

Barbara Hunter: Growth Edge Coaching Essay

When I think about my coaching practice today, I am reminded of the purposefulness and intensity of my learning journey, particularly in the last few years. I am also keenly aware of the impact the learning has had on me personally, as well as my work. Today I have a very new and different way of being, a new and different way of listening and a much more informed way of seeing and sharing with my clients as they seek insight and wisdom regarding the things that matter most to them. For the purposes of this essay, I would like to share how Growth Edge Coaching supports my work and give some specific examples of how it has served my clients.

My coaching work is grounded in what I will refer to here as a larger framework. As this framework has grown for me, it has given me a deeper understanding and awareness about humans and “what makes us tick.” It provides for me a lens through which I can better see my clients and informs my hypotheses and the questions I can ask as a coach. This framework helps illuminate what may be creating my client’s current bell jar and also their growing edge. Through subsequent dialogue, clients are able to give thought to choosing wisely and in more informed ways, how to deal with the challenges they face and who they want to be.

Though my framework is constantly evolving, below you will find a list of the components that support and influence my work. It is this the backdrop that provides for me the “windows in” to seeing my client and includes:

1. The metaphor of the bell jar and how to see, hear or speak to my client’s potential growing edge
2. Insights about habits that at one time likely served my client and today may limit them
3. Knowledge in working with soma, both in terms of what I may see and what the client may feel internally
4. Insight into emotions and how they inform us about our state, our habits and our history
5. Cognition, thoughts and story and how we can create a continuous loop that sometimes becomes a stuck story
6. Behaviors that I may see or hear about in the story, and how to identify new ones that could better serve the client
7. Growth Edge Coaching, including
 - The four stages of adult development and what they look/sound like in a client
 - Habits of mind and how to support clients as they wonder and/or work towards new ways of meaning making
 - i. Asking different questions
 - ii. Taking multiple perspectives
 - iii. Seeing systems
 - iv. Attending to soma
 - The importance of noticing and naming losses that also accompany forward movement
8. Language patterns, what to listen for and how to respond as a coach
9. Practices which build capability and resilience, such as
 - Presence and centering
 - Mindfulness
 - Yoga
 - Body work
10. Other ways to help a client see, such as
 - Polarity maps
 - Awareness maps
 - 360 Feedback
 - Various assessments
 - The ACT Matrix (a tool used in Acceptance Commitment Training and Therapy)

In addition to these components giving rise to potential inklings and insights regarding my client's growing edge, they also help me see my growing edge in the midst of my work with my clients. I see all these things as profoundly helpful in my work and in my own life and I am also aware (though not always good at catching it when it occurs!) how these things can become a bell jar for me and limit my range as a coach.

When I think about how Growth Edge Coaching specifically supports my work, I am reminded of a TED talk featuring Eduardo Briceno titled "How to Get Better at the Things You Care About." https://www.ted.com/talks/eduardo_briceno_how_to_get_better_at_the_things_you_care_about

In brief, Briceno talks about the benefit of spending time in a learning mode (i.e., when we are reflecting on feedback and working with our coach) vs. always being in performing mode (i.e., when we need to be an expert and want/need to get it right). Another point he makes is regarding the importance of leaders modeling and creating "safe islands" for being in a learning mode (i.e. when the client is seeking feedback or sharing their 360 themes with their teams). As coaches, an important part of our work is to hold the space and create a safe island for learning.

Growth Edge Coaching has helped contribute to creating a safe place for learning for my clients. It offers a way for the client to see their meaning making relative to all adults and to see the strengths, the blind spots and the potential struggles that can arise from each stage. Through this body of work, clients are reminded they are not alone. Constructive-development theory has helped my clients lean in and to accept and not judge themselves or others. As they more deeply internalize development theory, they are able to loosen their grip on getting it right. I also notice they begin to experience more ease while learning and more patience and peace in the process of growth.

An example where I have seen an impact from Growth Edge Coaching is in my coaching work with a group of women who met bi-weekly for two years. As a group, these women were seeking community for support and learning. I shared my understanding of constructive-development theory with them and it was exciting to see how quickly these women grasped and connected with the concepts. I noticed how it informed and shifted their stories about themselves and others. It also "normalized" their meaning making and helped them see development as a journey. They were able to make sense of their past and see more choice in their future. Over time and with the Habits of Mind in their back pockets, they were also able to loosen the tethers to their Socialized meaning making and step more solidly into the Self-Authored space, shifting from the stuck and torn feelings that often accompany the Socialized stage and into a place of more ease.

A second example is a client who came to me as the head of manufacturing at a local biotech firm. Using 360 feedback, we identified a few specific leadership competencies that needed attention. One competency in particular was his presentations, which tended to miss the mark in terms of audience needs. His Growth Edge Report helped him to see what was driving his choices regarding the content he typically included in his presentations. Historically he felt a strong need to prove himself; he would often lose his audience in the excessive details about the science behind his work. Through our work he learned this came from a tether in the Socialized space. By asking different questions, taking multiple perspectives and seeing systems, he is now better able to focus his presentations on helping the leadership team understand the impact of their decisions on the work of his department, and ultimately, the organization as a whole. This client's gifts as a leader became more visible to the CEO and the board of directors and he was recently recognized with a promotion to the role of Chief Manufacturing Officer.

My third example is a client who is a Vice President at a large pharmaceutical firm in Philadelphia. Her Growth Edge Report and our subsequent Growth Edge Coaching enabled this client to hypothesize about how her colleagues made meaning. By asking different questions, by taking multiple perspectives and also considering hero stories, she was able to shift the interpretations she attached to her colleagues' behaviors and come from a more neutral place, thus setting up a very different dynamic in her communications with others. Over time, she has noted an improvement in her interactions as well as her relationships with her colleagues, which resulted in a more satisfying work environment for her.

Constructive-development theory is a fascinating topic to me, and I am quite passionate about continuing to integrate Growth Edge Coaching in my work with my clients. Whether I am conducting a formal interview in order to prepare a written report or simply sharing information about the theory and having dialogue with my clients, I consistently see them have insights and learning about their meaning making and their growing edge. And though growth and learning are high on my list of values, the words of Robert Kegan echo in my mind always. Kegan said, "Among the many things from which a practitioner's clients need protection is the practitioner's hope for the client's future, however benign and sympathetic these hopes may be." I remind myself often the choice of whether or when to grow must always lie with my client, not me.