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The Turning Point

I was called in by a small non-profit firm in Switzerland which carries out social services with the aim of integrating people. What they wanted they called supervision.

Help! Supervision? Teamcoaching? Teambuilding?

What my clients want from me they usually call coaching, in particular those who have previously visited my website. If the client works in the social or pedagogical field, then sometimes they call it supervision even if they use me to help change a current problematic situation. Others divide the available budget sum by the agreed fee and enter as many dates in their diary as necessary, well spread over the year, and call it supervision. In these cases they usually need an outsider's view of some aspect of their everyday work. Often it is a requirement (official or their own) to have a supervisor. Looking back, there seems to be a pattern that small and medium industrial companies mostly want me to run team-building sessions – in the most memorable exception the owner's wife was a coach.

The funding for external assistance had been agreed by the company for its production staff and for workers in its own retail outlet. These two teams had a common leader who sought me out and briefed me on what they needed. I was grateful for the obvious care and inventiveness with which he/she answered my questions, and detailed their goals and their effect on the factory and shop. And of course, out came all that was wrong and had to be stopped, and how it was harming the customers and the rest of the company. At this point I came out with the question which I have used on other occasions since, before accepting a company's contract: *"Wow! I like my work to have a chance of success. What makes you confident that we will succeed, that we have a chance of reaching your goals?"*

He/she carefully ran through the members of the team, their function and role in the team. This gave me a good opportunity to ask what each person excels in, and in what situations each can be relied on by the leader.

The timeslot (two hours during the morning) made it possible that people working in different shifts were all able to be present. I was pleased, as I gathered that it was an extraordinary possibility that all members of the teams were there at once. Things are often simpler if people can see one another.¹ The leader wanted to know how many sessions I thought were needed. Five? Six? I suggested that we pick three dates, and after that see how they progress, and whether there's a need for any more.

Before our first session, I asked the leader to study the team members, so that when we set our goals, he/she would be able to cite examples where someone had already fulfilled their expectations.

Help? Effective interaction

My experience with companies' use of language² has taught me to be careful. What does the client want to achieve? How will it be evident in everyday interactions? What do they call the input that they expect from me? And how do the participants involved use that word? What makes it attractive? – and if what they call it isn't attractive enough, what name would the framework have then? Whatever they call it, what timeframe would make the client and myself confident that useful change will result during and after our sessions? What elements of methodology crop up during the briefing phase, and during the sessions, whether as client requests or as my own professional ideas (including so-called intuition)?

1 A relevant riddle from my childhood: there is a straight pipe in the park, half a meter in diameter. In daylight, a little boy looks in at one end, a little girl looks in at the other, yet they don't see each other. By contrast, coaching situations often carry the seeds of success: the participants are all together in the same place.

2 I refer to use of language by the client, the service provider, as well as the textbook definitions

The answers to these questions provide the framework for my work, and not what I have learnt from professional literature, or from market players, about what they call supervision, teamcoaching, teambuilding.

The process

I sent an invitation email to each member of the team. I “knew” at least one good side of each of them, from the leader’s appraisal, so I was sincerely able to assure them of my interest in them, my regard for them and that I would give my all during the process. I cited the goal we had agreed with the leader, so they understood the framework within which they were being invited to do common creative work. I emphasized that they could get in touch with me by email or phone to make requests and comments before the start. No-one availed himself of this.

Behave in the way that the number of your choices increase. (Heinz von Foerster) Here: you can choose to write an email, but not writing can also be a choice. Otherwise it’s just passivity.

The first session we devoted entirely to the miracle shower³. Following a brief welcome and introduction, I disclosed to them that above the entrance there is an invisible showerhead, and when they pass under it to leave the room, a miracle happens, which is that they can achieve all that our gathering here aims to achieve. I asked them what might the signs from which they would know the miracle was working, who would do what. I made careful notes of every crumb of miracle on a flipchart. I listened attentively to the occasionally occurring pre-shower descriptions, but my hand flew over the paper whenever the speaker began to

³ I got to know the miracle shower as a variant of the so-called miracle question at a workshop run by Insoo Kim Berg. A description can be found in *Short and Lasting Coaching - Solution-Focused Conversations*, by Daniel Meier, Peter Szabo, Katalin Hankovszky, Budapest 2010, 88 pages.

detail the imagined future of our goal. They took the completed sheets with them.

When the coach makes notes

The use of the flipchart provides an opportunity for strengthening the useful reality constructions in a team. I choose this form of visualisation whenever team members talk about desirable future circumstances, about positive examples or qualities. Appearing on a single sheet, these make the picture rich in detail, allowing each person to focus on different parts.

On the second meeting we hung up the first day's paper sheets, and I asked what little things on those sheets had already come about. Though there were plenty of details, we had enough time, so I asked them to imagine how they would move towards their goal in the next few days. In pairs, they gathered ideas of how they would notice progress. With these future possibilities under their belts, we parted.

If that “if” hadn't been

If the third session hadn't already been in my diary, maybe I would have rung the leader a week or two later to ask if things were satisfactory. If the answer had been Yes, then that would have been that, and this case study would not appear in this book. But the third date was in the diary. It came closer, and the day before it I got an email from the leader, asking me to work with his/her deputy and one of the team members, within the framework of the supervision, as there was a serious conflict between them.

