

COACHING CLIENTS THROUGH THE COVID 19 CRISIS

I coach organisations and individuals (virtual face to face), create and facilitate webinars/courses and networks. As well as visiting individuals and groups, I also offer themed walks/visits to beautiful and interesting sites. Clients receive an opportunity to clarify what they really want, align to and energise their future contributions. I was an external assessor (Middlesex University) for Masters Programmes in Psychosynthesis Coaching and Psychology, offered by the Institute of Psychosynthesis, London. I completed my first courses in Psychosynthesis in the 1990's in Ireland with Eckhart House (Dublin), then with Didi Firman (Synthesis, USA), Roger Evans (IOP, UK) and Massimo Rosselli (Italy).

This article is written in the context of the Covid 19 pandemic and other societal concerns,¹ and as economies cautiously reopen with varying citizen responses. An earlier version was written in May 2020² when countries were in full lockdown with daily reporting on initial national roadmaps³, deaths from Covid 19 and national leaders guiding populations forward. Below, I offer some joined up thinking on the global pandemic, leadership, psychosynthesis coaching (in/outside organisations) and client feedback on how this coaching meets their needs as they steer through this global pandemic. Leadership is considered in the context of the global cry for responsible behaviour, self-leadership and the common good. The coaching model assumed for this article goes beyond what is often understood as traditional coaching. Here, the terms coaches and coaching are limited to those coaching practices and practitioners with expertise to offer depth coaching to reasonably high functioning clients with coaching needs that can span complex organisational, personal, professional advancement and/or societal concerns. Some clients' feedback is noteworthy: 'support', 'gentle enough to give space to fully experien-

ce the enormity of changed lifestyle', 'spacious enough to acknowledge more than that', 'challenging enough to offer opportunities to fully align to and activate an inner knowing of how (they want) to live/work', with sufficient depth and breadth 'to evoke real self and enable useful consideration of opportunities/challenges faced in a complex family/social/organisational context'.

With the pandemic in mind, relevant quotes are offered from some (including Assagioli, the founder of Psychosynthesis) who faced challenges in extreme eras, overcame them and thrived afterwards. Reference is also made to more recent voices in the Psychosynthesis community.

Building from my earlier (June 2020) article, the initial impact of the crisis and the reality that global, national and organisational leaders are steering us through the Covid 19 crisis are still acknowledged in this article. The recently implied onus on every citizen to develop their five dimensions of leadership to self-lead⁴ and co-create the healthy individual-collective dynamic required for future thriving (or even survival) are considered. It is suggested that relevant coaching can empower clients to move forward with purpose and contribute to effective mobilisation of themselves and society post lockdown. Clients can become equipped to 'co-create a new paradigm that enables a new economy to emerge'. They can 'build blocks that will create outstanding human leadership, characterised by self-awareness and values that will ensure sustainability, transparency, honesty.'⁵ They can face and address stark contrasts observed between investigative televised reporting of life/death in hospitals⁶ and recent reckless behaviour (eg large gatherings in the U.K.⁷, non-essential international travel).

Purpose often features in coaching. It entered coaching sessions at the start of lockdown with a spearheaded focus. It presented itself in the form of the 'here and now' as clients and coaches, often stunned, rapidly responded to changed realities as they entered lockdown and experienced complexities of abrupt lifestyle changes. Virtual coaching, using Zoom, Skype, etc provided clients with an opportunity to meet a grounded disidentified authentic presence with a healthy response to realities of the crisis. The Psychosynthesis Egg diagram⁸ provided a useful analogy for rich content that emerged in coa-

ching sessions. In the global liminal space experienced during lockdown, levels of consciousness that clients were strongly drawn to, reverted to, shifted between, or experienced freedom in, were almost tangible as was some clients' experience of the present. Some clients became aware of those 'levels', sometimes for the first time. Clients' conscious experience of the collective was sometimes vivid. Until owned by the client, client presence could be commented on and what was emerging could be held for the client.

