt.

Intense and incredibly intelligent he realised he was not living his dream. During the course of the next couple of sessions we got closer. I suggested he talked to as many people about his dream, he would then know who would be in his team or out, he needs to surround himself with people who believe in him. Learn to visualise what his dream would look like when he got there, what it would smell like, what it would taste like. As he talked about his dream the energy shifted from cold to passion. The person in front of me was not the arrogant city big shot. He was authentic. He was animated. He talked so passionately about his dream that I felt it.

The mind can't tell the difference between something you vividly imagine with all your senses and the reality, if you do it all the time your subconscious mind starts getting conditioned and believes it is only a matter of time before you can reach your dream.

My initial chatter was totally inappropriate however it taught me a lot. It came a long way from the cocky bored internal chat to being on team 'Client' all the way. I got drawn into his story. I allowed myself to criticise my initial judgement in order to welcome my intuition back in the room.

Focus and Not in the Room

This client is a foreign language teacher. She is well travelled, she is a linguist. 'Excellent, we have a connection'. She loves teaching however teaching is not what she wants to do long term. She has a lot of interests outside teaching, including nutrition, wellbeing, reiki, martial arts. Teaching represents her vehicle to make her dream come true. 'Perfect. This is going to be easy, she's got it. She has a plan. Or has she?'

'What does she want from me?'

She wants coaching to help her build a method in her life. She needs 'a kick up the backside' (her words). She speaks fast, she is loud, she is showing high stress level. She can't focus on one thing for more than a

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split second. She jumps from one topic to another and back. I let her speak then I have to reframe her several times during a session.

'Am I reframing for her or for me? I can't concentrate on her every word. I am drifting. I'm daydreaming. I've never done martial arts. I wonder what it would be like to be a martial arts expert... what's this got to do with the session? I am not in the room. I have to neutralise this thought and get back in the room. I am not focusing on my client.' I am not helping her with a method at this stage.

Finally I can't help but ask what she gets from doing martial arts. It may seem like an odd question to ask, it is my way to get out of my chatter and get back in the room. It worked! She talks of her competitiveness. She can release her own frustrations and fears when she gets in the martial arts zone.

Fears? What are her fears? She fills her life with activities because she is scared to fail. There is no such thing as failure in my view. There are risk takings and results. Nobody laughs at anybody for trying.

In this instance my chatter allowed my thoughts to drift, yet I used it as a tool to get back in the room and explore the reasons behind her fears. This would be the catalyst to start building a method that would help her create her future and get closer to her dream.

My chatter

I enjoy having fun with my chatter. It is energetic, it has plenty of ideas, it is creative and playful. I get frustrated with it when it takes over the reality, when it starts being negative and judgemental because then I have two chatters going on when one tries to overtake the other onew and I have to get my positive chatter neutralise my negative chatter. It helps me with my self-doubt, with my intuition, with my focus. My chatter is my soul, it is very authentic, it has a wicked sense of humour and in all its colour and eccentricity it teaches me to grow my coaching skills.

Lina Hayek

I had an urge and I followed it. I hit the “return” key on my keyboard and the result of that action led me to contributing to this book. Several thoughts jostled for space in my mind. Initially I thought, “Why do I think I am capable of contributing to this Mind Chatter book?” and “Who am I to think that I’ll be able to contribute to some profound wisdom?”. And then I found myself going through my own notions of mind chatter.

The other side of me knows how this mental self-talk and I have a very special relationship history. The voice in my head can comfort, nurture, empower and torment me as I allow it to. I have found during my work with my clients that our mental chatter expresses similar fears. The common themes encompass thoughts such as, “I’m going to fail”, “I’m not good enough”, “I won’t ever finish/accomplish this task” and “I feel that I have a higher purpose to fulfil, but I don’t know what it is!” And the list can go on, and on.

I have been procrastinating over my contribution to this book for some time as I have been going through my own process of overcoming “exposure” issues. Being seen or being the centre of attention is not something I am comfortable with. The particular location, culture and environment of my developmental years may have played a role in this. Having spent time in societies where there’s no freedom of speech, where censorship is the order of the day, and where transgressions are penalised both for kicks and to “keep the troops in check”, I’ve learned to keep ideas to myself or to share them only with a select few “behind closed doors” in order to keep myself out of trouble and avoid causing “harm” to others. This way of being has resulted in “bats in the belfry” or a mind-chatter overload. Taking time out to review and process thoughts is a good thing, but prolonged periods of reflection without some sort of a sounding board can get out of hand... or just lonely.

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We are human beings; social animals – the need for psychological interaction and the exchange of ideas with others to enhance our personal development is paramount.

Caroline approached me ostensibly to work with her on her anxiety about doing presentations. However, there was a connection between this issue and the feelings of abandonment she felt from her father. I wish that I could have explored that issue further with her but she just didn't want to go there, so I didn't push her. As a coach I can only go where my clients are willing to go. There was obviously some old wounding there, and I could see that this may be negatively affecting varying areas of her life. I was concerned about his, but instead our sessions focused on the stress of the working culture she was part of, and the stress of having a first job as a contractor and hoping that she would be able to seal the deal for something more permanent within her work environment. We worked on developing tools that Caroline could use to calm her nerves during public speaking engagements and to comfort herself when faced with the unknown outcomes of whether she would stay or go with the company she worked for. I felt that it would have been more beneficial for Caroline if she'd been open to doing some deeper work rather than just skating around on the surface of the situation.

Mary's issue was existential: she wanted to find her purpose in life. Initially she came to me because she was finding her life situation stifling, and throughout the sessions we worked through different things that came up. The self-talk around her purpose was that she felt grateful for what she had but also felt that something was missing. She thought that it might be something to do with her job. She seemed unhappy with her job: she was working with children but they were little children and she wanted to work with some that were a little older. This was close to what she wanted to achieve but it was in a different domain and dynamic (working with kids, wanting to empower them). Her purpose and what she felt she was giving service to in terms of her talents and her gifts was to help young

disadvantaged kids, and she actually wanted to set up a project (out of the system that she was working in) and do something that hadn't been done before. We worked through the basics of what it was that she wanted and this seemed to make her feel better; she started to feel happier and things began to fall into place. This has led her to taking her vision further by obtaining training in developing and designing a program that she would like to launch in the future with the objective of empowering young disadvantaged children in society.

