



# Creating Possibilities and Pathways: Coaching Leaders through Change

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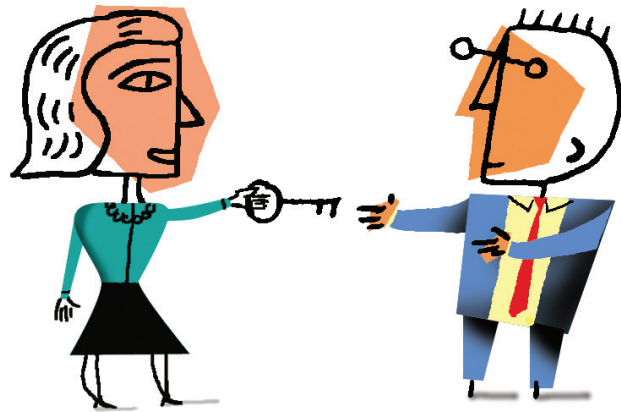
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The power of partnering with a coach when navigating new territory

Sheridan Gates, M Ed.



In these times of change, complexity and chaos, leaders seek to navigate through new territory on the job, and to deepen their own resilience and wisdom. A coach can partner with leaders to become adept at moving through change, enabling them to orient with an inner compass. In this article, I will share my experience of doing this important work.

### The value of seeming setbacks as one source of our personal power

Throughout my years as a management consultant, leadership trainer and coach, I have discovered a spirit within others to thrive. I also see how people get tangled in every conceivable real-world “trap” that appears to drag them away from this pursuit. My own path has included partial vision loss, an unexpected life challenge that has created the tension of loss and the desire for growth. As a trainer and coach, this loss has spurred me to cultivate simultaneously concrete practices that provide a deeper sense of “seeing,” of listening for possibilities, passion, and a sense of purpose that emerges from within one’s soul. In my work with leaders, I know how to foster what I myself have worked to awaken - the sense of spirit, of dignity, of thriving that fuels my work and relationships. My purpose is to support deep inner change, healing and growth, touching people to move towards wholeness as they live fully.

### The value of self-generated leadership skills

Most often, clients come to me at a mid-point in their career, either because they are experiencing what Frederick Hudson refers to as the “doldrums”, or they have lost their way. They want to revitalize their sense of purpose, energy and aliveness in their work life. In some cases, they are bumping into the headaches of being sandwiched between managerial challenges and not getting what they need from their bosses to be effective. Or they want to move from feeling reactive or

overwhelmed to being proactive as they manage their career. In some cases they are seeking greater fulfillment, or an alignment of their values, or they simply want to bring more of themselves to their work. Sometimes they want to navigate through complex organizational dynamics to create meaningful change and results. Although these leaders are very smart, they are not able to move into a creative stance to shape the next chapter of their career life. A key goal of my coaching work now is to create the possibility for the client of becoming resourceful and self-generating.

### Recurring Themes and Best Practices

In working with coaching clients over the years, I have made some surprising discoveries about recurring themes in the challenges they face, and also, therefore, about which practices best foster their learning and momentum. These practices are:

- Unearthing what is in the way – typically a chronic, negative internal “story”.
- Facilitating shifts not only in conversation, but in awareness of the bodily and emotional expressions of these stories.
- Supporting the client to access their own wisdom, power and life energy, offering inquiries that invite curiosity and open up new worlds.
- Designing practices that will support incremental changes that they can sustain.
- Encouraging the client’s ongoing work within the systems in which they live and work.



### 1: Unearthing what is in the way

Most of my clients are already aware that, although they are very capable, something is preventing them from moving towards their goals. Cultivating self-awareness and self-responsibility is a crucial foundation for building a successful coaching partnership, and so, to begin with, I take them through a series of reflective questions, both in writing, then in conversation. Working with these questions enables them to crystallize their insights into how they have moved through previous challenges, and what seems, predictably, to get in their way. This reflective work puts them in touch with the passions and purposes that enliven them. It helps them to become open to the possibility of their own strengths, and builds confidence that the process will yield movement and new learning.

