



## The Big Blue Box Ltd

### **'I've Been Behaving Like A Teenager!'**

Coaching outcomes can be life-changing yet on many occasions, support is only made available once the coachee is in significant difficulty.

Unlocking the potential in these situations can require patience; attitudes and behaviours can be deeply embedded. And even when the individual is able to make a change, for it to be sustainable, other factors may also need to be flexible.

This case also illustrates the wider, powerful impact that an effective coaching process can have.

#### **The Background**

The coachee E has been in the organisation since its foundation, he is highly respect for his practical and technical knowledge of the product and its evolution. He is seen as a *'great mind'*, a *'voice of reason'* and a *'trusted, hands on problem solver'* who is *'spot on'* with his predictions.

The business has grown rapidly and E now finds himself leading a substantial team. He reports in to T, an MD boss, who is a strong character and can be abrupt. E is in difficulty.

Over time his peers have noticed that E's confidence has declined, he is failing to assert his views, he appears overwhelmed, is easily side tracked from the priorities, is not delegating or developing his teams' leaders, he is even beginning to get insubordination from some of them, and conflict shuts him down, he has become passive and reluctant to make decisions.

The briefing from HR indicates that good outcomes from the coaching would be to prevent E's *'burnout'*, to avoid potential *'performance management'* actions, but positively to retain his skills in the business, to enable him to assert himself, to make decisions and own them, to be *'OK'* about being wrong and particularly to enable him to *'step up'* into the emerging role for which he would be ideal.

#### **The Process**

We met and passed the *'Chemistry Test'* yet still E seemed guarded. It was significant that E hadn't pre-booked the meeting room (we changed rooms several times) or arranged simple courtesies such as a tea, coffee or even drinking water.

Whilst his answers and discussion were extensive it seemed as if E wasn't being entirely *'open'*. E seemed passive and lacking energy, he made no notes, until prompted.

Progress was slow.

Eventually E described his challenges:

*'Firefighting... pulled in several directions... feeling I'm neglecting the people side (I'm not) growing people... I'm not getting my point across in meetings... I have no personal objectives, I struggled in my old job with this, I've got no plan, and in the absence of a plan... I drift... I react!'*

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For our second session E hadn't found the time for the 'home work' exercises that he had agreed to do – the business priorities prevented it!

Our conversation turned to examine his earlier story.

Understanding some of his experiences raised his self-awareness and we found several areas where E had achieved recognisable success and developed considerable capability.

With his confidence resurging, before our next meeting E was challenged to seek further feedback from his colleagues, friends and close relationships.

In our third session he reported on this feedback.

It was direct and honest, E had 'heard' it, he had made notes and had reflected upon it.

*'I'm good at solving problems and helping people but I'm not keeping them informed, I'm not telling them... people don't know how to communicate with me... I'm not visible... they don't know what I am doing!'*

E paused.

*'Maybe I'm not pushing myself... I feel I've let myself down... this is not what I expect of me...I'm not working hard to engage with others... I'm not thinking about other people... I've got lazy and stopped trying.'*

The patterns, behaviours and previous situations suddenly began to make sense. He could see his behaviours objectively.

*'I've been behaving like a teenager! I've lost my personal standards and become a child, I've been waiting for others to act, and not interacting with other people.'*

### **The Outcome**

As I arrived at E's offices for our next session several weeks later, it was immediately apparent that there had been a breakthrough.

E was waiting for me at the reception, he walked with me, chatting openly, to the meeting room where his preparations and planning were evident.

His MD T joined the meeting. What followed was inspiring.

T gave a detailed explanation of the complexities in the business, product and clients, of his own agenda and expectations. E listened and made notes and then, leaning in, firmly and politely asked for permission to challenge. Granted it, he then made a persuasive and overwhelming case for his vision and how it aligned with what T was aiming to achieve.

One of the issues with coaching is that whilst it can 'change' the individual it cannot always facilitate supportive changes to the working environment - the development of the coachee can be thwarted by external pressures and the outcome is less sustainable.

The flow of this conversation was significant. E was asserting himself as an 'adult', and his MD T was responding positively by rethinking his own strategy and behaviours.

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T admitted:

*'I've also been lost in the weeds! I can see that if I'm not seeking clarity from (the board) then I can't give it to you, I need to spend time doing more of that!'*

E was influencing his MD's opinion such that the contract between the two of them was being renegotiated.

At this moment the HR sponsor for the project joined the meeting – remarking later that the positive working relationship was immediately apparent.

The meeting became a coaching session for both parties with actions and commitments on both sides.

I agreed to check-in with E after a couple of months to review and evaluate but also to ensure that his progress was being maintained.