

OXFAM COACHING UPDATE



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Welcome to issue no 14 of the Coaching Update, designed to share ideas and experiences around coaching across our organisation.

In the last update we focused on the mindset needed to make time to coach. In this update we look at how to support coachees in renewing their own energy, and how Change impacts on energy levels.

Working with Energy

Our October Coach Connects explored how we make time for coaching, and we agreed that as well as managing time, what is really important is an ability to make shifts in our inner state. This is an **energetic** change, and we explored the idea that it may be more productive to focus on managing energy than time. As Schwartz and McCarthy¹ point out, time is a non-renewable resource – we all have access to the same amount and you can't create any more of it, whilst energy is renewable; by paying more attention to our energy levels and what fuels our energy, we can be more effective, and balance the different strands of our life in ways that are truly satisfying and productive.

This Coaching Update will explore two distinct frameworks to support working with an energy perspective in coaching, focusing on how we support coachees to renew their own energy, and understand how energy is impacted by change. There'll be an opportunity to discuss practical application in the next Coach Connects Call on 22nd November.

Our Four Energy Centres

Shwartz and McCarthy identify four key centres which influence the amount of energy available to us. Achieving a positive balance in each area significantly impacts on our performance, and how we 'show up'. Developing healthy rituals or habits is critical to ensuring these energy centres are well-maintained and renewed. If we don't look after our energy centres, they can't look after us! A key role for coaches is to raise this awareness in the coachee, and support them in developing habits to maintain them.

Physical

Our physical well-being is the primary determining factor for our energy levels. Yet it's easy to overlook as an area for focus in coaching! We might have legitimate concerns that it will take us into areas where medical expertise is required (although it's important to remember that coaching often requires us to navigate boundaries with other disciplines). It may well feel uncomfortable if we've never explored this with a coachee before, and we would want to know that there was sufficient trust and permission to explore. But whilst we certainly wouldn't want to impose a focus on physical well-being, given its critical impact, avoiding it altogether is equally unhelpful. The more at ease we become in discussing physical energy, the more likely it is that coachees will feel safe to explore this territory with us.

Simple questionnaires² or 'Wheel of Life'³ tools (possibly introduced as homework or pre-coaching work) can be helpful here. They normalise a focus on the physical, and, used respectfully can allow the coachee to choose which, if any, areas of physical well-being they want to focus on so.

Areas helpful for a coach to keep on their 'radar' when exploring physical energy (not an exhaustive list) would include:

- Sleep (how many hours, quality, levels of darkness⁴)
- Diet and drink (quality, changes in, balance of food groups, levels of water⁵, alcohol and caffeine consumption)
- Exercise, rest and recreation (balance of, recovery time, doing things we enjoy)
- Being outside⁶ (hours of sunlight, being in nature, impact of long-haul flights⁷)
- Stress (levels of, duration of, management of)
- Long-term health issues (management of, medication, medical advice and care)

It's important to remember that a lack of physical energy is not only related to levels of self-care. What looks like work-related stress could well have a purely biological basis, for example a vitamin deficiency or a parasitic infection. So in certain circumstances, it might be worth inviting coachees to consider booking a health check.

Emotional

Our emotions affect the quality of our energy – which not only impact how we feel and experience events, but also how we affect others. As mammals, we are equipped with a limbic brain which is an open system⁸; this means that willingly or not, we transfer feelings and states from one to another. Bringing awareness to our emotional state allows us first of all to recognise and accept our emotions, just as they are, without deletion or distortion. This consciousness then creates the potential to regulate and change these responses, if necessary, to ones which serve us better. A key factor in being able to change state / attitude is our ability to reframe⁹ negative events or circumstances, so that instead of feeling depleted, we are able to act more resourcefully.

In addition, we each have unique requirements to help us achieve a positive emotional balance. Some of this depends on personality (introverts tend to be refuelled by time spent alone or with trusted friends, whilst extroverts thrive on being more socially active), and we will each experience our own unique energy 'angels' and 'vampires' –the people or situations which make us feel fully alive, and those which leave us low in spirits .