Listening deeply to clients as they do this reflective work also reveals to me areas of faulty or negative internal conversations which make movement and action nearly impossible. I listen for where they are not learning, either because their negative internal stories are preventing new possibilities to emerge, or because their sure-footed certainty is concealing areas of incompetence or vulnerability.

Coaching conversations that begin to poke holes in the negatively oriented assumptions they are holding serve to create space for new stories. I often use gentle humor to exaggerate or play out their negative assumptions so that they can begin to laugh at their own thinking. Sometimes I will simply feed back what I am hearing, in the form of mirroring and clarifying questions, so that they will see the faulty reasoning on which their negative story is built. I will often raise the client's awareness of the moods and emotions associated with these stories. Discoveries around the disconnect between the stories, moods and emotions and what they want to create, help clients realize that they have bound themselves into a position where progress is not possible.

One of my clients, a senior manager with the US federal government, evoked a strong mood of discouragement every time she talked about her work. Her emotions had a grip on her and no doubt touched those around her. Yet she wanted to create a new chapter of her work life, and hoped that by changing careers, her energy and vitality would return. I raised concerns about the "mythology" of this thinking. In the words of John Kabat Zinn, "Wherever you go, there you are". Her goal was to be in integrity with her work life, which meant moving from the "story of disenchantment" to a story that enabled action.

In addition to reconnecting to that which enlivened her, she rewrote the story of her work history, this time using only facts and leaving out the assumptions and projections which had been supporting her thinking. She began to shift the mood of the story, and how she presented at work. She also invented several fun and life-giving "games" that were creative practices to access her own joy at work and in her life. This facilitated for her one

of the greatest shifts in mood any of us can experience – from disenchantment and discouragement to acceptance and hope. In the words of Julio Ohalla,

"Acceptance liberates the energy locked in resistance. Learning takes place."

(*The Oracle of Coaching*, Olalla, p128)

Often there are physical and external activities that support our emotional unearthing, clearing and moving-on process. I once attended a women's workshop facilitated by Angeles Arien in which a participant asked, "I know I want to move but don't know where, or even why, so what should I do?" Angeles replied, "Start packing." And, indeed, for a manager I worked with who wanted to transition out of his current role and who was running into a lack of focus and momentum to take action, cleaning, de-cluttering and organizing his home prepared him, somehow, to initiate difficult conversations with his boss. It also released a new momentum, and a focus on his inner work of designing the next chapter of his career life.

### 2: Facilitating shifts not only in conversation, but in the bodily experiences and emotions associated with negative stories

As the coaching engagement develops and trust deepens in the partnership, clients usually unearth deeper areas where clearing is critical for forward movement. A central tenet that underlies the coaching work I do is that there is a "coherency" in which one's "stories" or narratives are closely tied to a conditioned bodily tendency, and a set of moods and emotions that, together, create a way of being. This intertwined habit of mind, body and emotion predisposes one towards certain actions. Without a shift in all three domains of one's being, clients have difficulty sustaining a change. Conversation may be the first and most common "point of intervention" in the coaching relationship, opening up new, possible stories. But it is just as important to support work in the somatic and emotional domains.

One of the best ways to access a client's challenge or "stuck points" and their possibilities is through the body. As a symbol or metaphor for what clients want to happen in their lives, I find observing the somatic expression invaluable in pointing the way to places of learning. Observing the client's body as they speak about their challenges reveals areas of contraction, tightness and holding. At the simplest level, inviting clients to move into a posture or way of holding themselves that expresses the desired mood, or perhaps just a more fluid, free way of being, provides them with a felt experience of what they want to create. Inviting clients also to develop basic meditation practices, or to focus their attention simply on their breathing, is the beginning of a deepening awareness. Encouraging clients to engage in a much fuller conversation with their bodies and their felt experiences and sensations begins to deepen self-awareness.



