Skills in Relational Coaching

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CONTENTS

3

ENQUIRING COLLABORATIVELY

> Without awareness, there is nothing – not even knowledge of nothingness.
>
> (Fritz Perls, 1992, p. 31)

MAKING MEANING

Existential philosophy emphasises how as a species we humans are profoundly concerned with making meaning (Spinelli, 2005, 2010). Drawing on this reality, a relational orientation to coaching holds that, as human beings, we are always making sense of our experience in relationship to others. Even when we are alone, reflecting on our experience, this will always involve relationships with others as we experience, perceive, understand and make sense of them in our own minds.

Coach and coaching client bring to the coaching relationship their relative histories, personalities, backgrounds, constructs, beliefs about the world and a myriad of other elements that make up the unique subjectivity of each of us. As we described in the previous chapter, the contracting process and the coach's understanding of coaching methods and methodology set particular parameters and bring a negotiated focus and definition to the coaching relationship and its purpose. Within these necessary boundaries, there remain two 'universes' of individual subjectivity that shape the coaching conversation as it unfolds. On this basis, it can be said that no two coaching conversations can ever be the same.

This relational process makes room for meaning to emerge from the interactions between coach and client. This contrasts with more linear, protocol and competence-based approaches (Bachkirova, 2016); here the coach applies tools, methods and techniques to the coaching client, while keeping his own experience

and responses out of the interaction. Both linear and emergent orientations have their place, depending on the context and client requirements moment by moment. But cultivating a capacity for a more emergent orientation is a core component in a relational orientation to practice.

Behaviours and Attitudes Associated with Linear Orientation

- Planning each session and being inclined to stick to the plan irrespective of what the client might be feeling, thinking or saying.
- Having, and being invested in, a clear idea of the direction the client needs to be moving in – a focus on the pre-agreed outcome.
- Having a suite of tools and techniques front of mind to apply to the coaching client.
- Moving to fill silences with a question, model or theory.
- Feeling responsible for getting the client to their stated goals and driving the work in this direction.
- Actively guiding the client in the direction of stated objectives.
- Making decisions about what is relevant in service of the client achieving their stated objectives and calling the client's attention to apparent deviations in order to course-correct.
- Holding the client to account.

Behaviours and Attitudes Associated with an Emergent Orientation

- Holding objectives lightly, bracketing a need for structure and taking time to be present to what the client is saying and how the coach is being impacted.
- Being able to bracket and hold lightly a predetermined sense of direction – to focus on the present moment.
- Being able to allow space for the client to notice, experience and think in the moment.
- Trusting in the process of relating and the fact that insight and meaning emerge from interactions.
- Being willing to consider apparent deviations and meandering as being potentially relevant for the work and for new insight to emerge.
- Valuing and respecting the client's autonomy and right to decide the extent to which he or she may wish to follow through on insights.
- Valuing awareness raising, meaning-making and reflection as fundamental processes in generating insight, shifts in perspective and new possibilities for action.

Exercise 3.1

1. Alone or with a Colleague

Linear vs Emergent Approaches

Reread the descriptions above. Notice which behaviours are more familiar to you.

Do you tend to operate more from a more linear or a more emergent orientation in your coaching?

Is this different with different clients and in different contexts? If so, what might this be telling you about the unique coach, client and context dynamics with each client?

Linear and emergent orientations can be thought of as opposite poles on a continuum. Each has its place and usefulness at different times, with different clients and in different contexts and stages of the coaching relationship. If you tend to operate more from one end of the continuum, how might you experiment with expanding your range towards the opposite pole? How might you hold the tension of linear and emergent so that you can focus on goals while also remaining open to the unfolding and emergent nature of each present moment?

Exercise 3.2

2. With a Colleague

Linear vs Emergent in Practice

Do two 15-minute sessions each of practice coaching.

In one, start by making a clear contract with a measurable outcome. Use this as a guide to the 15 minutes, keeping your focus firmly on the desired outcome.

In the other, experiment with confining your interventions to here-and-now noticings – of your own responses, feelings and sensations; of your client's experience in the moment, including small gestures or movements, the use of particular words, the facial expression, and so on.