Focusing on emotional energy with coachees can involve helping them to:

- Accept and identify their emotions – we're often conditioned to push away difficult feelings (jealousy, anger, suspicion) – but getting in touch with them and deepening an understanding of why they are there can often unlock a way forward.
- Look at challenges through different lenses so that they can find a positive way of reframing their situation (I'm out of work I'm between jobs).
- Bring a sense of perspective to their situation (how important will this be in a week, a month, 6 months time,?)
- Adopt attitudes which will serve rather than undermine them.
- Understand what brings positive emotional energy, and how the coachee ensures they get the right mix for their needs in order to nourish this cornerstone of energy.

Running on Empty

I had a coaching meeting the other day - I'd texted to say I was running late – a previous telephone meeting had gone on longer than I'd anticipated. Getting into the driving seat I heard the unwelcome warning bell to remind me I was out of fuel. I inwardly berated myself for already knowing that because it had gone off the day before – and I hadn't refuelled then because it would have made me late for something else....

Driving to my appointment I kept telling myself I'd be fine, and that I didn't have time to stop to find a petrol station, I'd have to do that after the meeting – the dashboard indicated I could still make another 35 miles - but at the same time I realised I was choosing to trust that the dashboard was actually accurate..... and did I really know that for sure? And was it better to get to the meeting as fast as possible to avoid being even later, or drive slowly to try and conserve diesel?

I did get to the meeting, making a mental promise to never put myself in that situation again. But it made me reflect that in a car it's pretty straightforward to tell when we're out of fuel, and easy to fix the problem.

The challenge for humans is that we are often so externally focused that we don't hear our own warning bells, and find it hard to access the inner dashboards that would indicate that we are depleted of resources and energy, taking risks with our physical and emotional health. If we're coaching busy people in challenging contexts, perhaps it's part of our duty of care to help raise that awareness, as well as to attend to energy levels in ourselves.

Mental

According to Shwartz and McCarthy, mental energy is all about our ability to focus. It's clearly dependant on both physical and emotional energy, but also relates to how we apply ourselves to the task at hand. Some key aspects we might explore with coachees could be:

- How they deal with / manage interruptions (e-mails, impromptu meetings) AND how they break up lengthy tasks to ensure variety and sufficient breaks from routine.
- How they use technology in ways that contribute to their effectiveness and mental energy rather than diminishing it.
- How and when they experience a sense of 'flow' (Csíkszentmihályi¹⁰)- 'the mental state of operation in which a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity' – and what they can do to introduce greater flow into their work and life.
- How they manage their career and development opportunities to attract the challenges and tasks which will motivate and energise them.

Spiritual

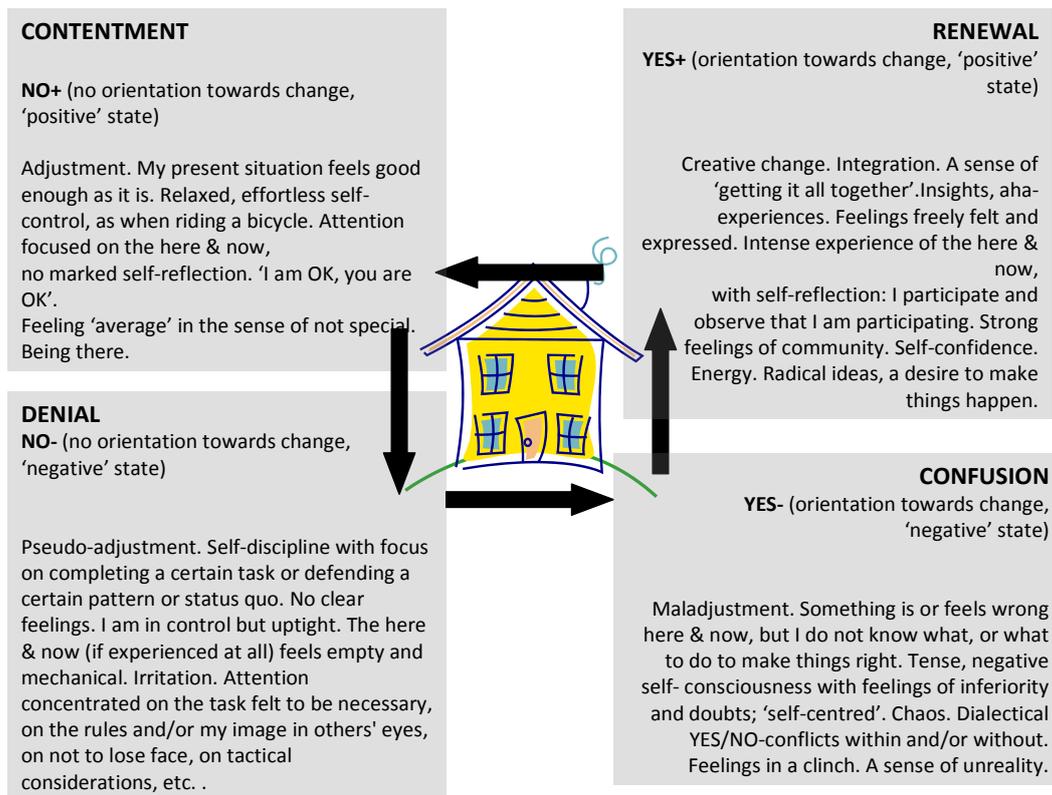
In the same way that we might skip over a focus on physical energy, we might also hesitate to venture into exploring how spirituality contributes to a person's overall energy and well-being. For Schwartz and McCarthy, spiritual energy relates to a person's sense of living a life which has purpose, meaning and contribution, about being part of something that is greater than yourself. It's about exploring one's own personal values and living according to them. Palmer¹¹ says 'Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen to the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I must live, but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.' By living in the true flow and sense of vocation in our own life, we access deeper seams of energy and fulfilment.

