



The Big Blue Box Ltd

'I Wish We'd Had This Conversation 2 Years Ago!

It's easy to get lost in the day to day and to lose sight of the big picture. In this case getting a dream job and being successful has left this talented leader without a clear plan for his own development. And his very success with 'people' meant that he ignored the need to look after himself. In growing his self understanding the coachee uncovers some formative and limiting beliefs.

The Background

R is the senior manager of a highly successful business unit within an aggressive, growing international group. In his career with the organisation, he has been promoted several times and then relocated within the last three years, to what he describes as his dream job. Through all the changes he continues to deliver consistently outstanding performance results.

Yet despite all the success, he now reports that he is facing a confidence crisis.

'It feels pretty lonely...as you go further up the tree so the coaching gets less and less... I don't dwell on my success ... My predecessor was seen as walking on water.'

'I [am] becoming increasingly anxious about my trajectory in the job, and less confident [and] happy in general as a result. ... The strengths that got me here no longer seemed valued or appropriate for the task. ... feeling of failure despite record performance numbers ... objectives [are] around "clearing the roadblock" and establishing personal plans with confidence.'

The Process

Our initial conversation began to look at some of the background to R's role and it was clear that the culture in which R was being required to perform was an issue.

'I'm not a 'drill into the details' kind of person... I'm about forming a good team... I'm surrounded by technical experts who understand the detail... I wonder if the skill set that [the senior leadership] want is the one that I have.'

There seemed to be some significant experiences that had predetermined his responses to particular situations. R described his behaviour in the leadership team's review meetings:

'I feel like the little kid standing outside the headmaster's study every time we have a [periodic performance] review.'

R agreed to do some work examining these early formative experiences:

'I think I'll go and talk to my parents about that... I've never thought about that... I never thought that those things mattered at this time in my life – I've just turned 50!'

Even as we concluded our first session R remarked:

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'I'm feeling really quite emotional... I wish we'd had this conversation 2 years ago ... I've been feeling like this for the last 2 years!'

Our second meeting was arranged for 2 weeks time.

Reporting on the conversation with his parents, and his reflections on our first session, R stated:

*'I felt that last session was going to uncover some ancient history... so ... I approached this task[of talking to my parents] with real trepidation.'
'I've had several really powerful flashbacks [about authority figures]...*

R explored some vivid examples:

*'Being dragged to the headmaster's office as a 6 year old – I can't even remember what I had done wrong...
The judo instructor who insisted that we 'got everything right'...
The piano teacher who demanded perfection or... or there would be "hell to pay"... I can see that I have an irrational fear of authority.'*

The connections and the influence of these early events became clear as we explored where this had impacted on R's behaviour.

'I recall as a young manager how I had an idea to resolve a wider problem in the business ... I'd worked it and worked it, trying to make it better... I didn't tell my manager about it until one day it was discovered... I thought I would be for the high jump because it wasn't ready... My manager was amazed at the innovation, and it was implemented throughout the company... I'd kept quiet about it because I didn't think it would be good enough and it wasn't perfect!

'I can't believe this... this session has also taken an unexpected turn... I wasn't expecting this either....'

Armed with this growing self-awareness, R was keen to begin to use it.

'I've got the next [periodic performance review] coming up.... I completely froze when I was challenged last time ...I can't make the same mistakes again'

We discussed strategies to enable R to use these new insights within his planning and preparation for the next event. We agreed to have a review of his performance straight after the event.

Reviewing R's preparation for the event he said:

'I'd 'spoken' to the old headmaster - as an adult and not as a child. (When I'd asked my mum about this incident, although she couldn't remember it initially she confirmed that it wasn't anything serious)...

I realised that this deep fear, this memory –which was nothing - was holding me hostage...I've realised that I was in fear of authority...I've opened up all my thoughts and memories and unpacked them...

I did that reading we agreed and it gave me a real strategic perspective, - this is a war not a battle and I need to have plan'.

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The Outcomes

At our next conversation R was clearly more confident; he had had a very successful periodic performance review.

'[The event] went really well, in fact the MD spoke to me afterwards and said he could see the change and he liked it. Our sessions have definitely slain a couple of dragons for me and led me (privately kicking and screaming) to the long term career planning table, which is now a work in progress.'

Evaluation

After the coaching series concluded R was asked to evaluate the outcomes. Here are some of his comments.

'Probably the most obvious "aha" was way back in the diagnosis part, owning up to and dealing with a hard-wired fear of authority. This was a surprise since it was not in my sights as a "target" to address. The "aha" and subsequent reflection and reading led me off on a personal journey.'

What has changed?

'I feel more confident to be "myself", and accept my own strengths and weaknesses as "ok"...I'm definitely calmer and less stressed out even though we are in a high stress environment... I have been able to moderate my reaction to highs and lows in a more neutral zone.'

'Personally I have developed new interests outside of work and followed up with lots of action! ...making social bookings, travels, reading, forward planning, "getting things done", career planning, first steps into what happens beyond career, even fixing previously ignored [issues].'

Can you identify 3 key changes you are going to make?

'Probably the biggest: quit living in / worrying about the past. This was triggered by the "headmaster" story, which (once understood) has been permanently banished! I have found that, perhaps surprisingly to me, the process of dealing with such demons is irreversible.'

'New focus / refocus on the people side of my role, in every aspect. It's what I'm here for and the way I can add value. New plans and activities are already in the diary, new conversations are happening every day.'

'Using [the tools identified in the coaching session) and making time for people within and outside of the organization, including, of course family.'

Can you estimate a value, a quantity, a percentage change, an increase/decrease on a scale of 1 to 10 or an amount?

1. "Anxiety" high (9) to low (2ish)
2. "Planning" Low (3) to higher but still work in progress; (7)
3. "Honesty" (especially upwards) "too guarded" (3) to "just say it" (8)
4. "Doing" (taking action) from low (2) to high (9)