Richard Heckler refers to the body as the “shape of our experience” as it reflects our history, our longings and our wounding

To work with someone through their body is to be interested in the qualities, capacity, and rhythm of their energy. To see the person through their body is to see how they contain their energy, how they express it, and the ways they awaken it. The way we relate to our energy system is also the way we make contact, and the way we make contact tells us what brings meaning to our life. Our many levels of energy and how energy moves through the body tell us who we are ...”

*(The Anatomy of Change, Heckler, p17)*

I worked with a leader of a faith community who wanted to embody leadership presence. He wanted to stand up to elders who were not supporting his leadership, and have a centered presence during conflict at meetings. Our work always started with physical centering practices that come from aikido. The client found that it was these centering practices which, in fact, convinced his nervous system to settle in times of stress and challenge. He was so committed to the body as a vehicle for presence, power and strength that he became an active runner and athlete. The “practice” that helped to build the story of embodied presence took new life at the health club. The way he held himself shifted as did his sense of embodied presence.

### **3: Supporting the client to access their own power, wisdom and life energy**

While attending the Newfield Coaching for Personal and Professional Mastery training in 2000, the notion that the coach nurtures and holds the space for “what wants to happen” provided me with a strong intention for my work. Just as there are practices that support self-awareness, there are also practices that reinforce, and help, center the client’s discovery of their “inner wisdom, power and voice.”

Using energy as an early indicator, I invite clients to pay attention to where they experience the greatest energy, assuming that this realization will lead them towards that which enlivens them. Identifying the essential ingredients of their own inner compass - the sweet spot of their own “best work” - builds momentum and clarity. Christian monastic tradition asserts that it is not how much we love doing something, but how much love comes through us when we are doing it that really matters when we are trying to discern our call or vocation. Once clients have clarified the key ingredients of their best work, they can begin to design a work and life in which they can thrive. Sometimes clients completely reinvent their work or career life around these essential ingredients, the work they most love to do, and in which they come most fully alive. In other cases, becoming clear about the underlying purpose that fuels this energy is enough to awaken a new sense of meaning and fulfillment in their work.

Often, I will also ask clients to identify their authentic voice – to notice when it is present and when it is missing. This

may lead to a refinement of their discernment skills - discovering distinctions within their own decision-making processes such as the voice of “should” versus the voice of a “wholesome” yearning to be more fulfilled in their work. We talk about why that might be, becoming very curious about how to shift and expand those situations or contexts.

There is nothing more stirring for clients than a provocative inquiry in which their whole being becomes engaged. Using powerful and bold questions during coaching meetings invites new thinking and change to take shape in the client. It is also useful to leave clients with a reflective question that resonates deeply with them. These questions are meant to simmer within like a pot of stew, to be savored until the clarity is released. This inquiry often points to a conflict of values, competing commitments and priorities, or paradoxes. For a client who was a newlywed and a person dedicated to her career, the fruitful inquiry which emerged from our work was, “How does living fully into my new commitments, including building a family, change my existing commitments?”

In my work as a Core Individuation practitioner, there is nothing more stirring for me than witnessing what occurs when the client fully integrates a shift or release in their healing. This act of witnessing closely parallels the International Coach Federation (ICF) competency known as “coaching presence.” What I see is that this is the time when the client expands, inhabits a new possibility even for a moment, and begins to settle into a new place and way of being. Each time I witness another in this process I encounter the Holy Other, the courage, the brilliance of that spirit within each of us that is so much more than our stories. Valuing our essential experiences, valuing what gives life energy, joy, and authentic expression incites renewed passion in us and a momentum to make our lives full and rich.