Mary had a strong longing to go back to Japan, where she once lived, and my mind-chatter led me to wonder whether she wanted to relocate because she didn't see herself living in the city she currently resides in for the rest of her life. I thought that would be something interesting to explore but we didn't have an opportunity to do so. If I'd had the chance I would have asked Mary whether her time living in Japan put a different spin on her life to living in the USA. Her Tokyo life experience was haunting her somehow despite us coming to the conclusion that in a different environment her curiosity in the world around her was triggered to explore and created that sense of within her. We found ways of how taking this element and applying it to her current environment by applying different tasks every week. It did help and bring back that sense of wonder and freshness but a part of me still wonders whether she would have experienced other changes and how that would potentially affect her.

In Adam's case, mind chatter played a part because he believed that he spoke to God and had undergone a spiritual awakening. He experienced oneness with the universal; he was in flow and he had managed to tap into a frequency where everything became effortless for him. This got to his head and he began to feel no need to go to university, or to work. He felt so connected yet, at the same time, he needed to detach himself from certain things around him. Eventually he told a tutor at his university about his experiences and the next thing he knew he was escorted out of his tutor's office and was obligated to be hospitalised and to take heavy medication.

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Before the incident of having been admitted to the psychiatric ward, Adam felt as though he was dancing to the rhythm of life; afterwards he felt as though he'd missed a beat and had got left behind by the marching band. His grades began to slip and he started to feel guilty for the thoughts he was having. He started to question other aspects of his life and to doubt himself. The objective was to get him back on track to completing his course, attending classes and handing in the work that was required of him. We went through a process of reverse engineering in terms of understanding study habits and what would be the possible contributing factors that might get him off track.

In general he noticed that his motivation for studying went down and he resented having to go to university because he felt as though it was something only his parents wanted. I reframed this idea, helping Adam to see the opportunity to study as a "gift" from his parents: something that would ultimately enable him to have a "better" life - a life with more opportunities. There were different facets to his situation: Adam was in his early twenties, studying at university and meeting girls. His mind-chatter was that of growing up (and all that comes with it). To me it just seemed as though he had a severe case of "growing pains".

I enjoy working with my clients and helping them to confront their fears, their particular bogey man, their baggage, block or whatever name you like to call it. This fear is the controlling puppetmaster of self-sabotage and it forces you to remain in your comfort zone, preventing you from moving forward in your life. We've all been there in some form or another and sharing the journey with my clients has unlocked my own colourful, springy Jack-in-the-Box of skeletons of the past from my own mental closet. Perhaps I thought all that was gone, over and done with, dealt with. Apparently, not completely. "Jack" is back and he's armed with a subliminal vengeance sprinkled with denial just to tickle your psyche with. As a coach I feel I am on two journeys: firstly, there is the experience with my client; secondly, there is my own experience. Coaching has unearthed residual traumas that result

from past events that were shelved in a corner of the mind, way past their expiry dates. Witnessing the realisation of my clients that their self-talk is actually negative and no longer serves them is a milestone in itself, and the first step in their journey of transformation.

I feel that my personal self-awareness has been heightened as a result of having guided my clients through the forest of their mind, helping them to explore their innate landscape and to understand their mental vernacular. I have a renewed enthusiasm for helping others to take action to recognise who they really are and what environment and conditions will best enable them to evolve via the power of self-awareness. It is inscribed on the temple of Delphi, “know thyself”, and the entire journey of coaching and understanding our mental chatter encompasses this ethos.

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Khadi Mansaray

My inner voice is very assertive and not always kind but thankfully it is mostly positive and has a wicked sense of humor. It is my best champion but also my harshest critic. It can be loving and annoying but only acts in my best interests and I trust it and love it. Whether its being good bad or ugly I know its on my side. My inner chatter reflects the various roles I play in life but most importantly how I see myself. It keeps me authentic. I learnt early in coaching that managing my state was crucial to get the best for my clients.

In those early days, my chatter was all about confidence as a coach. Was I sticking to the rules, was I doing things properly? had I asked the right questions? And who was I to be asking all these questions anyway? I did a lot of self analysis and addressed whatever made me uncomfortable, my confidence as coach grew and I found answers to the questions and challenged back.

'The only rule is getting the best for the client'

'What could be wrong about the questions?'

'Who was I to ask? Well I'm a coach and coaches ask questions'

Interestingly as I became more confident as a coach other stuff began to creep in. My view of the world, my experience and my values. I can be quite judgmental mostly of myself but sometimes of others. I sometimes set standards so high and have expectations so grand that I get paralysed before even starting and then go on to beat myself for not living up to them. But my inner voice has evolved with me and when I start getting lofty ideas it whispers. 'You know you're not going to do that'. Several times when I am so eager to help and I'm all set to over promise, it prompts me to be a bit more realistic. I am intuitive and judging so it sometimes let rip.

'Liar liar pants on fire!'

'Lazy sod, just do something' and

'If I can do it so can you'

These are common themes. Thankfully my inner voice is also kind and reminds me I became a coach to help people so 'liar liar' is most likely to be followed by 'but why would they lie?' and 'If I can do it' by 'well they're not you lady' and 'Lazy sod? Look who's talking?'. If I find myself drifting and not focusing on the client I get a stern 'Get over yourself its not about you'.

Ironically it was the NLP presupposition that I initially struggled the most to accept that eventually provided the solution to managing my chatter when coaching.

Every behavior has a positive intention

Preparation

By the time I started working on this project I had already done Animas' Personal Transformation and NLP coaching courses. I'd learnt enough of myself to know what works and had a range of tools to pick from. As a business coach the desired outcomes for my clients are usually business specific but the skills in other coaching courses have come quite handy. I've learnt to overcome being judgmental by trusting that my clients have the solutions to their problems and that everything they do has a positive intention for them. I just need to find that positive intention and everything would fall into place. In addition to any research or analysis I may need to do for my clients I have at least fifteen minutes to prepare for a session. I use this time to plan the framework and get into the right state. The better my state the more constructive my inner voice is likely to be.

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Client A

Client A was a former personal transformation practice client, who needed help setting up her business. When I first started coaching her I was new coach and not as confident as I am now. She was unhappy in her job and although she loved the work she didn't feel supported and appreciated by her boss and they had a difficult relationship. As we explored her problems, I encouraged her to think about what it was she really wanted and how she was going to achieve it. My inner voice was very supportive with her and I was naturally empathic. The challenge came when she took some bold steps and I had to confront my overwhelming sense of responsibility. She told me she had handed in her resignation and my inner voice screamed out

'What have you done?'