THE SUBJECTIVITY OF EXPERIENCE

Relational coaching accepts – and welcomes – the fact of the coach and client having distinct and different subjective experience and realities. It is this principle that makes relational coaching a relationship between human beings rather than an instrumental contract between a coach and coaching client. The instrumental contract sees the coach occupy a clearly defined role where they act upon the

client from a place of expert knowledge of coaching theory and technique. In this type of interaction, there is a risk that the client becomes dehumanised or made into an object to be *done to* rather than *related with*.

Welcoming the unique subjectivities of coach and client into the coaching relationship humanises them both. It offers the possibility of a more mutual, democratic relationship in which they both participate. The flow of information and experience between them is seen to be the source of meaning-making, learning and development. This is not to say that the relationship is equal – the very fact that one person is willing to share their concerns and anxieties while the other is there in service of the client's growth means that the relationship is (as Lewis Aron famously said in 1991, p. 33) 'mutual without being symmetrical'.

Bachkirova (2016) contrasts relational practice with the more traditional competency frame for coaching, based on knowledge and skills. Positioning the self in this way acknowledges the complexity and unpredictability of the coaching process which is often missed in more rational, linear and competency-based approaches. It offers a broader approach for clients facing complex challenges as questions regarding their context, role, situation and leadership arise.

Executive coaching clients often bring issues that affect their whole lives. The interventions of the coach emerge not only from an understanding of the client's context, presenting issues, psychological make-up and expressed goals, but from how the coach resonates with all these elements moment by moment (Bachkirova, 2016). In this way, coach and client are in an inter-subjective process of mutual and reciprocal resonance and influence.

WHAT DOES THE COACH BRING?

As we have said before, given the intersubjective, resonant elements of a relational orientation to coaching, it is necessary for relational coaches to invest time and energy in knowing themselves and being aware of what they bring to the coaching relationship. What they bring will inform their subjective experience and resonance with the client moment by moment.

Elements that Inform Both Coach and Client Subjectivities Include:

Age	Gender identity
Nationality	Sexual orientation
Race and ethnicity	Beliefs
Sex	Values

Preferences
Mental models and scripts
Education and training
Life stage
Life history
Personality
Career history
Relationship to power
Understanding of adult learning approaches
Ecological concerns
Political affiliations
Beliefs about and understanding of organisations
Beliefs about economic principles and forces
Social conscience and engagement
Current sociopolitical trends and events
Client organisation, sector and context
Self-awareness
Reflection skills

These elements cannot be spirited away as if they do not exist. We favour naming this from the very start of the coaching relationship in order that it can be explicitly recognised as part of the relational field. It is important that both parties feel able to raise the matter of their similarities and differences, be they a source of interesting learning, or potential misunderstandings or assumptions.

Normally, at the start of coaching there is an initial session where coach and client look each other over and decide whether they want to work together. It may be that the client is meeting a number of coaches in order to choose one – the so-called 'chemistry meeting'. Or it may be that the coach has been allocated or recommended. In any case, the coach will be beginning to build some agreement about the goals, tasks and bonds described in Chapter 2. They may ask what made the client choose them, if indeed they were chosen, or they may ask how the client feels about their being allocated. Some coaches may choose not to immediately discuss differences until such time as the topic becomes obviously relevant in the conversation. They believe that naming a difference might imply an over-emphasis on its importance. However, research into cross-racial dyads (Baptiste-Grant et al., 2024) suggests that both clients and coaches believe that talking about racial and other significant differences in identity leads to a deeper, more meaningful conversation.

Many coaches prefer to take the time at the start to share a detailed exchange about their social or intersectional identity. In this way, the client is not being asked to name their concerns or assumptions, they are simply sharing who they are in more detail than is perhaps normally done at the start of a relationship. A middle ground between these two positions is for the coach to make a statement along the lines of:

> 'I am aware that I am a white British woman, raised in a predominantly white neighbourhood, while you are an Indian woman who has lived

and worked all over the world. I am also aware that I am quite a lot older than you. I hope it will be OK if sometimes I ask you what meaning a situation has for you that it might not have for me, and I very much hope you will let me know if I am making assumptions or completely missing the importance of something.'

Relational coaching does not seek an ideal of objective reality but recognises the inevitable subjectivity in all human relationships. It makes use of these similarities and differences to examine how meaning is being made by the coach, the coaching client and in the coaching relationship. Meaning is not seen as incontrovertible truth, but as a momentary way of thinking and perceiving that has implications for how we feel, think and act in the world. Relational coaching also embraces the fact that meanings can only ever be partial; they are prone to evolve as more information becomes available. This can be at once a source of anxiety for those who need to believe in certainty and who associate this with safety, but it also provides creative possibilities for evaluating, assessing and changing the meanings we are making. This is very helpful where it is limiting our potential and capacity for responding to situations.

