



The Big Blue Box Ltd

Storytelling

Listening to a coachee's story is a powerful action. For a significant proportion of coachees, the coaching session is the first time that they have told their whole story, to one person, at one time.

Just 'hearing' their own story can be revealing. Time spent listening to the story is a useful early stage in building the relationship, identifying blockages and unlocking potential.

The experience of being listened to, confidentially, independently and without 'judgement' can be cathartic, insightful and revealing, enhancing trust, openness, self-awareness and a preparedness to become receptive, it helps to lower defences and move towards having an adult to adult conversation.

But it is not just the facts of the story that are important. The way the story is told is also revealing.

How quickly does the coachee tell their story?

The first telling of the life story can often be rushed, events collapsed and out of sequence, as if there is so much to tell and not enough time, or the story is not interesting and we should move on to something else, or even that the story is so familiar that it is assumed that the listener has heard it before.

What happens when the story is retold?

Going back over the story, step by step, will enable the story teller to explore more detail.

Gentle prompting by the listener can begin to control the flow and refocus.

Having heard the story once, the listener can assist in making connections, seeing repetition of events and 'cycles'.

At what moment in their life does the coachee begin their story?

Extending the timeline further back beyond the initial starting point will often reveal important events that will aid understanding.

K started her story from the age of 16, but her earlier childhood held significant events that impacted upon her adult life. Only after trust has been established would the earlier story be told.

Q recalled being taken back to school, as a small child, by his mother for a disciplinary meeting in the headmaster's office, 40 years later as a senior leader, this event impacted upon his confidence and ability to present in the Board room.

How long does it take and how much detail is included?

The storytelling is so important in building trust and understanding that the process should not be time-bound unnecessarily.

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From the briefing given by the HR team it was clear that J had had a very difficult time at work and that he didn't accept some of the 'unfairness' that he had experienced. He was also very suspicious of the coaching process.

The first coaching session lasted for 6 hours, and it was 5 ½ hours of storytelling before J approached the most difficult recent experiences. Having built the trust over the preceding period, J was able to accept his own story, as he told it in full for the first time to anyone.

Sessions occurring early in the coaching series tend to feature more storytelling and therefore these sessions tend to be longer than sessions later in the coaching process. This can impact upon diary planning.

What does the coachee regard as being significant or important?

During the storytelling, people can find keys to their behaviour that they may have overlooked or judged to be insignificant.

H's low self-esteem meant that he didn't value his own experience, assuming that his individual mix of qualities, achievement and experience had no significance, his confidence was low partly because he didn't know his own story or recognise his achievements.

Encouraging him to tell his story, to fill in the background details he didn't think were important, enabled him to see his experiences as connected 'chapters within a whole book' – each phase adding to the story, each adding value to him as an employee, partner, friend and person.

Is this the whole story?

A complex story might exist in different places in their life, perhaps part is in childhood, part at work, some at home, some hidden away and forgotten. These phases are often partitioned away, perhaps hidden, disregarded, and assumed to be not relevant to the 'current' moment.

The revealing of the full story can be enormously insightful for the coachee, making connections and building their understanding of themselves.

Does the client's objective for the coaching affect their story?

Sometimes the coachee feels that they know 'the answer' and can gloss over details that could reveal an alternative interpretation.

K came to our coaching session with a firm objective.

The story started at the point where K perceived the route to the objective might be found. But taking time to listen to the 'presented' story and its links to the 'expected' solution only told a part of the story and intuitively left many questions unanswered.

Patience encouraged further vital layers of the story to be revealed, K 'remembered' hidden and forgotten parts to the story and a new 'sustainable' route to a modified objective emerged, and K's engagement and motivation increased.