'What if she doesn't get another job?'

'You may have ruined her life'

I had experienced the transformational effect of coaching and all my self doubts kicked in. I'm also very rational so my voice came up with the answers to reassure me. Of course I had only facilitated the process, and she had done what was best for her. Client A made some very bold changes in her life and moved to China. Months later she contacted me to help as she set up her business, by this time I was a business coach and knew I could help her. We have excellent rapport and trust. I loved her enthusiasm and looked forward to the sessions. As we set of clarifying her vision and purpose my inner voice was totally focused on her and in tune with her needs. Each session evolved according to what felt right.

Client A inspired me and many times during sessions as we explored possibilities and options my inner voice would go. 'I should try that too'

Client A got clarity on her a purpose and vision, has embarked on a joint venture with an organisation with similar interest we are still working towards her big launch.

Client B

Client B needed help with her business. She had invested quite a bit on her business but had made very little progress and was having doubts. She was feeling overwhelmed and rather despondent about it all. It was very important for this client to regain her passion and believe in herself once more. A few easy tasks were to make a world of difference once the passion came back but that needed to be established first. I had a good rapport with this client and admired her dedication and discipline.

My inner voice was very nurturing towards her and constantly urged me to reaffirm the positive steps she was taking. 'She needs encouragement and support', it would say.

She regained her passion whilst we worked on her purpose and vision and we went on to make radical changes to her business strategy. The advantage of business coaching is that unlike other forms of coaching you can give straight up business advice. What needed to be sorted was glaringly obvious and my inner voice gave a curt instruction 'Sort it out now'. As a result she was able to put an end to the unnecessary expenses that were draining her business and was inspired again.

Client C

This chapter will be incomplete without an account of when it all went wrong. It was during the Olympics and I had scheduled my sessions around the events I wanted to watch. Client C wanted to reschedule a session to the day of the 100m mens final. Of course I wanted to see Usain Bolt. My inner voice was screaming not to book it but I convinced my self that it would be an opportunity to improve time management with this client. During this period I was also focused on building up practice hours for NLP so I agreed to do the session on that day. My inner voice kept shouting. 'You shouldn't be doing this'. The client was a few minutes late and the voice screamed again 'Serves you right

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Khadi' At some point it said ' What the hell does she want from me?'. Shocking? I know. I was so concerned that I was going to miss the historical race that I simply couldn't focus on the client, that added to the fact that what I really wanted was NLP practice I completely failed to see that what the client really needed was simple classic coaching.

'What do you want?'

'Whats stopping you?'

I hurried through the session, wrapped it up on time and went to watch Usain Bolt feeling a bit rattled. Client A was kind enough to give me feedback but not surprisingly never came back for more. That was a shame because until then we had developed a very good rapport and I should have been honest enough to say I can't coach on that day as I wanted to watch the Olympics. It remains my worst coaching session and but I learnt a lot from it and most importantly forgiven myself for it. It is my very own bad example of how NOT to coach.

Being congruent was important in coaching.

My Learning

Every action has a positive intention and this includes every uttering from my inner voice. I've learnt that I give my best when I've prepared well, and am feeling positive. It is important for me to like my clients and not to judge them. I need to be congruent and completely focused on them. The wonderful conversations I have with myself challenge me and leave me no choice but to be honest and that makes me a better coach each day. The chatter is a great buddy.

Paul Brown

When I heard about the Chatter project in February 2013 I was intrigued and keen to take part but, at that early stage, I couldn't have predicted how it would all unfold.

The opportunity arrived at a good time - my interest in Eastern philosophies (the practices of meditation and mindfulness in particular) was gaining momentum and I was curious (always a great mindset for coaching) to see how it would all fit together. Was my self-talk a good or a bad thing or, as is the case with many things in life, would it be more about context?

Sitting down for the first session of the project I felt usually self-conscious. This wasn't Mrs J's first session with me, and I was noticing some chatter before we'd even sat down! Would she notice anything different? Did I feel like I was hiding something from her? Would knowing I would be recording my thoughts after the session cause them to multiply during it?

As it turned out, the session went extremely well. I felt like knowing I would be reflecting on my chatter afterwards kept it to a minimum during the session. If my chatter was a dog, he seemed happy to keep the noise down in the knowledge that there would be 'walkies' (or 'talkies' if you prefer!) afterwards. For me too it seemed a pretty good deal had been struck, and a sense that the level of cooperation would increase over time.

I like to prepare properly before every client session, arriving in plenty of time plus performing some deep breathing and grounding exercises. It made sense, therefore, to show the Chatter project the same level of respect. I ensured I wasn't having to rush off afterwards, to give myself the opportunity to recall everything that had come up. To be honest

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(& considering I felt I was making good progress with my meditation) I really wasn't expecting to have a lot to write....so when it did I felt a sense of surprise bordering on disappointment, that I hadn't made as much progress as I thought. Or perhaps meditating for half an hour a day wasn't spilling out into the rest of the day when I had my eyes open?

A lot is said about coaching being a non-judgemental process and this, I had always assumed, referred to the attitude towards the client. Should non-judgement of BOTH parties be highlighted? The project reaffirmed in my mind my expectations: the fact that while judgement of my clients was minimal, I was unpleasantly surprised how much chatter there was related to myself and my 'performance'. Particularly in this first session with Mrs J, there seemed a constant need to ask the most powerful question or introduce the most appropriate tool and at just the right time. I wondered too whose benefit this was really for - hers or mine? Each 'good' intervention seemed to be met by an inner pat on the back, while a 'bad' one criticised. This in itself made me question these labels - who can really judge these things? Coaching is a process where feedback and progress are often not immediately available (in fact the latter often may occur between sessions rather than during) - instead of expecting each session to conclude with the client performing cartwheels of joy, this project allowed me to trust the process even more. Not only that but as I started to become more and more present (again the dog keeping the noise down during the session, knowing he would get his time afterwards), I was able to notice the subtleties a lot more. Those 'light bulb' moments which, with the volume of self-talk turned down, become more noticeable - those brief and subtle instances where, with a change in physiology or tone of voice, you just 'know' progress is being made.