Exercise 3.3

On Your Own

What Do You Bring to the Coaching Relationship?

Make a list or mind-map of all the significant life experiences, learning and influences that have shaped – and continue to shape – who you are as a person. How do they affect you as a coach?

What assumptions and working models do you have available to you, including theories and skills? Think about how much you lead with these in your coaching as opposed to allowing space for discovery.

CREATING MEANING IN COLLABORATION

From a relational perspective, coaching is seen as a collaborative enquiry process. 'Collaborative' because coach and client work together to explore the meaning the client is making – and the meaning they are making together – about the client's presenting issues, context, needs, focus and new issues, as they emerge over the course of the engagement. One of the things that can surprise coaches moving towards a more relational orientation is how often in supervision with

a relational supervisor they are asked about what they are experiencing, feeling and thinking in relation to their coaching clients.

Enquiry emphasises the exploratory and reflective nature of this coaching approach. Instead of following a predetermined protocol, coach and client engage in a free-flowing conversation and the coach pays attention to how the client has formed particular meanings about their situation and developmental needs, what might be potentially limiting their development, and what might need to happen in service of supporting their development. The coach also pays close attention to the meaning he or she is making about the experience of being with the client, and how he or she is being impacted by the content of what is being said, and also the feeling of being with the client, including sensations and emotions. This is because relational coaching pays close attention to the ways in which human beings influence one another's experience in relationship at both conscious and unconscious levels. The relational coach actively works to bring more of what is felt but as yet unacknowledged into the shared relational space of the coaching relationship. This requires the coach to be aware of and reflect on the ways he or she is making meaning, recognise the constructed nature of these meanings and be alert to assumptions and potential blind spots (see the next chapter for a detailed exploration of how to do this in practice).

Cavanagh (2006) describes how knowledge is an emergent property, as opposed to something finite which is either acquired or lost – for example, in forgetfulness. Access to knowledge moment by moment is 'shaped by our relationship to self and other – we can be rendered dumbstruck and lose our capacity to think in

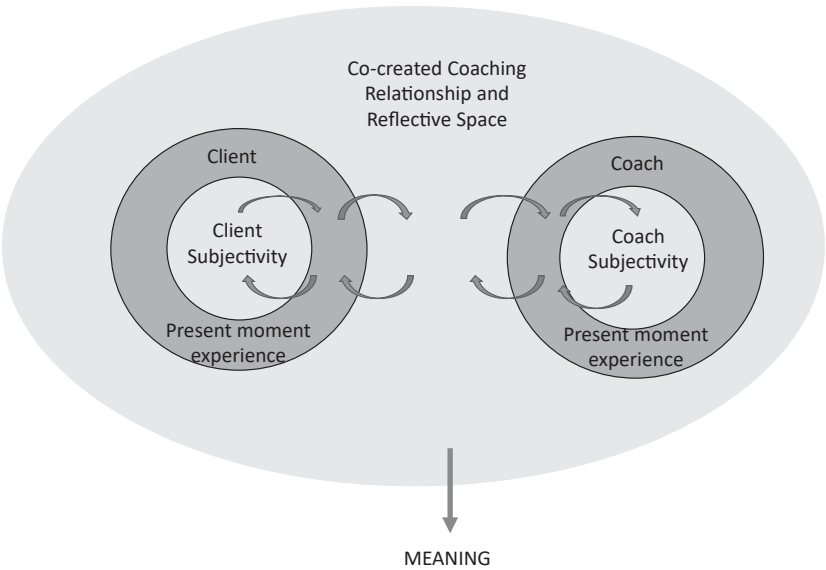

Figure 3.1 Relational Coaching as a Collaborative Meaning-making Process
Source: Adapted from Cavicchia and Gilbert, 2018

a particular conversation where we are being bombarded by questions' (p. 331). With this, Cavanagh is commenting on the potential disbenefit of those coaching approaches that hold that the client has all the answers within them and that the coach needs to draw them out through questioning.

