

## **Giving straight feedback while still listening supportively**

I gave some honest feedback to a potential client today. It is always my intention to do so, yet sometimes I find it easier than others. In this case, it was a relief for me to be direct and to call him out on where he was putting off making a decision, hoping that circumstances would eventually change and that things would work out for him to take coaching. Being at the effect of circumstances in this way, waiting until the wind changes, is the exact opposite of taking charge, being responsible, making things happen. Putting things off and waiting to decide comes at a huge cost to our own effectiveness and wellbeing, our self-confidence and productivity.

### **Being stuck in the circumstances**

He's been considering coaching for his professional development for a while now. He is saying he is constantly "under water" and has no time for the things he values in life. He identified that lack of freedom and managing his time as something he would like to work on in coaching, because work is taking over his life and impacting on his quality of life both at work and outside.

He got to the point over the summer of being clear with me what coaching could provide for him in his situation and he was interested to move forward in September after a particularly busy work period would be over. Then he came back again this week saying he is "particularly under water" as he has just won some new clients. He said he would need to come back to his interest in coaching next year and anticipated my understanding.

### **It's not about the circumstances!**

How to respond? I immediately thought of the following: Why will things be any different next year? What if success breeds success and he wins more clients? It's now that he needs the support - having coaching next year will not help him to address these challenges he is facing now, which are the very same challenges he was interested in exploring through coaching. If those challenges would be likely to clear up by themselves, they would have already done so, so choosing whether to have coaching is not really about the time involved and the circumstances.

### **The stories we tell ourselves, that disempower us**

What a paradox, that last sentence, but one I am sure many of us can relate to. The narrative in our heads goes something like this: if only I wait for circumstances to work out, then I can have my life back and make the decisions I want. However, in reality, this is the opposite of how life works. By acting to prioritise something we deeply want to achieve, whether we have any idea how to make it happen or not, something in our universe shifts and reveals a whole new perspective and way forward we would never have discovered without taking that action. We get our life back and our hands are on the steering wheel again.

But by not acting, by waiting, refusing to take a position, waiting for circumstances to change and doing nothing ourselves, that is to act as if the way forward is pre-determined by something external beyond our control and not to do with us. Out of our hands. By not acting, we are abdicating responsibility for our own lives and wellbeing, deciding that we do not matter enough to set priorities and work on them. That approach is certainly not going to strengthen our leadership capabilities, nor enhance our self-confidence and personal growth.

You may ask, if the choice is that obvious, why don't we just take action and be done with it?

### **Commit, take action, and the “how to” starts to become clearer**

Where we may be stuck, and hence refusing to act, is by thinking we must first know the way through the problem before taking any action. The “how-to” part. In fact, it's the other way around: by taking action, we gain new purpose and energy, getting a fresh view of our situation. New options on “how to” immediately start to reveal themselves to us when we commit to accomplishing something, even when we're not sure how we'll do it.

### **Each choice is valid. And each choice has a consequence.**

My feedback to my prospect was simple and direct: He needs to recognise the choices available to him. It's simple: he either carries on as he is, letting the circumstances of his life decide what he should do, not taking responsibility himself but instead blaming the circumstances and making himself a victim of them. With all the negative impact on his self-confidence and wellbeing that living life like a victim brings with it.

Or, he can choose to do something different, take himself seriously. He can set priorities and intervene in the challenges he faces, putting himself and his wellbeing first. He can be kind to himself about not knowing how things will work out.

### **Coaching takes us beyond our comfort zones**

As the old saying from American racing car driver and Formula One winner, Mario Andretti, goes: “If everything seems under control, you're just not going fast enough”.

Taking that step out of our comfort zones to make that big stretch into unfamiliar territory is what coaching enables us all to do. Such as making bigger choices, prioritising the things that matter most to us, setting limits, not saying yes to every request. Which from our present vantage point looks anything from challenging to downright impossible.

I respect his right to choose whatever path is right for him. It may not be the time for coaching. But I owe it to him to enable him to see what's really holding him back, so he can choose powerfully, rather than just being at the effect of the circumstances. I told him straight and politely, that it's for him to be clear about the choices he faces and invited him to choose. I'll be happy to support him if he chooses to have coaching.

### **Supportive listening and dare to challenge too**

Sometimes, listening powerfully and getting where someone is at means being completely straight with them and respectful when they're stuck. So they can see what's in their way and make a choice and move forward.

Supportive listening in a coaching relationship is not just about listening to what someone says about how difficult something is - it's about challenging them respectfully to reflect on their motives for saying it's impossible, so they can go further and step outside their comfort zone.

What are the big things you're putting off, hoping they'll go away by themselves or that things will be different in 3 months' time? Whether these be choices for progressing your growth and development, having a difficult conversation with your CEO, feedback you are putting off giving to someone in your team who is not performing as you need them to?

I provide one to one and team coaching for leaders and their organisations. If something resonates in what I've outlined here and you would like to check out what support options could be helpful for you and your team, please get in touch.