As I sat scribing my reflections, particularly the chatter related to myself, what started as a brief trickle almost turned into a flood. On the one hand I was pleased that I would have enough material for my

chapter from one session alone, but quite shocked just how much of it there was! As I reflected on the reflections (if you will) a different and more positive perspective came to light. If self-talk during a client session could be regarded as a felony, could I not instead view the increased 'crime figures' as a good thing – that they were now being detected and something done about them?

After this initial flood, I certainly noticed the amount of self-talk return more and more to a trickle in subsequent sessions. It was like my post-session reflections were becoming integrated into the overall coaching process, rather than artificially bolted onto the end. I also strongly suspect that the theory behind my meditative practice was providing me with a guiding light as I explored the rooms of my self-talk. One of the things that I liked about the way the project was introduced was its openness, non-prescriptiveness and the fact that it wasn't jumping to any conclusions by not labelling chatter as being a negative (or positive for that matter) thing. Until it came along, I hadn't properly connected my coaching work with my meditation. In meditation I was learning, rather than resisting thoughts, to allow them to arise. The key, it seems, is neither to resist nor allow them to take your full attention but rather somewhere in the middle: to allow them to be. Inspired by this realisation, I chose not to label my chatter as a good or a bad thing. By doing so, I no longer felt the need to resist my thoughts and this seemed to greatly reduce their frequency. In terms of my ability to be present for the client during a session, I strongly suspected that it wasn't so much the chatter but rather the chatter about the chatter that caused the real noise. It's the self-talk about the self-talk that can really get in the way.

My first session (my third of this project) with Mr P was really interesting. Beforehand I was really curious to learn what effect it being a 'first session' would have on the self-talk – I had (naively as it turned out) assumed there would be no difference. Whilst the only judgement I seemed to make of him was that he was physically not

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what I was expecting based on our initial phone conversation (and I was pretty sure this didn't 'leak out' and wasn't picked up by Mr P), far more 'noise' seemed to come from what I was wondering he was thinking - mainly about me (was he wondering how much MY physical appearance matched my telephone voice?), but also the room and the process. On one occasion, I noticed one piece of chatter had turned into another but a 'runaway train' didn't get chance to develop. I wonder if at some point in the past if it had and was thankful that I hadn't started the project with a first session with a client. As well as a greater volume, another thing I noticed was the nature of the self-talk. It was more concerned with the need to deliver an excellent (or even perfect?) service and ensure the client was getting good value for money. As these thoughts didn't seem to go away as quickly as the others, for the only time in the project I elected to make a written note of them during the session itself. Not only did this physical act make the difference by allowing these thoughts to subside, I was able to give them proper attention afterwards. Rather than being a 'bad' thing (and again to be resisted), they were in fact incredibly useful - I don't want to be a coach who doesn't deliver excellent value. Again, however, running these thoughts in my mind has a time and a place and during the session itself (particularly with a new client) certainly isn't it!

It was only when my contribution to the project was reaching conclusion that I was able to reflect on the sessions as a whole, rather than individually. By taking a step back, a really interesting awareness began to develop. As I have already mentioned, observing my chatter without judgement and allowing it to be there really seemed to help deal with it. But then something else seemed to be emerging, which I can only describe as 'intuition'. As my need to 'ask a powerful' question began to subside, I found myself more and more asking the right question at the right time as well as using silences in a more profound way than I could ever remember. The less I tried the more intuitive I became and it was almost like something outside of (or

possibly deeper inside) myself starting shining through! My goodness, I thought, there seemed to be a lot more ego previously involved than I first realised! Whatever was going on, the thing that mattered most was that the later sessions seemed to have more power – with clients remarking on this in a positive way. The only way I can describe it is that a subtler, quieter, more creative voice (one with an entirely different feel and flavour) was finally able to be heard now the volume of the ‘traditional’ chatter has subsided. Fascinating indeed!

As part of this project, I wanted to put myself in the shoes of my clients and try to appreciate what their views might be around their coach having internal dialogue. I concluded that I would want my coach to be as present as possible for the hour we spent together, but also to be human and understand that self-talk would naturally arise. I wondered also if their own self-talk might be so noisy that part of the coaching process is spending time in the company of someone who has greater mastery off their own inner dialogue. The analogy that sprang to mind was a piece of wood that lies next to one already burning will in time itself burn as strongly as the first. So, whilst a coach might not be expected to have complete mastery of internal dialogue, should there be some kind of commitment to being on a path with that destination in mind? To what extent do we as coaches feel our profession is all about the tools and techniques? Some of the most powerful sessions I’ve been involved in (both as coach and client) have been those where no tools have been used at all – there was just great use of rapport, presence, silence and reflective listening.

When I embarked on this project I really had no idea what a journey it would take me on – one that would provide me with a torch to bring awareness to my own self-talk. Whenever light falls on previously unexplored areas for the first time, we never know quite what we will find there. I was initially surprised at what I found but then realised that this was having an impact whether I was aware of it or not. As coaches are we only too keen to rush in exploring the client’s landscape

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whilst being unwilling to explore our own? I wonder what kind of message that might send out – not one in words but perhaps all the more powerful for that very reason? Beware the chef who doesn't eat his or her own food! What a great exercise for bringing my head out of the sand, one that has already become an integrated part of every coaching session. How useful self-talk actually is – it's what allows us to develop and grow as coaches. Like most things though it needs to be done at the right time – during a session when we need to be open to what's going on around us certainly isn't it. I'm sure this is applicable across a whole range of professions – what effect a moment's excessive chatter on a prize fighter or a football referee needing to make the right decision in front of 50,000 fanatical spectators? My inner dog, once it was trained into knowing it would get its 'talkies' at the end of the session, really allowed a deeper intuition to shine through. It didn't really need an awful lot of training either!

Margaret Yates

Good coaching involves good listening and not letting my mind wander whilst my client is telling me all the reasons why she can't get another job. But that's exactly what I did on this occasion. We were half way through our coaching programme, and my client was no further forward. In fact, I wasn't sure why she was paying me for the sessions when she was clearly determined not to make any headway.

The day had started badly for me. My train was delayed due to there being a cow on the line. The tube was cancelled due to there being a body on the line and the bus, well I won't go into what happened with the bus, so I was way behind my schedule. I called my client to explain the delays, but her phone went to voicemail. Thinking that she would be sat there waiting, I practically ran to our meeting place and arrived in a right state. It was very hot, I was very thirsty, and as for running, well I haven't done that in a long time and I was beginning to resent the fact that I would have to sit here for an hour and listen to her wingeing.