A relational, intersubjective orientation sees knowledge as arising where the subjectivities of coach and client interact; differences can be explored and negotiated. In this way, the coaching conversation is 'an organization that emerges from the complex interaction of the coach and client – it is a co-created conversation' (Cavanagh, 2006, p. 337). This is also the territory of associative intelligence and 'bricolage' – a term coined by Lévi-Strauss (1968) – where new connections stand to be made by combining different realms of knowing and experience. In this co-creation, mental models and theoretical knowledge are brought together and constructed, then emerge informed by the uniqueness of each moment from 'within the complex responsive dialogue that goes on between people and within the person' (ibid., p. 332).

Exercise 3.4

With a Colleague

Dialectic Enquiry

Conduct what is known as a 'dialectic enquiry'. Sit opposite each other with your knees about a foot apart (in other words, close enough to be intimate but not on top of each other). Set a timer for ten or fifteen minutes and commit yourself to the conversation.

Start by sitting in silence for a minute, just being in each other's presence and being aware of what thoughts, feelings and noticings arise in you. Then begin to speak, taking it in turns to share what comes up for you as you sit together. Allow yourself to be stirred and to respond to what your partner says and does.

MEANING IS SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED

Implicit in a relational orientation to coaching and meaning-making is the assumption that meaning is something that is socially constructed (Burr, 2003; Gergen 1985, 2009). Facts as observable phenomena might initiate the meaning-making process, but different individuals will make different meanings from the same observed facts based on their own subjectivity (Spinelli, 2010). Relational coaching adopts the perspective that meaning is subjective and socially constructed and it is to this process of meaning-making in relationship that coaches give their attention with their clients.

In relational coaching, the focus is not on seeking universal truths or employing past protocols and logic. Rather, the focus is on the process whereby the client constructs meaning in relation to their situation. If the meaning is limiting in some way, it might need to evolve. The coach supports both exploring the meaning-making process and also acting as a catalyst for experimentation with new ways of making meaning and identifying the implications of these for the client's development.

AWARENESS

Many individuals have limited awareness of how they construct and organise their experience moment by moment; they simply take their experience as given. They identify with their own thoughts and take them to be who they are. As such, they operate and behave in a kind of mechanical way, a bit like an aircraft on automatic pilot.

A central skill and orientation in a relational approach to coaching is the cultivation of awareness. In Gestalt approaches to coaching, awareness is seen as crucial to development and increasing awareness of 'what is', is in and of itself a powerful driver in facilitating learning and growth (Perls, 1992). In this paradoxical theory of change as expressed by Beisser (1970) change happens not when we try to be something we are not, but when we fully experience what we are.

Awareness is the ability to observe ourselves and our experience moment by moment with ever-increasing breadth, depth and subtlety. This is not limited to the content of our minds and the thoughts we are having, but includes sensations, emotions, areas of tension or relaxation, movement impulses and how we are taking in information through our five senses. These are considered to be equally (and sometimes even more) reliable sources of information about what is going on in an individual's experience than thinking and thoughts alone.

By enquiring and by noticing cues, the coach helps the client to be aware of what is happening for them, including separating 'real time' experience from our expectations, assumptions and internal commentary.

Without awareness, or with less developed levels of awareness, we risk operating from unexamined beliefs and ideas we have formed about the world, ourselves and others. By raising awareness of beliefs, sensations, assumptions, historical narratives and emotions, we become more able to see the ways in which we and our clients are constructing our experience moment by moment and in relation to particular situations and coaching issues. When we become more aware in this way, it can be said that instead of 'being had by' our experience we now 'have it'.

Relational coaching focuses on exploring with the client the way they are experiencing their current situation and challenges, then constructing development goals

as a result. The focus is on increasing awareness of what might be getting in the way of a client's optimal responsiveness to the situation(s) they face. The goal in this orientation is not simply to learn new skills and increase confidence – although these can be useful – but rather to support the client to increase their capacity for self-observation and meaning-making in service of increasing capacity and perspective for responding to their situation(s). When we observe our patterns of thinking and feeling and, as they are now in awareness, test them and evaluate them and understand where they might be holding us back, we can reframe them where necessary. Then we can experiment with new and different ways of thinking and behaving.

As is often the case in a relational approach to coaching, it is as important for coaches to be cultivating awareness in themselves as well as supporting clients to do the same.

CORE ORGANISERS OF PRESENT-MOMENT EXPERIENCE

Ogden and Minton (2000) have developed a very helpful map for supporting us as coaches – and our clients – to cultivate awareness. Drawing on neuroscience research, Gestalt psychology and principles of Hakomi psychotherapy, this map describes the ways in which human beings are constantly organising and constructing their experience moment by moment. This is always happening whether we are aware of it or not.

