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Navigating the Emotional Minefield

How to be comfortable with discomfort

In the book, *Synchronicity*,¹ Joseph Jaworski wrote that the most successful leaders are those who participate in helping others create new realities. The leader engages in conversations that bring to light how a person frames a situation so they can see for themselves both gaps in logic and what else is possible. This changes what the other person believes is true – a necessary factor for the person to attain long-lasting and positive change. Jaworski wrote about this long before coaching became an accepted leadership competency, but the definition fits perfectly – the most successful leaders are those who coach!

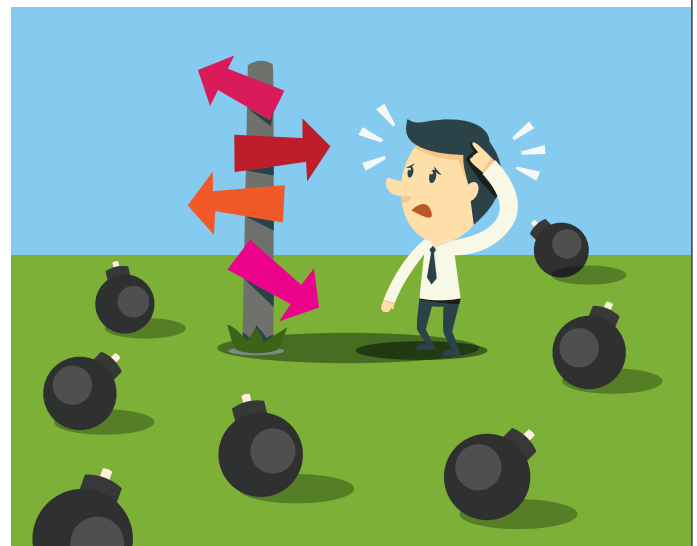
Much to the chagrin of most leaders (and coaches), emotions are integral to this process. When people actually observe their thinking and actions, they are often surprised and could feel embarrassed, sad, or angry. You have to be comfortable with this expression of emotion; it means they are trying to cope with the new awareness that is forming. The breakthrough experience is an emotional moment.

“Give people space to express themselves and then work to help them understand what triggered the emotion in the first place”

Here are some tips for staying present and intentional when someone expresses emotions while you are coaching:

To build trust, the person must feel that your goals and desires are in his or her best interest throughout the conversation and beyond.

Your purpose is to reveal a greater self to your clients, not to fix their problems or to make them into someone



else. Even if their actions are critical to your organization's success, do not make them feel as if they are just the means to an end. Stay focused on the other person's desired outcomes.

Set an emotional intention for the session before you start.

How do you want him or her to feel: inspired, hopeful, proud, or encouraged? You must consciously choose this tone before you speak; if you are angry or disappointed with the person from the beginning, you need to let this go, or choose to wear your manager hat instead of your coaching hat. Then continue to feel this emotion as much as possible throughout the conversation. Be careful not to lose your emotional grounding; the emotion you choose to feel is your anchor. If something unnerves you, say this word quietly to yourself to shift back to the feeling you want to express. You might also choose to feel other emotions such as calm, courageous or kind to

support your active listening, but your anchor word will keep you on track.

Learn how to recognize when a distracting emotion emerges.

Vincent Van Gogh said, “Let’s not forget that the little emotions are the great captains of our lives, and we obey them without realizing it.” Your own brain has automatic defense mechanisms that are naturally on alert at all times. When the conversation begins to feel risky, messy or emotionally unstable, you need to breathe and recall your emotional intention for the conversation. Notice when your body tenses up or your breathing shortens, so you can release the tension and return to being present. If you ask a question and the person isn’t ready to explore with you, you might back off and come around to the question later in the conversation or schedule another session to give him or her time to think.

Do not try to save people!

Many leaders and coaches try to assuage people’s discomfort by telling them they shouldn’t feel something or telling them lots of people have similar reactions. Either way, these coaches are devaluing the emotional expression. Instead, give people space to express themselves and then work to help them understand what triggered the emotion in the first place. Emotions are the key to valuable information! Don’t send them away.

Examine your judgments.

The moment you have the urge to tell someone what to do, this means you judge that person as inadequate and you won’t know what questions

to ask. Your brain will focus in on what you want to say. Then if you slip and tell him what he should do next, his brain will shut down. He might do what you say, but you haven’t developed his mind or helped him feel better about the future. Do you believe the person can figure out what to do and be more than he is demonstrating now, through good coaching? You have to believe in the person’s potential even if he doesn’t believe in himself to stay in coaching mode. Notice the urge to advise, take a deep breath, and let it go when you exhale. This will give the questions a chance to show up. You will never move beyond basic problem solving if you allow yourself to judge what the person is saying.

Calm your mind and body so you can use silence effectively.

Silence allows the person you are coaching to form new thoughts and perspective. Silence is often an indication that your reflections and questions have penetrated the mind’s protective barrier. A new sense of self and reality is trying to emerge.² When the brain recombines information in a new way, it could take some time before the person you are coaching can articulate what she now understands to be true. Be quiet while her brain is working. Remember you are watching the brain of the person in front of you actually spark, shift, and develop new connections. How awesome is that?

Remember, insight-based learning often triggers an emotional response. When people see a different truth about themselves or the world

around them, they can’t help but feel something. Often sadness, anger, or embarrassment will precede hope or humor. It is worth it to you as a leader to be comfortable with discomfort. When people learn about themselves through coaching, they are much more committed to changing their behavior because it came from their

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own realization. This will help you not only be a leader who manages change well, but also a leader who coaches people to see themselves and their world more broadly. Leaders who grow people’s minds as well as their skills are the leaders who are remembered for life. ●

This article was created from excerpts in the book from Marcia Reynolds, *The Discomfort Zone: How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversation into Breakthroughs*. Berrett-Koehler, 2014.

1 Joseph Jaworski, *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership*. Berrett-Koehler, 1996. The description of how Jaworski defines true leadership is on page 2 of the introduction, written by Peter Senge.

2 Nessa Victoria Bryce, “The Aha! Moment: A Step-by-step guide to your next creative breakthrough.” *Scientific American Min*, July/August 2014, pages 36-43.