

Coaching at Work

“Myth buster p16”

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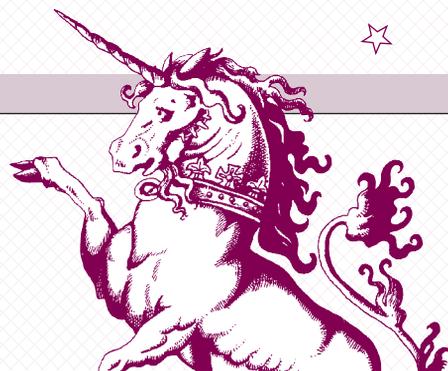
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Life is full of possibilities, but what if your client disagrees? Is it your job to 'fix' them? Or is it more productive to 'meet' them in their stuckness?

CHOICE WORDS

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A given of the coaching profession is that everyone has a choice in life – without choices, there are no possibilities, and coaching is all about enabling or accessing what's possible.

Or is it? I think these assumptions are worthy of further investigation. When I explore them with coaches during my training sessions and presentations, I usually ask for a show of hands from those who agree that everyone has choices. Almost every hand in the room goes up.

I follow this with a second question: "What if someone doesn't believe that they have a choice? Do they still have one?"

This usually provokes different reactions – some people raise their hands, others ponder for a while, and some call out: "Maybe not."

Others find the question too challenging to their core beliefs, and get annoyed at being asked.

And, yet, I think it's a question that's at the heart of the work we do. What happens when the client believes they have no choices in life? How do we hold that? We can be in danger of trying to persuade them that everyone has a choice. But while that may be true from our perspective, it can be like telling the client they're 'wrong'.

Could we instead be curious about their perspective, without trying to change it? Julio Olalla has said, "A good conversation means 'lend me your eyes' – tell me how you see the world."

Let's first take a look at the idea that we only have choices if we see that we have them. A central tenet of ontological coaching

is that our capacity for action is shaped by how we see the world. If I don't believe I have any choices, or that I can't do anything about the situation I am in, then whatever possibilities you put in front of me, or whatever suggestions you make, will appear meaningless because of my inability to see. We need to be able to accept our client's view of reality as legitimate, even if, or perhaps especially if, we see a different reality.

We, as coaches, also need to explore our own relationship to stuckness and hopelessness. Our belief in possibility can result in us being very quick to look for solutions and possibilities in every situation. But can we stay with the client in their stuckness? If we can hold our client's

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perspective as legitimate, and explore with them, they will feel 'met' where they are, rather than 'wrong'. If we can establish such a connection, the coaching can go deeper: we can begin to explore the client's world view, working on the inside, building resilience and capacity, and taking the time to allow things to unfold or for new choices to emerge or become visible.

The idea that we always have choices, and that there are always solutions, is not just part of our mindsets as coaches, but of the broader paradigm in which we all live. If we can step outside of that, we might also be able to help our clients do the same. That might be more liberating for both coach and client. ■

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