I looked around the cafe to find that she hadn't arrived yet. That was good. I just collapsed into a chair. I had time to sort myself out, get a drink and become calm again. But as the minutes ticked by and she didn't arrive I found myself getting more and more resentful. I had other clients booked who were really making progress and I was eager to move on to them. Eventually, she waltzed in to the cafe, looking like she didn't have a care in the world, and after getting herself a drink, came over and sat down.

I said I was sorry I was late and had tried to call her and explained the problems with the trains. Apparently she had the same problem on the tube too, which was probably why I couldn't get through to her. She said she had received my email confirming the points we

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had discussed at the last session and.....here it comes, I thought, she's going to say that she hasn't done any of the stuff we agreed she would. Her values just aren't aligned with what she thinks she wants and she just isn't prepared to do the basic foundation work so that we can build on it. In fact I think she probably doesn't really want to change her career but just feels she should get a better job as all her peers are doing just that and she is getting left behind. How am I going to deal with this? We can't go through another session not getting anywhere. Is there another model I could use? She was talking - I could hear her talking, but my mind was drifting off to the lovely guy I was going to meet later...I was thinking about my last session with him and how well that had gone. Although his job was redundant, at the age of 62, he was really embracing his situation and working hard to move towards his goal.... but hey what was I doing? This lady was my client, she was paying me for my time and deserved my full attention for the hour. I had to stop this - judging her and not listening to her. I needed to come back to the present. I could still hear her talking..... was she wingeing yet again that she just couldn't get her CV right?

Sometimes, particularly during the early sessions, clients need to open up and be free to talk. This can involve some very active listening for long periods. Usually, if I find I am drifting during a long listening session, or start feeling judgmental about what a client is telling me, I have mechanisms that I have devised to bring me straight back on course. I mentally tell myself to put judgments aside whilst I am with that client. I picture my mind sending those judgments out and away from me to my left (sometimes they have little wings!) and usually have no problem reverting back to the client. However, the stress of the journey and the heat of the cafe was making me feel drowsy..... I could just feel my eyes about to close when I was suddenly drawn back to the present... my client's tone had changed, it had a much more positive ring to it and she was actually thanking me..... thanking me?

What was she thanking me for? Oh great. What had I missed? My heart started beating faster, I was getting sweaty palms, all this happening in a split second and I am ready for flight.... I took a sip of my drink and started to say I was sorry....but she butted in and said that there was no need for me to be sorry at all. In fact, if it hadn't been for me, she might have gone on to get a job that she really didn't want.

Now she had my undivided attention. What was this about? I started to really listen now and as she continued, began to understand what she meant. When she first came to me, she really believed that she wanted to change her career. She felt that so many other people were leaving the company that she ought to as well. Her friends were all telling her she should move on and that the place was a crap place to work and she had believed them. Now here's the thing....by having the weekly sessions with me, she had now been able to overcome what other people were telling her to do and she was telling me that she had decided to stay in her job after all. That's not to say that she might not want a career change in the future, but at this stage, she said I had helped her to realise that actually she was happy doing what she was doing and she was thanking me for helping her realise that.

A huge sense of relief washed over me inside, and I was genuinely happy for my client. I was so pleased to know that she had got something from the sessions when I thought we weren't actually getting anywhere. Sometimes this happens in coaching though, so I shouldn't be surprised really. On many occasions I have started off on a certain route with a client only to bear off to the right or left where they have found something that is much more their thing than the original goal itself. Its the decision to want to make a change in their lives thats the key. However, on this occasion it seemed as if she was going to stay "stuck" and not move along the route at all.

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My pleasure was short lived as I started to feel really guilty about all the internal chatter that was going on in my mind whilst she was telling me the good news. How serious was that? As far as I was aware, she hadn't noticed. But what if she had? Should I 'fess up and make a clean breast of it? However, as I caught sight of the clock, I saw it could only have been at the most a couple of minutes. That in itself was amazing as I felt as if I had drifted for ages. There was no recognition from her that she noticed I wasn't listening. Her tone was happy, she was relaxed and chatting away about her work. We finished the session, agreeing to meet again in a couple of weeks, when she would begin to think about how to improve her work life, now she felt comfortable staying. She gave me a big hug and left.

I was still feeling guilty though that I had judged her and had not given her my full attention for a spell. I sat there for a bit and thought about what I could do to overcome that. Clearly it had not affected my client in any way. We had parted on good terms and had another meeting booked. So the only person it was affecting was me. So how should I deal with this now, and for the future? I was really annoyed with myself because it shouldn't have happened. Then I got to thinking how I should deal with the guilt. People do make mistakes I thought and its recognising the mistake and dealing with it effectively that's the key. The main thing was that it hadn't affected my client.

I then mused where the guilt was coming from. Why was I feeling guilty? I realised that by drifting off and being judgmental, I had compromised my standard of conduct to be present for my client. I had not expected this to happen and it had really jolted my sense of responsibility. As a result of not being true to my standards, I was beating myself up.

Was it a good thing or a bad thing to feel guilty? I thought about that some more and decided it was a good thing because it meant I had acknowledged to myself that this session had not lived up to my track record and clearly there was a lesson to be learned.

Ok, now I had decided to acknowledge the guilt as a good thing, what should I do next? Should I hang on to it as a reminder, or should I let it go? I decided if I hung on to it, then instead of the positive outcome of a lesson learned, it would be with me at every future coaching session, and would no doubt affect the quality of those sessions. That would not be helpful.

I believed the best way to deal with the guilt was to acknowledge it learn from it and then let it go the same way as the judgmental thoughts I had earlier, and let it be a lesson for the future. Although I can't say for certain that it won't happen again, trains being trains, I now know that it can happen and will be much more aware of how personal issues can affect me and to deal with them before a meeting with a client in the future.

Erika Scarth

“I know we can all be like swans, gliding calmly and purposefully on the water while frantically paddling below, struggling to find our next question.” This comment on a coaching training course struck me like a thunderbolt. My coaching sessions were plagued with the question of how exactly I would facilitate awakening in an individual. A challenge to be sure, especially when my first client appeared with an outstanding request: “I’m lonely and not happy. I want to be happy.”

