

Potential – it’s something that everyone of us has and, at the same time, it is something that is so often stunted. I came to coaching for a lot of reasons, not the least of which was a growing understanding that being smart, or expert at something, is only one piece of the puzzle. But the message – that success comes from hard-work and smarts – was the narrative I carried in my early career and it largely came to fruition. It wasn’t until I found myself in a role - working hard (and smart), yet simultaneously underutilized, unsatisfied, and unfulfilled - that I started to wonder about the various forces threatening (or cultivating) potential. *Was it a case of maxing out my potential, being under-nurtured, or some combination?* Questions like these filled my head and fueled my exploration of the field of adult development.

In this ongoing exploration, my philosophy of developmental coaching continues to evolve, as I weave together the theory, personal experience, client experiences and our shared interactions. It is not simple. I’m hopeful that offering a snapshot of my coaching journey offers a better sense for this evolution and the ongoing exploration.

As a beginning coach, the belief that consumed me was this: *organizations were sitting on stockpiles of untapped potential and leaders were the barrier to access.* So, it followed, that my job was to “fix” the leaders and teach them how to not only mine the stockpiles, but nurture and grow that potential into possibility. With this mindset, I eagerly listened with the intent to fix – searching for the manager’s fault. The worst part – I didn’t see that I was doing it – I was subject to (or looking through) this problem-fixing belief. Instead, I saw myself not only supporting my clients, but also supporting the people who work for them. My beliefs were continually reinforced with the positive feedback from clients, at least until I started to see clients slide back to their old patterns.

Hoping for a way to achieve long-lasting shifts, propelled deeper into the study and practice of adult development theory, which helped me to see that problem-fixing was a filter through which I looked at every client. With curiosity and reflection, I shifted from looking through the problem-fixing approach, to looking at it. This shift helped me begin to see clients, not as problems, but as humans with unique, interesting and layered ways of making sense of themselves and the context in which they operate. Previously, I saw clients as a vehicle to solving problems (a fascination of engineers, like me). My work with clients evolved from “fixing” their leadership approach to one of gaining insight about how they know what is “right” for them. Then exploring how their current version of “right” influences each action and interaction, inviting leaders to imagine new possibilities.

There are also times when imagining possibilities, and multiple “rights” isn’t what is needed; sometimes the immediate, impending obstacle is what needs to be addressed. Here, the work might be exactly about fixing a problem and that’s generally not the right spot for developmental coaching. But, when a leader faces that same obstacle repeatedly, going beneath the surface with development approaches offers the opportunity to make lasting change. With the problem-fixing approach as object, a plethora of possible coaching approaches become available, rather than just one.

Looking at the people as the problem to be solved had a way of working, but it obscured the humanity woven into the everyday challenges we face. Making a shift to look through the lens of humanity, makes it easier to see multiple perspectives, absent judgement on the perspective. Trying on the lens of Growth Edge Coaching has enabled me to listen in new ways. My ear tunes itself toward connection, understanding, and seeing the world through the sense-making of another. It gives me this rich opportunity to just be with a client, offering a safe space to sit in and roll around in their experiences. Not only that, it helps me to see shades of perspective previously invisible to me, creating even more space for me to hold my own beliefs and assumptions lightly, opening the door for my own growth.

For me, coaching has moved beyond judgement or problem-fixing, to walking side-by-side and being on the journey together. With problem focused coaching, my perceived need for data goaded me into diving deeply into the story of what happened, clouding my view of the underpinning structure. Sometimes it was easy to collude with a client to tell a beautiful story of how the actions made a ton of sense and were exactly the right thing to do

(and that might be true), but we missed the depth of sense-making behind the actions (and reactions). Uncovering this sense-making is an invitation to explore our developmental edges and, if we wish, to help us better navigate the complexity that is the world around us. The shift in focus from problem-fixing to sense-making has allowed me to create even safer spaces to explore and open different possibilities that were previously shutdown by having an end in mind. Growth Edge Coaching helps me be less certain, more open to possibilities, and makes it easier to meet a client wherever they are on the journey.

A Case Study

Like many leaders who come to coaching, Carmen was extremely successful according to any external measure. In her case, she was surgeon at a top-ranked hospital and sought after by other prestigious hospitals. However, despite accolades and accomplishments, Carmen was feeling underappreciated, exhausted, and under-engaged.

Exploration, assessment data, and self-reflection led Carmen to be more intentional when engaging others and better allocate her time, in service of reigniting her passion for work. A first step was to create an Immunity to Change (ITC) map, painting a picture of the self-reinforcing system that had her stuck. An initial observation was the tension between her deep desire to be more intentional and her underlying “hidden commitment” to eagerly accept projects that garnered her support and recognition. As a result she was slogging through high-visibility projects, most of which were of little to no interest to her, contributing to her dissatisfaction.

As we wondered about the assumptions that might keep her committed to taking on these kinds of projects, the “Big Assumption” that most caught her attention was this: *“I assume that if I’m unsupported in anything, they won’t see the value I bring to the team and actively work against me.”* Looking through this lens, Carmen consistently made choices that deprived her of satisfying projects. In cases where support seemed lacking, she tended to complain about the project, giving the appearance that she was not a team player, despite her deep interest in collaboration.

Exploring this idea of overt support and recognition, we began to wonder together, what might be the risks or hard parts of working in less visible, or seemingly unsupported areas? We asked questions like: *“What might it mean to allocate time where you believe you bring value, regardless of whether others say you bring value?”* This led to new discoveries about the interplay between behaviors and assumptions, where she surfaced a nuanced assumption, saying actually, *“my hard work will never pay off.”* Her insight helped her to see just how long she had been carrying this assumption, recalling her college years. In preparation to make the rowing team, she sacrificed everything – academic, friendships, and more – to earn her spot, and she did earn her spot. Upon returning from summer break, though, she was told the spot was no longer hers and it was given to a different rower, one who hadn’t put in the work, laying the groundwork for this assumption to take root and cloud her vision.

We began to play with new ways to imagine what it meant to “put in the work” and how she measures “payoff.” She found a new appreciation for how she was making decisions and engaging with others. In particular, she became more intentional about defining her role in projects and setting clear boundaries. This intentionality helped her free up more time and she feels less stressed, despite more things coming her way. She found it striking, that caring less about overt appreciation was just the thing that garnered her greater appreciation in the organization. She now finds herself engaged and contributing at a high level. At the close of our engagement, she reflected with this key realization: *“this is an on-going process, where I need to keep checking myself and my assumptions; and it is most important, and perhaps most difficult to do, when things feel tense or frustrating.”* By getting beneath the surface, Carmen found ways to minimize, and in some cases, completely remove these perennial obstacles to make lasting change.