

Coaching at Work

“pp32-35 Dance of Trust”

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The DANCE of TRUST

Cultivating trust is core to building an effective coaching relationship. The psychotherapy and counselling literature consistently tells us that, irrespective of your particular orientation, it is the co-created relationship that forms the bedrock of trust. Without trust there can be no meaningful work, no conversation of depth and no growth. And it needs to be regenerated constantly.

While we instinctively know the importance of trust, we may default to thinking about it as an on/off switch and that we decide if it is present or not.

Julio Olalla¹ describes trust as a “predisposition to co-ordinate actions with others” and points to the necessary dance between coach and client inside a genuine trusting relationship.

Domains of enquiry

Solomon and Flores (2003)² describe trust as an assessment, an interpretation, an opinion, but never the truth about someone. When we consider trust as an interpretation it allows us to enquire into whether the level of

trust is sufficient for the work we are going to do together. When we say ‘I trust you’, we are making an assessment that everything we have been learning about the person leads us to trust them.

Solomon and Flores suggest that for effective co-ordination, the assessment of trust happens in three domains of enquiry:

- **Sincerity** Does the coach mean what they say? Is the way I experience them consistent with their intentions?
- **Competence** Does the coach have the skills, resources and capacity to do what they have committed to?
- **Reliability** Does the coach take care of the situation and the client consistently over time? Are they diligent, do they monitor what is happening? Are they compassionate?

By thinking about trust as a reflection of sincerity, competence and reliability, we have a framework to manage and repair it.

Within a relationship that is personally significant, such as coaching, Flores² suggests that our enquiry moves into conversations about openness and care. The

Without trust between coach and client, no meaningful work can take place. Yet we are all different – and our interpretation of trust will be, too, says **Eunice Aquilina**

client begins to pay attention to whether the coach cares about what is important to them, and if we can be open enough with each other to do the work we need to do together. It is important to acknowledge how everyone is different in terms of their background, perspectives, understanding and motivation, and how we therefore need to co-create each trusting relationship differently.

As humans we have an innate understanding of trust from our need for safety and belonging. We know instinctively when we feel safe, when we belong and when we can trust the other person.

Somatic sense

Take a moment to think about someone you trusted immediately, and someone you didn't. What were the subtle cues that had you move towards or away from the person? Pay attention to the felt experience. How did your body help you? What feeling was provoked in you? For example, did you feel open and relaxed or closed and contracted? Was your gut churning, did you feel the hairs on the back of your neck stand up, did your throat feel tight?

When we say trust lives in the body, we refer to the body in the somatic sense, from the Greek word *soma*, meaning the living body in its wholeness. "Somatics declares the human form as the space in which humans act,

perceive, think, feel and express emotions and mood. In this interpretation of the body is the field where we build trust and intimacy..." says Dr Richard Strozzi-Heckler³.

Neurological research tells us we have neural circuits that foster interpersonal connection, so we could say we are wired for connection. In their book, *A General Theory of Love*⁴, Lewis, Amini and Lannon say these circuits are found in our limbic system, the part of the brain that experiences and interprets emotions, and that contact and connection actually affect our physiology. They suggest that our nervous systems are not self-contained, that human physiology (at least in part) is an open-loop arrangement and when we connect with others in "a silent rhythm that makes up the very life force of the body", these wordless ties determine our mood and stabilise and maintain our wellbeing, making empathy and attunement possible.

Born with it

Our natural capacity to attune to another, begins in our infancy, when we only feel the world through our sensory systems. Attachment Theory highlights the importance of the primary care giver(s) in meeting an infant's basic needs for safety and belonging. When the caregiver (mainly the mother) is



emotionally attuned with her child in both a feeling and physiological sense, this is what Lewis et al⁴ call "limbic resonance" – the capacity to sense the child's inner state and respond appropriately. Through limbic resonance we develop a greater sense of neural integration, and this builds the child's ability to soothe and calm itself. When we are emotionally nurtured we feel safe and our system is able to relax. However, when emotional nurturing is compromised or absent, we activate strategies, including fight, flight or freeze, to compensate for feeling insecure, unsafe or abandoned.

Experiences in our history literally shape our physicality⁵, all the way from our muscles to our connective tissues, to how relaxed we are, or how contracted we are. These experiences, as well as the recurrent conditioning environment, create a habitual way of being, our identity and the presence we project. In this way we can see that the 'emotional self' and the body are indistinguishable. It is our 'self' that embodies our relational tendencies, our felt sense of trust and our automatic patterns

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of how we interact with, move towards or move away from others.

We cultivate genuine trust with our clients through the quality of our presence. When we become conscious of our own physical and emotional responses we have more choice about the quality of presence we are projecting.

An exercise in trust

Try this: as you sit reading this article, bring your attention to the sensations in your body. Notice temperature (more warm or cold), pressure (more tense or relaxed) or movement (places where you feel still or find movement)⁶. There may also be places you feel nothing, a void or blank.

Straighten your spine to sit a bit taller. Notice your sitting bones as they connect with your chair, and your back against it. Connect your feet to the floor. Align your head so it sits over your shoulders. Bring your attention to your eyes and allow your peripheral vision to extend past the page you are reading so more of the room comes into view. Bring your shoulders up to your ears as you inhale and as you exhale, let them drop.

Now relax your jaw. See if you can drop your breath so you are breathing just 2 inches below your belly button. Finally, relax your pelvis, thigh muscles and calves and take three deep breaths. What shifted in you? What is your mood?

In this practice of centring, we are paying attention to building coherence between our mood, emotions and thoughts. We are self managing, so that the action we take produces the assessment in our client that we are authentic and trustworthy. When we are centred we can better observe and listen so we can take the whole of another in and attune to them. We can make

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better assessments about what is happening for our client and gain insight into their reality unavailable via direct questioning. It is from this centred and balanced way of being that we project a presence that is open, present and connected and enables trust to be felt between client and coach.

‘Clairsentience’

When we listen from this centred and balanced orientation, we can ‘hear’ our intuition. Developing our capacity to sense or intuit our client’s needs, to have a felt sense of their concerns in the moment, is a very intimate move in creating trust. Strozzi-Heckler³ describes connecting with our intuition through our bodies as *clairsentience*, clair meaning ‘seeing clearly’ and sentient meaning ‘capable of feeling’ or ‘conscious of’, which enables us to “access the unconscious impressions of the client”.

Through the body, we can learn to “feel and sense the client’s underlying habits of

thought, emotion motivation and behaviours”.

It is important for us as coaches to hold our intuition as ‘data’, not as truth, but as a place for us to be curious and to explore with clients.

Philosopher Aristotle said we are what we repeatedly do. So, if we want to cultivate a trusting presence with our clients we must first become aware of the presence we are projecting. We do this by bringing our attention to both our thoughts and physical sensations. Noticing when we are in our own emotional reaction of fight, flight or freeze, and then making the choice to shift back to a more neutral position, we communicate connectedness, openness and trust.

From this place we can move together with our client in the dance of trust that is powered by the rhythm of limbic resonance⁴. ■

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