

Jason Rabinowitz

Reflections on Growth Edge Coaching

When potential coaches – or indeed anyone – asks me about my coaching approach, I always mention one aspect: that coaching often has a starting point of a desired behavioural change, but that it is crucial to get at the thinking (and feeling) that drives behaviour. Behaviour change *can* be the sole focus when we are dealing with more technical skills or only looking for a short term fix, but without delving into the underlying thinking, the results can fall short, be unsustainable, or look and feel inauthentic.

The adult development framework used by Growth Edge is for me an extremely powerful and comprehensive tool to address ways of thinking. It gives a way of both structuring the way we look at how we think (each developmental level has a raft of interconnected mindsets and assumptions) but is also liberating and inspirational. When clients understand that there are new and broader modes of seeing the world beyond their current view, they get excited about the journey and can be more insightful (and compassionate) about how their current mode of sense making may be limiting them.

None of this implies that moving towards a new developmental level is straightforward! It takes real effort, courage, humility and vulnerability to acknowledge that our existing way of seeing the world is not the only one, or indeed that there is such a thing as sense making to start with (vs the world being an objective fact). But our natural human yearning for growth can give us the energy to embark on the quest, even when the destination cannot be fully known in advance.

Growth Edge theory played an influential role in one of my recent coaching engagements – not through a specific GE interview, as this was early in my training, but through listening to how he made sense of his situation and of the world more broadly. Timothy was introduced to me when he was looking for a coach to help him work on assertiveness: he was the head of tax in an investment firm, and his new boss had told him that he needed to be more forceful, didactic and confident when interacting with his internal clients. Timothy's natural style was to be more consultative and conversational. At our chemistry meeting, I asked Timothy whether he agreed with his boss's view, and he said he thought he largely did – this was important for me to know, as trying to help someone shift behaviour when they don't understand or agree with any change to it with can be a very unproductive pursuit.

However, soon after we started working together and had built a trusting relationship, it became clear that he did not always agree with the way his boss wanted him to behave – he thought it might be unproductive with some of his clients. But he struggled with holding his own perspective in the face of a powerful and persuasive authority figure in the form of his boss. If his boss believed he needed to change, then he must be right and be obeyed! This was a potential symptom of the form of mind known as the Socialized Mind, where we validate our courses of action through reference to the norms of our social/professional group. It also emerged that part of Timothy's view that being more assertive would not always be productive was influenced by a fear of conflict with what he termed 'scary big people' – yet more influential authority figures, where he feared that challenging them would be seen as disrespectful and frowned upon.

I introduced the Growth Edge framework to him and showed him how his way of seeing the situation could be characterised as a Socialized form of mind. He found this helpful, and started to see the limitations of this form of mind: he had an automatic respect for (i.e. accepting as gospel, not wanting to challenge, being seen as conforming) the authority figures around him, but was being torn between (what he perceived as) loyalty to his boss or to his internal clients. As he saw it,

thinking this way, he couldn't satisfy both of them – or himself. If he could start to make a shift towards a more self-authoring form of mind, he would be able to form his own opinion about the best course of action to take, be able to see the assumptions he was making more clearly (if I challenge my boss, then I will be fired...) and refer to his own values and principles. We started with some small experiments – thinking through where it might make business sense to be more assertive with his clients (vs just following his boss's edict to do so everywhere), and where he wanted to push back on his boss (when he felt strongly that being more challenging to his clients would not help advance a situation). From these safe-to-fail experiments he started to learn how to pay attention to his inner voice, how his body felt when faced with potential conflict (and what the default behaviours would be if he blindly followed these feelings), and when he could be at choice about what approach to take.

Over the course of our engagement, Timothy became increasingly confident in formulating and asserting his own point of view, and learned that the 'worst case scenario' rarely transpired. He felt some loss for the old certainty of just doing what he was told (a common phenomenon when growing out of a form of mind), but was bolstered by the sense of autonomy and achievement that a self-authored form of mind enabled him to feel.