This client - a natural extrovert - presented herself as light-hearted, which was a stark contrast to how she described her situation and her motivation for seeking a coach. The nature of the original statement meant there were a range of paths to explore and work through. Over the first few sessions, I found that these paths were not as independent as I had believed and as we investigated topics surrounding careers we stumbled over confidence and sociability, money, loss, negative self-thoughts and, strongest of all, relationships. Each week we touched on a different aspect of what seemed to me to be a web of interconnected mental and emotional phenomena and I found it difficult to find the foundation, the root, of this magnificent structure that seemed to be causing so much suffering.

Each week she returned enthusiastically even though I felt little excitement about the progress of the work, which I experienced as slow and challenged by walls I was finding very difficult to overcome. I think it is fair to say at this point that I had clearly forgotten this was my first client. Each week we picked up where the client had been the previous week and what had come up for them during the days since our last session. I expected there to be some considered thought over the week between the sessions and little else.

One week this changed. On the fifth week since we began working together our conversation began and there was a marked difference in my client. Her voice, usually calm and interested had a distinctly excitable tone and as she spoke of her week her voice became more enthusiastic. Although in the previous session we had not set any specific goals she had mentioned various projects that she had lost interest in and wanted to complete, and she explained that she had made significant progress in these chosen areas.

She also told of how she had taken the initiative to seek new methods of working towards the happiness she craved and enthusiastically described a passion that had been slowly developing over the past few months and was suddenly flourishing. By the end of the session she described having a “permanent smile”. I was overjoyed... more than that, I was astounded. In the space of a week her world had shifted magnificently and it had all been her doing; in the space of a week her internal self had taken the reins and she had leapt forwards in her emotional and mental world, which had a rippling effect on how she now conducted herself and what she achieved. Based on the stories of others and my own experience I was aware of a client’s active engagement with the material discussed in a therapeutic session, yet I had never considered it to be as deep, as meaningful nor as powerful as this client had experienced and I was hit with the overwhelming realisation that I had been underestimating the client’s inner potential for change. This client had shown how wrong that idea was and how, with just a little direct external assistance, we can considerably alter our own world.

What I also learnt after each session was that my feelings regarding a session were not representative of how my client interpreted the session. This would seem to be an obvious point and each session brought me closer to this realization; one session in particular shook this into perspective. The first session with a new client had been smooth and effortless. She was energetic, talkative and responsive as

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we talked about her difficulties with a colleague. The energy of the second session lay in another dimension; as she slouched in her chair I wondered if and how we would leave what felt like a perfect cycle of questions with the same responses. By the end of the session I felt the little energy from the start had been blown away and I was left disheartened, fearing her judgement regarding my coaching; I was left questioning my own abilities as a coach and wondering if and how these would be developed. I thought: Will I ever reach a point where I'm not searching for questions, when I instantly know what to do with the information I've been given?

The second session had left me on edge and I was afraid that our third session would be just as futile as the second. She sat in front of me looking a little more upbeat than the previous week and smiled brightly: well, at least she's still here. As we started the session and I asked how she had been she said, "You know, something you asked really struck me; that last question... I was left thinking about it all week!" I was astounded because to me there had been nothing extraordinary about the question. I hadn't planned or read into anything she had said. It hadn't been a typical coaching question nor had it been complex and structured - it had simply been an automatic response, drawing on her own words.

This experience was uplifting and my confidence grew. The third session flowed as smoothly as the first and I was left with two realisations. Firstly, I had understood the meaning of the phrase 'keep it short and simple'; this experience had shown what all the lead-coaches in the field had said, that sometimes the simplest questions can be the most powerful, the most thought-provoking and can encourage the most inner-change. Secondly, I was struck by how differently my client and I had both reflected on the session. For me it had been a source of distress, questioning, and even embarrassment; for my client it had been prompting, giving her insight and access to an understanding of herself that she hadn't even considered.

Time passed and each session brought with it a jewel of knowledge about my clients, an awareness of some aspect of myself, or a greater understanding of coaching. As I spoke to numerous coaches throughout my training I soon found a theme running through these conversations: time and cancellations. Within this theme I found my next great teaching.

“I’m so sorry, I completely forgot about our session!” My client rapidly tried to explain the cause of this memory-lapse with numerous extravagant excuses. The first time it slips by as something that happens: “It’s absolutely fine, we’ll talk next week. I hope the builders stop pulling your walls apart and the kitchen stops flooding...” However it seemed that this was becoming a regular occurrence as the following week we experienced a similar hurdle and I was left thinking: if you knew you weren’t going to make it, it would have been nice for you to let me know. At the same time I questioned: what is my responsibility in this situation. The coaching process, as with all therapies, is a dynamic interaction between coach and client; as much as clients may be forgetful and unexpected events may arise that result in cancellations, I feel it is necessary for a coach to explore his/her own being to clear any subconscious barriers that may be keeping clients at bay. The question remaining was: where is this boundary of responsibility? Where is it my ‘stuff’ coming into play and where is it your ‘stuff’? I had spoken to fellow coaches who took an altogether different approach: “I’m fed up! This week I’ve had so many people cancelling and it’s wasting my time. This is their session and they should be committed and dedicated!” If this had been my situation I most certainly would have acknowledged that something I was doing was pushing clients away. However, after just two cancellations by the same client while all other clients seemed content, I was really left questioning whether this was an issue of mine or an issue of theirs. After much contemplation, reflection, talking to other coaches, observation of their behaviour and words and those of other clients, I reached the conclusion that it probably wasn’t a barrier of mine.

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However, I was still left with the niggling question of where the responsibility lay regarding the client's growth and advancement. "Ultimately, it's the client's responsibility to change," echoed through the class and featured in every conversation where a coach presented a dilemma, such as, "he doesn't follow through with his tasks". On the other hand, there was talk of "a good coach" (verses a not-so-good coach), implying the client's success in moving forward was greatly contributed by the coach providing the space, the safety, the security, and the questions, that prompt the client to see things from alternative perspectives. After weeks of being wrapped up in a cocoon of it's their responsibility to change, but it's my questioning... but it's them...but it's me... I agreed to hold a table to discuss the matter with others at a practice Open Space Technology table on a training weekend. Here for the first time the question was discussed openly, out loud, with coaches presenting their coaching issues and everyone reflecting on where the responsibility lay - "he says he'll do something and then he doesn't", "she's always late to the session", "we seem to be going round in circles and I don't know what else to ask". My head was left spinning with more phrases, thoughts and ideas than before. At the end of the discussion one coach asked me a single question: how much do you trust the coaching process?