The map of the core organisers supports clients to develop the reflection skills necessary for many leaders facing complex challenges and uncharted situations where pre-existing protocols are limited. Leaders are thus enabled to relax attachment to fantasies of control and develop the awareness and skill to reflect and respond more creatively to the situations they find themselves in.

Core organisers support the coach and client in noticing what each is experiencing as well as the meaning each is making of the experience, the emotion that it gives rise to and the thoughts and behaviours that flow from it. Once we have awareness of these processes and patterns we can act upon them, we can explore and question our beliefs, assumptions and the meaning we are making from experience, we can evaluate this in terms of its effectiveness and usefulness for the situation we/the client currently find ourselves in.

The core organisers are:

- Cognition
- Emotion
- Five-sense perception
- Movement impulses
- Sensation

These represent five different territories and functions of the nervous system as it responds to stimuli from the environment. They also represent different stages in the evolution of the human brain from the early 'reptilian brain' which deals with sensations, through the later 'limbic system' of emotions and social engagement, and finally the newest part of the brain responsible for registering and representing experience in cognition and thinking, the 'neo-cortex'.

Historically, Western thought has privileged the functioning of the neo-cortex, enshrined in Descartes's famous saying, 'I think, therefore I am'. This is partly because often what most people have greater access to and experience of is their thoughts, and this has led to the erroneous assumption that because we can be aware of thinking, this must be the most important function of the brain (McGilchrist, 2019). Neuroscience research has shown that before we become aware of a thought, our nervous system and other parts of the brain have processed vast amounts of sensory information, which shape the particular thought that arises and we become aware of.

The nervous system processes information entering through the senses in either a 'top down' or 'bottom up' way. Top-down processing refers to cognition leading. Our thoughts, memories, beliefs and the meaning we have made from experience act as maps for making sense of our somatic (bodily) experience and for managing it. 'Bottom up' refers to information and stimuli that move from sensation in the core organisers upwards through our impulse to movement, perceptions and emotions to our thoughts, memories and beliefs.

Both directions are necessary and can be made use of in coaching for helping clients to understand how they are making sense of their experience. Cognitive behavioural approaches, for example, make use of top-down processing, whereas Gestalt approaches focus on exploring body sensations, posture and movement impulses, using bottom-up processing to track the way in which we experience and make sense of experience.

USING THE CORE ORGANISERS TO CULTIVATE AWARENESS

Over-emphasising the role of the neo-cortex means that many of us and our clients have been educated in ways that privilege thinking and logic over a fuller embodied experience. *All* the core organisers are sources of information about how we are experiencing a particular situation or challenge, not just our thoughts. From a relational perspective, we need to cultivate ever-increasing awareness of the totality of our experience moment by moment in order to enquire collaboratively with our clients in service of new discoveries, learning and change.

The map of the core organisers acts as a navigation aid for helping us to discern which of the core organisers we are most in touch with. For many of us and our clients this will be cognition – we will know what we think but may find it harder to know what we feel. For others, they may be more in touch with sensations and have less access or awareness of how they think about their experience. We can then use the map to develop greater sensitivity to those core organisers we and our clients are less able to notice. This must happen first in ourselves as coaches in order to then be able to support this in our coaching clients.

Exercise 3.5

On Your Own

Scanning Your Core Organisers

The neuroscientist Daniel Siegel (2010; 2018) has shown that where attention goes, neurons fire, and that when neurons fire they form and strengthen connections. This proven neuroscientific principle underpins the use of the core organisers. By simply directing our attention to the different core organisers, we are increasing neural firing and the ability of our mind to make new connections.

Take a moment to think of each of the core organisers – cognition, emotion, five sense perception, movement impulses, sensation – and see if you can sense how much access you have to each. Do a scan of your bodymind and see what is figural.

Call to mind a recent pleasurable or enjoyable event or experience. Go back over the experience in your mind remembering as much detail as you can.

As you remember the experience in the present moment, direct your attention to the different core organisers.

What sensations are you aware of?

Spend a little time experiencing these sensations in the body. These may include stillness, a sense of relaxation in the muscles or, if the experience is one of excitement, you might feel some energy building. You may notice how the body moves as you breathe. You may also experience an absence of sensation. Notice what that is like.