The working hypothesis, which made it possible for me to take on a situation without special preparation or protective measures: *“Conflict is the missing coordination between two good intentions.”* Jesper H Christiansen

When I entered the room the next morning, you could cut the tension in the air. The two women sat in different parts of the room, staring at the floor. I sat at the table and tried to create a context for the meeting and asked what they would consider a good and useful outcome to our meeting together. For my extrovert ego and healthy vanity the next hour was horror itself. Whenever I could get a word in and asked something, it barely reached their ears. They competed to detail intolerable situations and listed generalised outrages. I scanned all available possibilities with which I might assist the coordination of their very different, but similarly vehement good intentions. Nothing seemed promising.

After an hour I stopped the conversation and asked where we had got to in their opinion, how much had we progressed in the preceding hour, what had they learned.

I was balancing on the border of a real and a pseudo question: I guessed the answer would be “*nowhere*”. So a pseudo question really. They agreed (I could comment that it was for the first time) that we were no further forward. I quickly suggested that if the process hitherto had not helped, then we should do something else in the remaining time, and they acquiesced. Thus I continued the search for a possible common future with solution focused questions, with the one difference that if they mentioned a past grievance as an answer, then I stopped and reminded them of our agreement.

The change

And then a word hit my ear. Something like: “*then we’d work shoulder to shoulder, not against each other*”. I got really excited. In a Hollywood movie there would be a close-up at this point, as the coach scans the length of the table before her. It was a lovely, oval conference table, the coach sitting at the head of it, with the two colleagues on either side. I asked them if they’d agree to try something. Something that I wasn’t sure would work, but maybe it would change something. I stood up and asked them to position themselves to make possible this “shoulder to shoulder” working idea. Then and there. Physically.

In their co-authored book, Insoo Kim Berg and Peter Szabo⁴ emphasize that many people think that change is an internal process, which later has externally visible signs. Others consider the change of external circumstances a precondition of the internal one. Insoo suggests that instead of preferring either method, we should learn to think that change can start anywhere, provided the participants see a chance for it. I hazarded turning this metaphor into concrete action, by making it the external circumstance of the meeting. I hoped that among the changed externalities maybe their interaction - and with it the possibilities of one or other of them - might change.

What followed was a lengthy and cautious negotiation from who would move over to the other side of the table, to how to turn the table so that everyone could keep their standpoint. Finally they turned the table 90 degrees, and sitting next to each other gazed at me expectantly, and with something like pride in their eyes.

In the final phase of the meeting, the tiniest buds of trust began to appear: a few constructive ideas on what one or other might conceive trying out in the interests of improved cooperation. Cautiously exultant, I listened and asked them how far they could see themselves doing these new things if the other were to react in the old way. They agreed on two weeks, and thus we set the next meeting for two weeks' time.

The meeting in which they related several reassuring examples of their joint efforts was my last in this supervisory process. They disagreed about the extent of the progress that had been made, but agreed about its reality. Both were ready to undertake further experiments in the interest of continued improvement.

4 Brief Coaching for Lasting Solutions, Norton 2005, page 19

Looking back

I look back on this case with pleasure, for it demonstrates the solution-creating power of our clients, as by clutching at the tiniest of straws they engender change. As coaches often the most we can do is to watch what happens while searching for possible straws. The International Coach Federation's competence specification⁵ might regard my instructions before the change as the presence, and the willingness, of the coach to take risks. I trusted what the participants said, and in the process I took them (in this case, literally) at their word. It was as if I suspected that I needn't have any input to the conversation, but to get the maximum output from what they said.

The situation reminds me of what Therese Steiner⁶ calls "DO hope".⁷

During a coaching process the participants are open to not just chatting with us, but to doing something that increases the chances of a desired situation coming about. The test of the trust we build can be such an experiment on the part of the coach, for we can never be entirely sure that the idea we have improvised will really be as meaningful to the participant. If however, it proves to be useful, in other words the client sees it as constructive, then it exponentially increases all that the words mean, before and afterwards. If this table-turning example has significance beyond this case, maybe it might inspire readers if they find themselves in a helper role in a conflict-ridden situation to:

- trust the participants, even if they have to wait until a constructive idea pops up,
- make it possible as soon as possible for the parties to begin to build their common future, one which is what they all want,

And if they are present in some other role:

- start realizing their best ideas as soon as possible, be they ever so small.

⁵ www.coachfederation.org

⁶ Swiss therapist, who together with Insoo Kim Berg wrote about the use of the solution focus approach with children, and developed it further in: *Jetzt mal angenommen... Anregungen für die lösungsfokussierte Arbeit mit Kindern und Jugendlichen*, pub. Carl Auer 2013, 2nd edition

⁷ Therese Steiner's workshop at the 2013 EBTA conference was called Do Hope. She demonstrated therapeutic activities in which the client can experience during the session what they hope to reach as the result of the therapy: better relations within the family, or more effective communication. Thus these usually creative activities gain a hope-producing effect. (www.ebta2013.org EBTA = European Brief Therapy Association)

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