Some clients described lockdown like being in jail. Global forecasts scared many. For others, the effect of lockdown was multiplied by the loss of loved ones, loss of income, remote working, closed schools etc. Some experienced complicated grief, near-death experiences after infection from coronavirus and/or overwhelming workloads. Feelings, thoughts, actions, choices, etc, oscillated, and for some, the experience of unpredictability was palpable. Gentleness, kindness, listening, love, hope, empathy and relevant action were important. The Psychosynthesis balance of love and will was very relevant here.

Other clients remained positive, experienced the first lockdown phase like 'flow'⁹, realised what really matters, explored new opportunities and related accounts like those referred to by Ferrucci¹⁰. Clients referred to a sense of global unity, improved connections, slower pace, immense humanity, calm, peace, freedom, appropriate humour, joy, exercise (dance, yoga, walks, cycles in nature etc), bird song, nature's continued reliable, spectacular beauty; clients' new meaningful contributions to society, insights, meditation, relaxation, artistic pursuits. Some clients noticed what they want to 'let go of'.

Some developed a new or re-ignited an existing sense of purpose or call to Self¹¹. Others realised that meaningful purpose and contribution can be as simple as kindness to others. In that global liminal space, some clients' experiences resembled a rite of passage to a new phase with renewed purpose and contribution. Appropriate humour and bizarre amusing facts distracted some for a while¹². Courage was abundant¹³. A rare spell of endless sunshine in Ireland during lockdown enabled some to experience 'a temporary holiday,' while caring for those suffering. From initial stunned states, clients' experiences and

perceptions evolved. Without a return to the 'old normal', economies opened in the face of second lockdowns across the globe. Some restrictions remain indefinitely. There are attempts to address broader consequences of the pandemic. National leaders and organisation managers have developed new regulations¹⁴, are now leading implementations, addressing empowerment, wellbeing¹⁵ and ramping up countries and organisations to high levels of functioning. The illusion that solutions are the responsibility of leaders has been replaced by the realisation that workable solutions require input at collective and individual levels, bold new visions and a review of previously entrenched habits and patterns¹⁶. Often limited to national leaders or organisation managers, the understanding of the term leader has expanded to include every citizen who must now be self-responsible. Every citizen is now required to self-lead with clear purpose and focus on the common good. Everyone needs a personal plan to thrive and contribute post lockdown. What is yours?

Hope is palpable. Fear still lingers. Reported expectations of the potential for change and disillusionment¹⁷ have their place. It is not known whether this disruptive catalyst¹⁸ will lead to positive or negative change. In such contexts, coaching interventions are often required for self-leadership to emerge. In the face of an unstable 'normal', extended¹⁹ and second lockdowns²⁰, daily workloads and home lives, clients (in coaching) can reflect on their purpose from a variety of perspectives and consider how they will respond²¹. Usefully, Assagioli²² states that disillusionment is not inevitable if we learn to accept what we experience as an opportunity to learn. Astute attention to the immediate has potential to inform clients' authentic purpose and contribution. Through relevant coaching interventions, coaches evoke what is emerging in clients and encourage the revelation of the 'real' person. Clients learn to stay present, learn more about themselves and reflect on daily experiences. Coaches can encourage clients to use all psychological functions²³, discover, reflect on choices etc.

For those clients who feel terrified or stuck, coaching is enabling them to focus, face that, notice where they feel free or energised and develop daily structure. Discipline is explained by Assagioli²⁴ as 'not meaning repression or

suppression, but regulation and direction in the sense of ‘steering’. As appropriate, clients can be encouraged to self-nurture, take small steps, explore options, make appropriate decisions. Interventions using techniques for the sake of it are discouraged if they distract coach and client from the ‘being’ that is emerging. With a trifocal vision²⁵, coaches intervene wisely. They make appropriate use of psychosynthesis techniques²⁶ with clients. Through coaching, clients can become empowered as they become more conscious of their experiences, perceived opportunities, overcome obstacles and discover/align their contribution to their purpose. In contrast to traditional coaching, coaches trained at Psychosynthesis centres are equipped to support the client’s attendance to internal reality. That is significant because what is experienced internally can become their external reality. Attention is given to the significance of free will²⁷, attitude²⁸, responsibility and choice.²⁹ Useful are Assagioli’s notes/evocative words³⁰ at Casa Assagioli on acceptance (‘full utilisation of an existing situation and the opportunities it offers without emotional and mental reactions of rebellion, self-pity or evasion’). Of particular relevance in the context of the Covid 19 crisis is ‘Freedom in Jail’.³¹ In that publication, Assagioli quotes Keyserling: ‘we can only become free and fulfil our destiny when we accept full responsibility, without reservation or exception for everything of inward concern and our freedom’. Reference is also made to two of Assagioli’s contemporaries (Viktor Frankl and Etty Hillesum). All three wrote about how essential one’s inner attitude is to experience true freedom.