As you focus in on any sensations, notice movement impulses, including stillness. Don't immediately put your impulse to movement into action; sit with it and see how it amplifies as you pay attention to it. Later, slowly and mindfully make the action you have felt drawn to and see what arises for you.

Notice what you are picking up through your senses – temperature and movement of air on the skin, sounds, sights, smells.

Notice emotion.

Notice thoughts.

Do the exercise again, but this time think of a mildly challenging situation. Track your core organisers in the same way.

What do you notice?

Warning: a few people, often those who are survivors of trauma of some kind, find focusing deeply into their body to be dysregulating for them. Make sure to notice if you become tense as you do this exercise, or if your client does if you introduce it to them. If that happens, come back to the present and the contact between you.

RIGHT BRAIN TO RIGHT BRAIN COMMUNICATION

Relational approaches and relational neuroscience have demonstrated the ways in which human beings subtly and profoundly shape one another's experience of self and other in relationship (Schore and Schore, 2008; Schore, 2009).

Example: as the supervision group met for its regular meeting, one of the women started by saying that her husband had just received a serious cancer diagnosis. He had little time to live. The supervisee spoke calmly but her voice quavered as she shared her news. The supervisor felt her own eyes filling with tears as she resonated with her supervisee's barely hidden grief and she noticed another member of the group – a big, hitherto unexpressive man – reaching for a handkerchief to wipe his eyes.

Through increasing sensitivity to the core organisers, we can pick up unspoken hints from our clients about what they are experiencing that even they might not be aware of.

While relational coaching makes use of traditional coaching theory such as contracting, focussing on goals where appropriate, asking good questions and so on, there is equal emphasis given to the experience of being with our clients and the processes and dynamics of relating between us. Those processes are full of information about the client, the coach and also the dynamic of the relationship between them. Other factors that might be influencing the client and the coaching from outside of the coaching relationship may also arise (see next chapter for a detailed exploration of these processes and how to make use of them in the coaching relationship). Rather like developing a more and more sensitive telescope for seeing further and further into space, cultivating awareness and using the core organisers allows us to see more and more deeply into the relationship between coach and client.

USING THE CORE ORGANISERS

The core organisers map offers a systematic way to pay close attention to the coach and client experience moment by moment.

The coach holds the map in mind and, with a present-moment focus – i.e., noticing when a core organiser is being expressed as the client speaks, directs the client's attention to it and then invites them to explore others. This approach can be used whenever the coach wishes to raise awareness of how the client is organising their experience and responses in relation to a presenting issue. The coach then tracks with the client what emerges.

The process has three stages:

1 The coach notices a core organiser as it is manifested in the present and gently comments on it – for example, 'You frown as you say that' or 'I notice that you tensed your shoulders just then – did you notice?' or 'I am beginning to feel anxious – are you too?' See other examples below.
2 The coach directs the client's attention to the other different core organisers – for example, 'and as you pay attention to that tightness in your throat, does an emotion come up?' or 'and when you have that thought, what image comes to mind? What do you notice happening inside?'
3 As awareness increases, the coach watches for shifts in energy, emotion, thoughts, insight indicating new learning and perspective. When shifts occur, these are integrated, again using the core organisers.

The more we direct the client's attention to different core organisers, the more we increase awareness and the possibility for change to happen.

Examples of Present-moment Language of Awareness Raising Using the Core Organisers

'What does it feel like now to be telling me about this conversation with your manager?' (sensation)

'As you remember now the difficult conversation you had, do you notice any sensations?' (sensation)

'As you tell me about the responsibility you feel in your new role, your hands move to cover your chest, what is that like?' (movement impulse)

'Imagine you are meeting your new team for the first time. As you hold them in your mind's eye, what do you notice?' (sense perception – visual channel)

'As you imagine now the meeting with your team, is there any emotion?' (emotion)

'As you notice that you feel prepared for the product launch, what emotion are you aware of, if any?' (emotion)

'As you focus your senses on that, is there a thought that comes?' (cognition)

The more we draw attention to different core organisers, we are increasing neural firing in the client's brain. This supports enquiry and discovery, and can raise energy for taking action once a new possibility has emerged, which is very useful if a client is initially not sure about how they think and feel about their presenting issue(s) and what action to take.