The answer was obvious. She smiled at me, knowing the impact of a question that I'd heard yet had never been asked. My mouth fell open as I stammered, trying desperately to say "a lot!" while my body, my heart, said: not at all. My thoughts turned to exactly what I thought the coaching process was: listening, observing, identifying key points, reflecting back words, gestures, thoughts, and questioning. That seems easy enough. Yet somehow: there must be more to it than that, there needs to be more. They need to have an "ah ha!" moment, a "wow!" bright lights and fireworks. Or do they...? In that moment, memories of my own coaching sessions flowed into consciousness and it seemed that the process alone, just having the time to reflect on questions never considered before was what had led to the most change. Am I making this more complicated than it needs to be?

That evening I sat with a throbbing headache, a build-up of tension as I waited in anticipation for another coaching session to begin. Once again plagued by the fear that by the end of the session the client would say “Yes... that was ok...”, rather than “Wow! Yes that was amazing,” I recalled the question asked earlier in the day: how much do you trust the coaching process? It’s a process, it’s the time and the space, and it’s an exploration of one’s thoughts and feelings. That, in itself, is the catalyst for change. The more I considered the question, the calmer I felt, the more my muscles relaxed and the weaker the headache became. As usual this client greeted me cheerfully, a smile across her face and a strong resounding dedication to the sessions. Throughout the session I experienced much the same as normal, yet there was a very quiet confidence somewhere deep down, a calmness that hadn’t existed previously. As we moved away from the general issues we had been working on in previous weeks, I wondered how to approach a new issue that had arisen, one that I considered more challenging and unfamiliar. Repetitive thoughts swam through my mind, fears of a half-hearted session where nothing was really achieved. How can I deal with this intangible issue? How can you help with loneliness? People have tried everything and still feel lonely so what do I do? How will I develop as a coach if I’m stuck with this everyday issue? Maybe I’ll never develop as a coach! - No. Focus, Erika. How much do you trust the coaching process? Re-asking the question was soothing and in turn, focus shifted back to the client and less on my own insecurities, directing attention on each word, the way it had been pronounced, each hesitation and pause, each silence. Suddenly, it clicked. A fleeting phrase embedded in the length of a sentence, falling from her tongue as smoothly as satin: “my other half”. Okay. I gave an inaudible sigh of relief and smiled internally. We were off - questioning, exploring this notion of “the other half” and her own wholeness.

From both view points, client and coach, the session was awakening. She had gained an idea that it was possible to be more than just ‘half’ a person and I had gained an insight into a phrase that fascinated me. However, as the session came to a close I began

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to wonder: what if she hadn't used such a strong trigger word? How would I have dealt with it then? Through pondering, other courses came to mind and one in particular: "just listen," the trainer had said, "Everyone uses trigger words, which give you an insight into their world. It's just a case of listening and with more practice these become easier to identify. Just listen."

In time I've learnt that the coaching process is far simpler than we, or I, sometimes make it out to be. Space and safety, as we are so often told, are powerful tools that I had undervalued. The client's internal processing, the extent to which one changes from week-to-week, even day-to-day, is also something I had underestimated, as well as the strength of the simplest of questions. With a running theme of undervaluing and underestimation, I wonder if I am also underestimating myself, my abilities, my capabilities and my future life as a professional coach. With each session that passes, I feel this to be more and more the case.

Maxine McLeary-Jones

It's funny how much you can learn about yourself when you really listen to your innermost thoughts and the dialogue from that silent voice within. Sometimes the most poignant learning comes from some of the most fleeting conversations, unbridled observations, mind mutterings and whispers that take place inside yourself.

Could it be that this internal self-talk presents the one true place to say what you really want to say, think what you really want to think and be your very own fountain of knowledge, encompassing your true authentic self?

In the coaching context, I believe it makes perfect sense to acknowledge the internal space as a legitimate and necessary arena for engaging with a client, in a way that facilitates a complete openness and honesty during a coaching session. Could it be that without it, you are merely responding on a surface level, without that deeper acknowledgement and processing of the issues that surface during each individual coaching scenario, intertwined with your own human condition?

Before embarking on an exploration of my voice or 'chatter' and how it manifests within my coaching, I did wonder how honest I could really be about what actually comes up for me. Throughout my life, my thoughts and inner voice have been the one constant quality I have felt I could rely on in terms of it: (1) always being there and providing an overriding source of guidance, and (2) always being the vehicle for me to speak my truth as I see it. So, what if the subject matter was embarrassing to me or maybe people simply wouldn't understand my train of thought? What impression would I be giving people?

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For me, my inner voice is closely linked to my intuition and I know if I have a feeling about something, it will be backed up with some correlation in my inner voice. So for example, if I get a sense that someone is telling me lies, my inner voice will state the fact that I feel I am being presented with dishonesty. Phrases like “you liar”, “really?” and “why are you lying?” may come to mind, with me not necessarily addressing or communicating that chatter with the person in question. Of course if I felt it was appropriate, I might choose to address some of my thoughts and feelings about the situation, but would do so in a way that was tactful and constructive, without the rawness and blunt honesty of my initial inner response.

I know that my self-talk allows me the freedom to express a full spectrum of thoughts, feelings and emotions in a way that I would not normally reveal to others, probably with a great deal of effort added to hide it in situations where it I feel it would not be particularly conducive or is potentially damaging to the situation.

Take for example Eleanor who came to me wanting to work on confidence issues.

Eleanor

Eleanor is a middle aged woman who feels that people form negative judgements about her because of her large size, ethnicity and manner of speaking.

I allow her the space to talk freely about her feelings and she expresses her deep distress about her situation. I am genuinely touched by her openness in sharing her story and how she is being affected by her beliefs about what people think about her. At one point she mentions her appearance and how it might be contributing to some of the problems she is experiencing. My inner voice kicks in at this point and I find myself agreeing with her sentiment that she did indeed look a bit shabby and could smarten up a bit.

Can you imagine what would have been if I had revealed my self-talk at this point?!

I am mindful that I need to maintain professionalism and I continue to listen attentively, with both a genuine and forced sense of empathy that strives to cancel out the thought I am ashamed to say came to mind. I start to beat myself up a bit for having had that somewhat 'cruel', but honest reaction and ask myself "who am I to think that?" and believe I have no right to think in this way, especially as there have been times when I could apply that very criticism to myself.