Without really knowing where or how we will be in the future, global society catapulted into the current liminal space shortly after Evan’s publication³². He usefully defines a full-blown existential crisis that he believed leaders and leadership faced pre Covid 19. He³³ emphasises self-reflection and the significance of a client’s free will if he/she is to succeed as a leader. He explores the essence of what was happening immediately prior to lockdown, what is trying to emerge, how to address systemic forces (dynamics/organisation politics). He emphasises humility and relevant support. Some coaching clients will now lead their organisations through this crisis

or even be required to make career changes due to redundancy. Some clients need to bring employees with them, manage employee wellbeing, while supporting those experiencing disillusionment. In that context, they need to ramp up to appropriate levels of organisation productivity, with healthy dynamics, targeted isolation³⁴ and relevant supports. With relevant coaching from experienced coaches, those clients can manage challenging organisation dynamics, ignite and sustain the momentum and acceptance required, develop/renew clear purpose, consistent reflection, effective relationships,³⁵ required conviction and direction.

Clients might initially seek coaching to address high level organisation concerns. In the wake of this pandemic, they often address personal concerns. By spending substantial time at home, systemic/family concerns can surface and clients can desire resolution of same. To maintain focus and momentum as successful leaders (of organisations/personal lives), those clients are encouraged to align/synthesise their personal and career purpose and ensure their will is free, while accepting that purpose and contribution evolve and transmute as we move through life. With coaching that evokes their essential being, will and ‘right relations’, they can maximise their potential to lead organisations through the substantial change and transformation required³⁶.

During this crisis, the understanding of ‘leadership’ is transforming. Until now, ‘leadership’ was sometimes dangled at a few who aspired to it and was often the privilege of an exclusive minority. All has changed. There is now a global call for all citizens to self-lead and become ‘self-responsible’ with respect for the common good. Required citizen behaviour suggests that a broader cohort might now benefit from leadership coaching of the type outlined above³⁷.

Ferrucci³⁸ usefully alludes to purpose and the essential envisioning of a new form to inspire/stimulate and mobilise us to action. That can potentially counterbalance potential disillusionment as we move forward. Frankl’s³⁹ regular quoting of Nietzsche is poignant: ‘he who knows the ‘why’ for his existence ... will be able to bear almost any ‘how’. Frankl’s realisation is also noteworthy: ‘life means taking responsibility to find the right answer

to its problems and to fulfil the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual'. By staying present to and reflecting on the immediate, clients can become empowered, learn more about themselves, discern their purpose, align their will to purpose and commit to the contribution required of them now. With appropriate humour which Assagioli⁴⁰ and Frankl⁴¹ emphasised as essential and courage which he⁴² explains as the 'will to risk and the acceptance of insecurity', coaching supports clients as they fully engage with this crisis (without becoming overwhelmed), use it as an opportunity to get to know themselves better, stay present, reflect on theirs and society's experiences, maintain healthy relationships, realise what really matters and fully activate their will to contribute in a manner aligned to their individual/ organisation/collective purpose.

In my article (June 2020), I stated that leaders were embarking on a herculean mission in an unstable environment. Global familiarity with this mission is now accepted. The pandemic has also demonstrated that we belong to local, national and global contexts where workable solutions require consideration of the individual and the 'collective'⁴³. There is now a global call for citizen self-leadership and self-responsibility with a focus on the common good. Accepting that society needs multiple solutions now, coaching of the type proposed here offers clients the opportunity to clarify purpose and fully contribute in a way now required for society to thrive again soon.

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Endnotes

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