

Where Life Coaching and Transformational Coaching Meet

There once was a man who woke up one day to discover he was trapped in a 10-foot by 10-foot by 10-foot wooden box with no windows and only one door. Inside the box was nothing but an old, beat-up chair on which he sat, and he was overwhelmed with despair, dread, and emptiness. Outside the box was the rich fullness of life that was replete with love, family, friends, purposeful work, and all the successes and joys that are part of our earthly lives.

The man had the discomfoting thought that during the night a group of dangerous men had abducted him and had informed him that he must live the rest of his life in this box. They said they would feed him enough food to survive but, if he ever tried to escape, he would be shot and killed immediately. He was told that they stood outside the door day and night with machine guns ready to fire.

The man struggled with his thoughts. Was what he remembered true? Was the threat real, or was his mind playing a trick on him? Was he destined to live trapped in the box for the rest of his life? Would the mere possibility of living a free, fulfilling life make escape worth the tremendous risk? Was there a way out that hadn't occurred to him? Could he avoid the bullets? A decision was gut-wrenching. He sat frozen, unable to move, because he feared that what he imagined was true, but he didn't know for sure.

Too often, our paradigms shackle us and bind us in a way of thinking in which there are few options. Within such a box, we make choices and live out our lives. While constricting, the box becomes familiar and comfortable over time. We know its contours and its boundaries.

Although the potential for a splendid, freedom-filled life exists outside the box of our paradigms, dangers lurk there as well—or so we fear. We can only experience the fullness that a new paradigm offers if we find a way to escape the boundaries of our current paradigms.

The problem is that we don't know what awaits outside that box or how our present lives and identity might be threatened—and we won't know without risking that sense of certainty and stability that we now have. Our “inner abductors” tell us not to leave the box of our own thinking—that if we do, others might ridicule or reject us, and we might even face failure. Our inner abductors “protect” us from this possibility and, at the same time, prevent us from a more expansive set of choices—even a fuller life. To live a fuller, more satisfying life requires that we let go of the shackles that bind us. We must strip away that which holds us back.

Everyone is in a box of some kind. When someone comes to you and says, “HELP,” they want some kind of change, and they are trapped inside a box of thinking that makes change difficult for them. If the change was easy, they wouldn't need help. By definition, people ask for help when they're stuck and too often, we helpers respond, “It's easy, just do X.” If it were so easy, though, they wouldn't ask us to help them.

If the person asking for help wants to make a difficult change, their current situation is likely to be a confluence of forces or factors that complicate the change. Their situation is multi-faceted, almost by definition, and easy or quick solutions are unlikely to stick. Therefore, it is best to refrain from offering quick, easy solutions no matter how sensible they seem.

Implications for Life Coaching

Most good life coaches are people who have figured out the key to a successful life, or some portion of life, and they want to help others do what they did. In some ways, this is simply a variation of skill-building coaching as it could

be the skill of a healthy life. Or it could be a variation of problem-solving coaching, the problem of living well. So, the skills of being a life coach are similar to the skills of other coaches.

There are many life coaches out there in all walks of life and many are very good. They have worked hard to improve some or many features of their lives and want to pass this on to others. They help people find better careers, find their purpose, learn how to eat well, find a good life partner, etc.

The best life coaches I know have recognized that to impart a skill well to another requires knowledge of adult learning theory, good listening, psychological understanding, and a high degree of sensitivity and intuition. With those capabilities, a life coach can be an essential partner in the journey of life.

Whenever someone asks another for help, they are facing what often feels like an intractable problem or they want to make a difficult change. The problem is created within the personal paradigm in which the person relates to the world—the paradigm that created this particular problem in the first place. If the paradigm created the problem, and the paradigm is invisible to the person asking for help, then the coach's job is to help the client to see their paradigm. Einstein said it best: "You can't solve today's problems from the same level of thinking that created them." Once someone sees how their problem—their box—was created, then and only then do the images of an enduring solution have the potential to reveal themselves.

When someone wants a fundamental change in their life, I believe there is something much deeper going on. How to X and how to Y is easy and does not necessarily require us to face ourselves. Transforming our fundamental patterns of behavior almost always requires that we do some psycho-emotional or psycho-spiritual excavation. In so doing, we have to face our wounds and the deeper patterns that were created because of those wounds. That is often

painful and difficult to do. That is why the “how-tos” are so appealing—they don’t require much, and they are often pain free.

Wouldn’t it be nice if we could take a pill and lose weight, and then take another pill to keep the weight off? And, can I have an order of “no side effects” with that, please? Wouldn’t it be nice if we could snap our fingers and the perfect partner would show up? Wouldn’t it be nice if we could make a simple shift and magically have balance in our lives?

Instead, life coaches need to also be transformational coaches to do enduring work. Transformational coaching, as I define it, is distinct from many solution driven forms of coaching in that the goal is not to fix a problem per se. Nor is it to learn how to do this or that. It isn’t in search of a short-term solution, although it can certainly have the effect of fixing a problem or learning how to do something. **The goal is to shift the fundamental way in which we approach a problem such that the solution of the problem endures.** This requires that we facilitate the client in doing their own paradigm detective work in order to find and psychologically own alternative and better solutions to all kinds of problems.