

‘Reflections of an executive coach’

by Lindy Bryant

‘What was your favourite job to date in your career?’ As coach, I asked this question of an executive level officer from an APS agency whose job was writing e-business strategies. Answer: ‘When I was 19 years old and a jackaroo fencing in the bush. I could look back at the end of the day and see a dead straight fence that I knew would last’.

This simple sentence told me that this person is motivated by seeing a tangible outcome at the end of the day from his work, that working with his hands is important and that he gets a sense of achievement from doing it all himself (not all of us want to be team players). It also told me that this person prefers concrete and sensate activities and is not motivated solely by seemingly esoteric and conceptual issues where he can’t see an outcome. I checked my perception with him and was right on the button. He probably knew this already, but having someone else articulate it from their point of view, clarified this for him.

This EL1 was de-motivated. It had been a gradual process of a series of career decisions where he kept on accepting opportunities without really pausing to think where it might take him. The money seemed right at the time, with a young family a sense of security was required - a series of contracts and jobs saw him (still young) in a state where the spark of motivation had been extinguished. Getting up in the morning was hard for him - we’ve all been there, right?

Motivation is an elusive thing. It is not static and sometimes hard to manage in day-to-day management, so managers often give up trying to engage it in themselves or their staff. But motivation comes from working where your life and career values are met. Motivation is being *‘in the flow’* - doing something challenging, but still finding it easy, as Daniel Goleman says in *Emotional Intelligence*. Work life these days barely gives people time to think, let alone reflect on whether they are doing the right things in their life with the right balance. Coaching allows, gives permission, nay demands, that you do just that. People change careers 3-4 times during their working life now. There seems to be a silent revolution where people are quietly choosing how to spend their time. Work choices are not made about money and promotion anymore but working where you find the most satisfaction - minimising stress, and putting time and autonomy back into your life.

The EL1 knew he had to be resourceful in seeking an answer to his motivation/career management issues. He had 20 career years ahead of him, knew that his personal work happiness was at stake, and didn't want to become a 'grey cardiganed' public servant. He is a talented, articulate, presentable and marketable APS officer. And that's the curious thing about coaching - most of those I coach are already resourceful and successful and it is this 'resourcefulness', which makes them open to learning and direction from coaching. It is a privilege to coach these people.

My experience as a coach has involved being a safety net, or sounding board and occasionally a rudder! It has been described to me as a maintenance check, or a 'grease and oil for the career'. I am not a psychologist, social worker, partner, friend or family - I am someone with a vested interest in just them (the client) their career and work issues. But one cannot canvas all aspects of a person's working life without getting into life issues. Identifying values, for instance means discussing a wide range of issues which impact on a person's life and work/life balance. The coaching relationship is confidential and discreet (yes, I have cleared with my client to use his story here!).

I have coached a number of SES people who then referred their direct reports to me. This required agreement with the senior manager and direct reports on how and what I cover in those sessions to ensure confidentiality. The rewarding part of this is that it enhances the goodwill between the two in the workplace. It is like an additional workplace support.

Coaching is one of the fastest growing industries in Australia. Top athletes have them, politicians have media and presentation coaches, CEOs have coaches to help them maintain their demeanour, delivery and style - a different set of skills altogether. Coaching can be for career management, presentation, interview skills and resume preparation, for outplacement, life skills, personal fitness, weight loss - for just about anything. We all need help from time to time.

Coaching skills transfer is beginning to happen now, ie coaching managers to be coaches so that they can coach their staff in the workplace. Coaching is a very Australian way of managing - it's democratic and it's a new way of managing and relating. Coaching done on-the-job can be powerful and can take the fear away from performance feedback because it's a normal, regular part of work. And a natural part of a manager's continual request for feedback. This takes time and trust but it works. It's easy and rewarding.

John Adams Australian Quality Council says in *Cultural Imprints* that Australian's respond to leadership if recognised as team players, but also as individual identities, Australians want the truth and can handle the truth. That we want personal, as well as organisational communication together with regular, but low key recognition. I find it's true. Coaching does that for people.

Postscript: The EL1 clarified his career path options - with ideas about how to run his own business as a long-term goal, something he could start planning for now - what we call 'ideas incubation' stage. His attitude to his job changed after recognising his marketable attributes, becoming more risk taking, confident and assertive and, in fact, displaying more leadership behaviour. He now knows what motivates him and what to look for in his next career move.

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