REGULATING ANXIETY

Where a client may already be anxious, or where anxiety arises as a result of using the core organisers to enquire, the coach needs to stop drawing attention to the range of core organisers, which will increase energy, and focus instead on settling and regulating the client's nervous system. This can be achieved by focusing on one core organiser only, typically sensation in the peripheral nervous system (see exercise in Chapter 4, focusing on arms and legs where we talk about embodiment) or inviting the client to place both feet on the ground and focus on the sensations in them. These two processes – first, drawing attention to all the core organisers and second, focusing only on one – can be thought of as an accelerator and brake. They help to ensure that the client remains sufficiently engaged for insight to occur, but not so activated in their nervous system that their ability to reflect and enquire is hijacked by anxiety-induced reactions.

Window of Tolerance

Dan Siegel (1999) coined the term 'window of tolerance' to describe the zone of nervous system arousal in which we are able to function and engage with other people most effectively. As a result of our development histories, each of us will be able to tolerate varying degrees of intensity of emotion and physiological arousal. This will vary from individual to individual and in relation to different contexts and events. One coaching client, seeing a frown on his boss's face, may notice a flutter of anxiety and yet be able to remain thoughtful and curious about what might be going on for the boss and continue to engage in conversation. Another client, on seeing his boss frown, might be flooded with anxiety and, imagining that the boss is furious with them, avert their gaze, blush and become tongue-tied. This is described as being outside one's window of tolerance. When we and our clients are operating within our windows of tolerance, we are able to notice our feelings and thoughts in the present moment and make choices about how we wish to respond. When we cannot tolerate mounting levels of anxiety, we lose our capacity for reflection and will react unthinkingly in order to try and regain a sense of safety.

This is because the window of tolerance is connected to the functioning of the autonomic nervous system which has evolved to take swift action in response to actual or perceived threats to our safety. As it is 'autonomic', it functions independently of our conscious thinking processes. An individual's life experience, including trauma, plays a fundamental role in determining the sensitivity of our nervous systems to actual or perceived threat and our capacity to remain in our window of tolerance.

It is possible for coaches to encounter clients with extreme symptoms of trauma and post-traumatic stress. Should this happen, sometimes as a result of a traumatic event outside of the coaching relationship or if some current stress has triggered an old trauma, coaches need to consult with their supervisor on how best to support and proceed with a client. This can include referral to a trauma specialist where required, potentially in addition to, not necessarily instead of, the coaching.

However, given the pressures of modern organisational environments, clients do often display signs of nervous system activation that need to be attended to in the coaching relationship. The autonomic nervous system responds to increased stimulation, stressful experiences and overwhelm in two ways: either by increasing energy via the sympathetic nervous system, as is the case with fight, flight and high freeze responses to stressful experiences, where we would be at the top end or 'spinning out' of our window of tolerance – this is referred to as 'hyper-arousal',

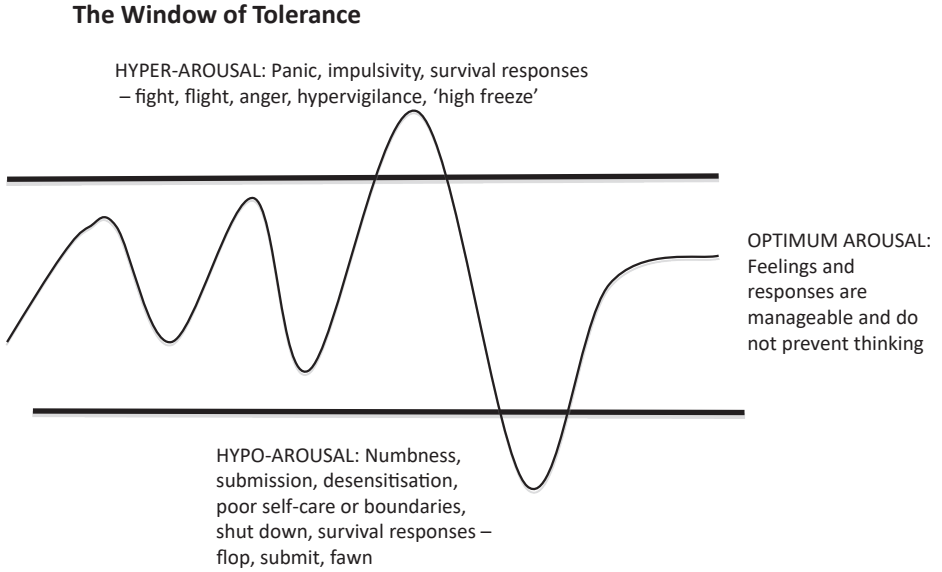

Figure 3.2 The Window of Tolerance
Source: Diagram from Joyce and Sills (2018); Based on Ogden et al. (2006)

or by reducing energy via the parasympathetic nervous system as in flop, fawn and submit responses, where we would be at the bottom or 'dropping out' of our window of tolerance – this is referred to as 'hypo-arousal'.