Just as with the other energy centres, working with spiritual energy requires an ease within the coach to 'go there'.

- How at ease am I in helping a coachee uncover a deeper sense of the meaning / guiding principles and values in his or her life?
- How ready am I to support the coachee in developing practices which nourish their spiritual energy centre?
- How well do I support an understanding of the connections between physical, emotional, mental and spiritual energy? Or help my coachees find ways which help them to achieve greater stewardship of their resources?

The Four Rooms of Change

The coach joins the coachee for a period of time in a much longer journey of continuous change. Depending on the resilience and resourcefulness of the coachee, many of those changes are easily accommodated and adjusted to as part of normal life, but sometimes life change (often when externally imposed, or perceived as beyond the individual's control) can severely impact on energy levels. The Four Rooms of Change¹² (Claes Janssen) provides a useful psychological model, which is simple, intuitive and easy to introduce in a coaching context. It suggests that at any given time in any part of our lives we inhabit one of these four rooms.



Adapted from <http://www.claesjanssen.com/four-rooms/about-the-four-rooms-of-change/index.shtml>

Key ideas relating to the model are:

- **Change is constant** – we are always experiencing changes in some part of our life, but sometimes we are psychologically oriented to change, and sometimes not. Too much change in too many parts of our lives can become untenable – and one more change can become the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back.
- **We move through the 'rooms' in a fixed order.** We cannot move directly from Contentment to Renewal. According to Kegan and Lahey, we are neurologically pre-disposed to resist change¹⁰; this is likely to be a self-preservation mechanism.
- **It is normal and healthy to experience the 'negative' emotions** relating to change (Denial and Confusion), as well as positively perceived emotions (Renewal and Contentment). Coaches (and leaders) can try and move people quickly to Renewal at the expense of helping coachees process Denial and Confusion stages.
- **It's NOT healthy to stay in any one of the rooms or stages for too long**, even in the more 'positive' rooms of Contentment and Renewal – where there are dangers of either ending up in complacency or burnout. Staying too long in the Denial room can lead to the beginnings of depression, and too long in Confusion might tempt us into making **any** choice, just to escape from the uncertainty we face, even if it's the wrong choice for ourselves personally.

- **We bring past experiences of change with us – the so-called ‘attic of the memory’.** If our previous experience of a merger was disastrous, we are likely to bring that assumption and associated energy into our new experience of a merger. Or if we experienced it as challenging yet ultimately beneficial, we may bring an altogether more constructive attitude.

