

Cornelis on Growth Edge Coaching

I have used an example of an unfolding coaching relationship to elicit some views I hold on the Growth Edge work. You can start with the example or start with the views.

Sara increases her impact without authority and finds her voice

Structured yet flexible conversations

A programme director of a non-profit organization reached out to me two years ago. Let's call her Sara. She shared with me that she wanted to lead through greater collaboration and impact in areas where she did not have direct authority over stakeholders. After eliciting some feedback from colleagues Sara narrowed this down to 'getting better at addressing relational dynamics rather than focusing on content only in difficult conversations'. Over the next half-year we used elements of the Immunity to Change process: mapping, self-observations and then a series of on-the-job experiments. Sara found the dialogues and exercises very helpful and reported good progress. I enjoyed the process too, although it was sometimes challenging for me. The agreement was that she would send input 24 hours before a next session. In reality this did not always happen, even after candid reminders. I learnt to allow for the emergent on the one hand and creating a solid enough process on the other hand. We mused about these observations and rounded off the developmental coaching process in a positive way.

Casual conversations

Over the course of next year, when I was visiting this organization to meet other clients, I often would stop by for a chat or coffee. We had casual conversations about work, life, complexity theories, politics, and development. After some months Sara shared with me that these casual conversations had also been transformational for her. She had regained a sense of belief in what was possible, and found motivation to apply for a newly created role in the corporate centre. My takeaway was that although I didn't feel I was 'adding' much, these conversations 'around the edges' apparently had a big influence. Notwithstanding a difference between causality and correlation, the point is that a developmental relationship does not need to end with the last contracted session. Things happen in between and over time.

A different and deeper conversation

After some time Sara reached out to me again to talk about the new role she had accepted and about some possible support. We agreed to do a Growth Edge interview, report and debrief. This helped her to integrate her solid and successful past experience and place both this and herself on the adult development map. Seeing this bigger picture, Sara recognized that while she was successful in many ways, when it came to making hard decisions, she was lead more by doing what was expected by her own managers or by avoiding possible issues of conflict all together. Sara shared with me that this mindset would not serve her in her new role where she needed to orchestrate collaborations on a bigger and more contentious playing field. She also could see how she had made a beginning to develop a more internal, self-authored voice or compass for making decisions. Sara had begun to articulate a purpose that was stronger than her fear of tension or repercussions with her employees and key stakeholders. She experienced this as her growth edge and saw a possible curriculum ahead of her. Rather than seeing this new role as the 'last station in order to retire quietly' she now – at age of 60 - sees this role as an opportunity to help transform herself and thereby the system Sara is part of leading.

Ongoing conversations

Sara and I are now working in this individual curriculum as well as designing and facilitating dialogues with internal and external stakeholders. The story unfolds and so do we.

This story helps to surface a number of important principles that my work with clients is based on.

I believe that people can always grow and develop. I also think that growth and development is usually not a goal in itself but a desire in response to a new situation, such as new roles, more responsibilities, more uncertainty or increased complexity. Some leaders really feel 'stuck' or 'out of their depth', whereas others frame their aspiration as growing 'from good to great'. In most cases though, there is an actual or expected experience of too much tension that needs resolution; the complexity of the demands they face no longer matches the complexity of their mind and repertoire of behaviours.

I sense that development of a more complex and better-adapted form of mind (and behaviours), at the core, involves some form of renegotiation with others, and with yourself. I have experienced that this renegotiating process can sometimes come with profound experiences of loss for a client. Letting go of a way of making sense of the world that has served you well in the past, but needs to be transformed, can bring joy and pain at the same time. Working on this Growth Edge therefore requires deep empathy of me as the coach. My role in this is to help the client make sense of his or her meaning making, let the client infer the relevance of this way of meaning making for the particular challenge or goal he or she is working on, and help the client see and make choices about what to do next in service of his or her development.

My view is that this development happens over time, in between coaching sessions and during sessions. I could see how a single new insight or increased awareness can be very powerful and transformational. Any shift that helps a person to make something visible (object) for them that was out of their awareness (subject) can serve their development. I nevertheless remain cautious not to confuse a single powerful moment with sustainable development. I see that clients who do the work of noticing, experimenting, and journaling in between sessions usually benefit more.

I work from the premise that a journey can take place in various ways yet use the same principles. This can range from the 'full options' Growth Edge Interview + Report + Debrief + Follow-up sessions, to more emergent and fluid Growth Edge work, to combinations with other (developmental) approaches such as Immunity to Change or a Leadership Circle Profile 360. I believe that the client readiness, context, nature of the request, fit with coach are factors that come into play when choosing a particular approach and coach.

For me a good coaching relationship fires on multiple cylinders. It aims to help the client in more than the professional context, and it also serves me to grow as a coach and as a whole person. In addition it is helpful for me as a coach to get supervision from persons who are familiar with growth edge as well as from persons who are familiar with other adult development models, and other wise folks. In all this beautiful work I believe that carrying a good sense of humour and light heartedness, makes a positive difference for everyone. In closing I would like to share that while this section may read as my 'credo' I can also say that I hold these views lightly. I remind myself that I *have* ideas and that I *am not* my ideas.