



The Big Blue Box Ltd

Learning Some Painful Lessons

For leaders, the ability to be able to be flexible in their approach to people and problems is a key quality.

But for some, their styles are deeply rooted and personal change is really challenging.

This is often presented as a strong set of values that the individual is not prepared to compromise. But their future success and even continuing their immediate employment could be adversely affected by this inflexibility.

To be able to unlock their potential by increasing their 'adaptability' is a subtle coaching challenge.

The Background

N has achieved major changes in senior leadership levels within some of the toughest and most challenging organisations.

At work he is confident and knowledgeable, driven by success

'I know I've got a bit of an ego ... I know I'm good at what I do... I can fight a good fight... I'm directive... I'm a bit macho!'

He reported that *'my methods are not necessarily how it should be done!'*

In his current role he has achieved all that has been asked of him and he has a loyal team around him.

The Process

Discussions soon revealed that there are some things that are now holding him back from further promotion.

His values of 'honesty' and retaining his integrity cause him difficulty in the 'political' atmosphere that so often pertains in senior management engagements – he finds it difficult to manage the shades of meaning, the manoeuvring, negotiation and positioning that appear to him to be 'dishonest'...

'I've tried pandering to people – trying to keep them sweet, but in my experience that has often been damaging.... I find it difficult to 'schmooze' and to 'do the right thing all the time! ... I won't play political games... but... I need to learn how to manage upwards.'

He has learned from painful mistakes in his personal life, values of honesty now carry huge importance for him.

'I wasn't honest in my private life... I guess I've got a bit of a chip on my shoulder...'

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Our discussion ranged cross 'strategy' and 'flexibility of style', and political 'savvy'. We introduced the idea of Emotional Intelligence, 'The Art of War' – being 'strategic', 'playing the long game' and being 'flexible', of 'balancing' the long term objectives with the needs of the immediate. We noticed how principles and values come with a cost.

We also noted how sometimes we have to manage a 'duality' – for example, a lawyer has to defend a client whose behaviour may be almost indefensible – a public relations role may require constructing an alternative interpretation or explanation for a client's action. Compromise is sometimes a survival strategy. We may need to play a 'role' at work.

As the challenging and open discussions developed so N's attitude noticeably changed and he began to reflect on his earlier attitudes.

What advice would you now give to yourself 10 years ago?

'Ten years ago I was all ego... I was all about money and promotion.... I wasn't honest...

I've learned some painful lessons.... I can see the pain created by my decisions.

I know what I'm good at and I'm cool with that, for the first time, in a long time I'm happy with who I am... I'm going to play to my strengths.'

How are you going to retain and secure your progress with this new way of behaving?

'This is getting me to think differently...

I'm going to be proactive, to manage upwards and look for work, I need to do this... I'm going to be seen around the business, to interact, to talk to people...to engage.'

The Outcomes

It was clear that N was making significant attitudinal and behavioural changes, precipitated by the openness and honesty he was able to find in the coaching conversations.

Despite his initial stance of fixed values and behaviours he was beginning to develop a genuine flexibility and adaptability - change was possible.