In my experience, when introduced to the model, most coachees can readily identify the room they are currently in and the rooms they have been in, and what it felt like. They find it reassuring to know that Denial and Confusion are normal, which means those stages can be reframed more positively (‘Oh, so it’s OK to feel confused – it means I’ve moved on from Denial’). Seeing what the next room in the cycle looks like also enables coachees to visualise how they might move on to the next stage of their transition process.

Which room(s) are they in? And how would you coach them?

Two colleagues working on the same project have been told that because of limited funding available, their roles will be redundant by the end of the year.

Bob receives the news extremely badly. He feels that the value of his contribution is being questioned, and is angry that a project he believes is really important is coming to an end – he’s blaming everyone else for what is happening. He finds it almost impossible to think about the future, and every time anyone offers him suggestions or advice about other options he might consider he gives them a strong reason why it will not work in his situation.

Jenny is also shocked by the news. After an emotional weekend processing it, she realises that above everything else, it’s the team-work and commitment of her colleagues which she is going to miss the most. This helps her to regain perspective on how she will manage to complete the contract, and has determined that she will stay supportive and constructive for the rest of the time together. She doesn’t know what career options will be available to her going forward, but when she has time, she is starting to network and research other avenues.

Energy in the coaching session

Finally, it’s worth reminding ourselves that *everything* related to an individual’s energy is present at some level within the coaching space in the present moment. By tuning in to the coachee we become increasingly aware of what he or she is expressing through body language, tone of voice, physical presence, use of language, eye contact, silence. We can’t expect to gain more than just partial impression, but by noticing what we are noticing, tuning in to our own responses, feeding back or gently exploring some of what we sense, we can begin to open up the space together to look at energy.

References

1. See Schwartz and McCarthy’s article ‘Manage your Energy, not your Time’ Harvard Business Review

- <http://www.med.umich.edu/leadership/resources/Manage%20Your%20Energy%20Not%20Your%20Time.pdf>
2. Schwartz and McCarthy have some simple (and free) energy audits on their website <http://www.theenergyproject.com/tools> .
 3. The 'Wheel of Life' tool provides a simple diagnostic to enable a focus on balance between different parts of work and life. It is easily adaptable to a wide range of applications (Wheel of Personal Values, Wheel of Physical Health etc). Mindtools http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_93.htm provides some useful examples and templates.
 4. An increasing number of studies show the importance of total darkness (i.e. eliminating light pollution from street lighting, standby lights on electrical equipment, night lights etc) during sleep as a way of supporting the body's production of melatonin and human growth hormone (HGH). Light pollution at night has been linked to cancer, diabetes and obesity.
http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-06-13/health/sc-health-0613-blue-light-20120613_1_melatonin-blue-light-night-light
 5. See: Hydration and Cognition: A Critical Review and Recommendations for Future Research http://www.jacn.org/content/26/suppl_5/555S.long
 6. Just as humans benefit from total darkness while sleeping, adequate sunlight during daytime hours has been shown to be essential for health, recovery and mental well-being. <http://171.66.125.180/content/52/4/422.full.pdf>
 7. Our body clock synchronises (entrains) with circadian rhythms of day and night, and disruption to this pattern can easily result in poor concentration and fatigue. The impact of circadian disruption on long-haul pilots is well-understood, and research also shows that pilots flying regular *short* hauls experience increased fatigue as well: <http://ocmed.oxfordjournals.org/content/56/4/263.full>
 8. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Limbic_regulation
 9. Cognitive Behavioural therapy and Positive Psychology offer a wide range of tools and techniques applicable in the coaching context which are particularly useful for reframing unhelpful thought patterns. 'ABC' is a tool which looks at Adversity, what we Believe about it, and the Consequences of our beliefs. See: <http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/abc.htm>
 10. See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow_\(psychology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow_(psychology))
 11. From Parker J Palmer 'Let your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation'
 12. For an overview of the model as well as application in an organisational context see: http://web.mit.edu/hr/oed/learn/change/art_four_room.html
 13. Kegan and Lahey coined the concept 'Immunity to Change' in their book by the same title - see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFYnVmGu9ZI> and their worksheet for identifying assumptions which undermine our best efforts to change
<http://experiencelife.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/ImmunityMapWksht.pdf>

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