I eventually lighten up a bit and conclude that my seemingly heartless thought is actually just a reaction and establish that my inner voice is not speaking from a place of criticism or malice. I am simply trying to connect with Eleanor by trying to really understand her story by putting myself into the shoes of others. I recognise that I am exploring my true response to the assertion about her appearance.

I believe that giving Eleanor any indication of my self-talk would damage the coaching relationship as it could imply that I am also judging, which is likely to compound and impact negatively on her confidence issues. I am very aware of the need to be non-judgemental as far as possible and this becomes an overriding factor in the coaching space. I am very quick to maintain that stance and compensate for my perceived wrong doing by focusing my self-talk on Eleanor's obvious qualities of beauty, intelligence and a confidence that she simply fails to see. Through my chatter, I tell her that she has so many wonderful qualities and I wonder if she can pick up on this.

I conclude that even if things in my self-talk come from a place of complete honesty, sometimes there is no place for them to be expressed in the coaching situation. The potential to damage the coaching relationship if the client becomes privy to the unedited version of a coach's dialogue could be a real concern, especially if that self-talk is not particularly positive in nature. After all, the focus of the

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coaching is not about the coach and their voice, but the client and their concerns, hopes and dreams.

I think of the internal chatter of the coach as a wonderful mechanism for the processing and exploration of the client's situation, in a way that allows the coach to detach and also connect by getting in touch with the thoughts and feelings at the core and most honest level of the coaching relationship. Without this private space in which to say, think and feel what is truly on your mind, I'm sure many a coach would probably go mad! We as coaches too need an outlet for the stories we absorb and create during the coaching process. The internal voice becomes just that.

So, with Eleanor my chatter surfaced as a response to her story with an internal dialogue I wouldn't openly share and was careful to keep to myself. But this response was helpful to me, in that I felt I was able to identify in that moment with the story she was trying to convey, enabling me to form a real sense of the judgements Eleanor felt people were making about her.

My internal voice presents itself in a variety of ways. At times it is focused on things completely separate from the client and their situation and instead is all about me. Acknowledging this could be seen as going against the whole idea of how coaching works, since how can you possibly work with a client effectively if your self-talk is focused on a separate situation or you end up doing a bit of multi-tasking by combining various situations all at once? Thankfully, I believe that as coaches we become very adept at dealing with a number of internal voices without letting on to the client that all this 'noise' is actually going on with robust professionalism. I feel this is true whether a client is actually present or not, as the scenario with Andrew exemplifies.

Andrew

I was preparing for the sixth and final coaching session with Andrew via Skype. I was recapping on notes I had made from all of our sessions and was making a note of things I intended to cover as part of bringing the coaching relationship to a close. Andrew had always struck me as a fairly organised and reliable type of guy, so when it was time for the session to start and I could see that Andrew wasn't online, I started to form all sorts of conversations with myself. Where on earth was he and why was he late?

It wasn't really a very good time for me as my mind was entrenched in the questioning and processing of a number of personal issues quite apart from the coaching I was about to do. I was preparing to halt all of these thoughts once Andrew was online. My self-talk kept going over and over all of the domestic issues currently at hand: an argument with my husband and how to resolve it, the kids and what to do during the school holiday, business plans and even cleaning the house! This was all coupled with an apprehension over whether Andrew had managed to get all that he wanted from the coaching sessions with me. I also questioned myself about how to approach the final session. Should I go through a structured recap or simply free flow? I also noted my hesitancy around the prospect of mentioning a potentially very emotional issue, given that the time to explore would be limited with it being the last session.

I told myself that I would need to get the chicken out of the freezer if I was going to prepare it for dinner later. I also replayed in my mind a telephone conversation with a family member from the previous day which had me feeling extremely irritated as I still couldn't believe how rude they had been!

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Five minutes into the session time and Andrew was still not on Skype, so I sent a text message to ask if session was still on.

Still no word 15 minutes into the session time, so I sent a second text to say I hoped everything was ok.

I was feeling a bit taken advantage of and confirmed with myself that the time had been agreed the day before. Indeed it had, so where was Andrew?

I started to think that something untoward may have happened to explain the no-show, so began to feel a bit guilty in doubting Andrew's seemingly good nature. I started to tell myself that I needed to get strict on my terms of operation so as to avoid a situation like this happening again. I was fed up and felt as if I had wasted valuable preparation time and energy.

Not wanting to dwell on a downer I quickly shifted the tone of my talk and realised the positives. On the plus side, I didn't have to deal with some of the stressful/tiring feelings that coaching someone can evoke, so I was quite happy and relieved in that respect as I had a lot on my mind anyway.

I started to ponder certain possibilities. Maybe Andrew didn't want to confront certain issues hence the no-show. This might explain not even getting a text back to explain. Though, he might have had an issue with his phone meaning that he couldn't actually contact me? Maybe he suddenly got sick or felt that he didn't need the final session? Maybe he went out drinking, so was too drunk to make the session? Maybe something more serious had happened preventing him from contacting me? Maybe, maybe, maybe! So much self-talk and some of it so unnecessary! (Transpired there was a plausible reason for him not making the session and he was very apologetic about not letting me know!)

It has struck me how easy it is for one thread of internal dialogue, to feed into another, setting the conditions for a train of voices to start up. Once these voices are chattering away they have the potential to go on and on if left unchecked.

I have found that it is good to be aware of such situations and consciously take steps to calm the mind when the chatter begins to overload the thinking and ceases to be helpful. Remember to breathe, nice and slow!

It can be useful to acknowledge what you are actually listening to when the chatter occurs and ask yourself if it helpful in any way and if there is anything you can take from it? I have found that this opens up a myriad of possibilities and ideas that can serve to enhance the coaching relationship on a deeper more honest level, presenting options and ideas to take forward (or not!).

Letting the chatter just be can also be wonderfully freeing, as you can express your emotions and true thoughts in a safe and personal way, without it necessarily having any impact on your client. Saying that, I also believe that people can pick up and connect with our innermost thoughts and feelings, no matter how hard we might try to hide them!

So, be mindful of your chatter and find a way to work with it that is useful to you. I have found that it can help in the exploration of your own honesty and authenticity, which can help to forge great coaching relationships.

Notes

A series of 24 horizontal dotted lines for writing notes.

Notes

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