### **4: Designing practices to support incremental changes that clients can sustain**

If we look at high performers in athletics or the performing arts, it is customary to see them seek one-on-one support to refine their technique, build competence and break through plateaus. It is this commitment to learning, growth and mastery that defines high performers over a lifetime. As George Leonard explains:

“We fail to realize that mastery is not about perfection. It’s about a process, a journey. The master is the one who stays on the path day after day, year after year. The master is the one who is willing to try, and fail, and try again, for as long as he or she lives.”

*(Mastery, George Leonard, p141)*

Most of my clients report that they feel overwhelmed as they strive to stay on top of the many complexities of their lives. Often, the feeling of being overwhelmed is an indicator that we are taking on more than we can



reasonably accomplish, or we are not saying 'no' to new requests. Most of my clients with this challenge practice saying 'yes' and 'no' in small ways before doing so in the more significant arenas of their work life. My observation is that if clients can be successful in an incremental new behavior practice, they are more likely to build this into their repertoire of skills.

Success in these behavioral change practices supports the building of awareness and clarity about what is happening in larger areas of their lives. Observational practices that cultivate awareness include paying attention to one's reactions to a situation, to one's somatic responses, or to the impact of one's behavior on others. Now, becoming deeply curious about both actions and reactions, the client ponders a more significant inquiry, such as "What does being a leader who inspires others look like to me?"

As the client moves into experimentation with desired behaviors or skills, active practices become a part of the client's daily routine. For example, one new bodily practice, such as centering, might be coupled with one new conversational move, such as making counteroffers.

#### **5: Encouraging the client's ongoing work in the systems in which she or he lives and works**

Ultimately it is within the client's daily social systems that his or her change work will take shape. This linkage and the application of the client's revelations, learning and practices, enables the client to build the capacity to sustain change. Building alliances to support behavior changes will also accelerate learning. If the client can develop trust and rapport with colleagues, s/he can solicit input, feedback and additional data from peers.

A manager aspiring to reach the executive level of his company sought to redefine himself as a strategic thinking-partner with senior executives. He articulated the shift he wanted to make: to become strategic, focusing less on tactics and more on enterprise-level concerns and strategy. As he began to re-imagine himself and his role, we designed conversations that he could convene which would build his competence in these arenas. His work between coaching meetings involved noticing those aspects of style which might yield a greater sense of executive presence for him. He then initiated those conversations in the business and sought feedback. His proactive moves to create these new conversations enabled him to sustain his reinvention of himself.

#### **Conclusion: The Sheer Wonderment of Coaching Leaders**

Coaching individuals who are intent on making large-scale changes is nothing short of sheer wonderment. The work is always part mystery, part science, part challenge and, at the same time, intensely intimate. As we learn about growing and stretching with our clients, we encompass every path of learning. A coach's work starts within: inward

movement enables us to hold the space outwardly for others. The power of coaching leaders is that the changes they embody reflect into the organization. Leaders who embody a powerful presence and model integrity in their words and actions inspire those they lead. Coaching fosters sustained change among managers who work to master their own path of learning, possibilities and leadership.

#### **BIOGRAPHY**

Sheridan Gates is a consultant to organizations engaged in shaping futures and managing change. She is a coach to leaders and teams as they build capabilities and pathways that embody core values. Sheridan designs and facilitates workshops, meetings, retreats and strategic planning. She helps individuals and organizations become more effective and able to produce the outcomes they desire. Sheridan is exceptional at creating processes, structures and practices that empower her clients to express authenticity and integrity in their work and life. She cares deeply about helping individuals and teams become energized and focused around that which matters most. Sheridan has over fifteen years' experience working with managers, leaders, and employees.

Sheridan supports clients through strengths-based approaches to assessing, building and planning organizational change. Sheridan's clients include employees and managers in Fortune 500 companies such as Quaker Oats, mid and senior-level managers in federal government agencies including the United States Postal Service and Department of Homeland Security, and a variety of community groups and nonprofit organizations such as the Samaritan Ministry, Luther Place and the Academy of Hope. She also works with individuals seeking to shape and take action to realize meaningful futures.

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