Both responses result in a number of experiences that affect a coach and client's ability to remain thoughtful, present-moment focused, reflective and responsive. This is primarily because the nervous system interrupts the functioning of the neo-cortex so that energy is redirected to the muscles in the case of hyper-arousal or simply shuts down the mind and body in the case of hypo-arousal.

Effects of Hyper-arousal

- Feeling anxious
- Going off sick
- Having angry outbursts and shouting at staff
- Inability to concentrate or focus
- Reduced ability to notice what is happening, reflect and consider a range of possible interpretations of events
- Automatic assumptions of threat and negative thoughts
- Heightened self-criticism
- Rash and impulsive action

Effects of Hypo-arousal

- Feeling numb
- Absence of any emotion
- Flat energy
- Going through the motions
- Mindlessly doing what they are told
- Inability to think and reflect
- Withdrawal and distancing from others (including the coach)
- Sense of hopelessness and disconnection from resources

Understanding the workings of the autonomic nervous system allows relational coaches to attend to their and their clients' levels of nervous system activation and resource themselves and their clients to remain within or return to their window of tolerance if they have 'spun' or 'dropped' out. This is not only relevant for managing the effects of stress, but also for creating and maintaining conditions in which the client can learn. Where a client is at the edges or outside of their window of tolerance, their capacity to make use of the relationship with coach and reflect on their experience in service of developing new insight and perspective will be reduced or non-existent.

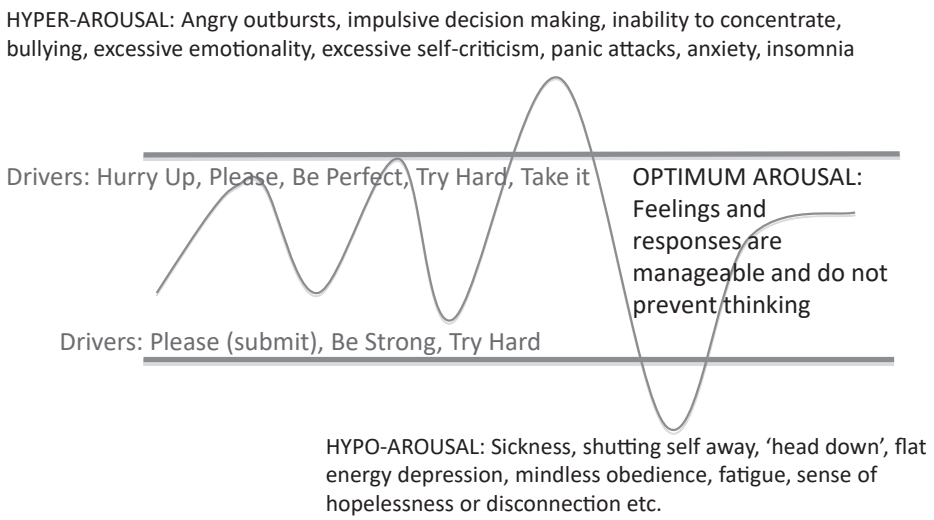

Figure 3.3 Typical Stress Behaviours in the Workplace
Source: Diagram adapted from Joyce and Sills (2018); Based on Siegel (1999) and Ogden et al. (2006)

Supporting the Client to Return to the Window of Tolerance

Resourcing the Client

Where a client is hypo-aroused in the face of overwhelm, the coach can suggest resourcing experiments to support increasing energy such as movement, walking together with the coach in nature, inviting the client to tap their arms and legs to stimulate sensation.

When a client is hyper-aroused, the coach may suggest resourcing experiments intended to reduce energy production in the nervous system. Walking briskly can help to discharge energy, as well as body scans paying attention to the peripheral nervous system (arms and legs), or sensing one's feet on the ground, taking some deep breaths and lengthening the out breath relative to the in breath. So called 'butterfly tapping' (the client crosses their arms across their chest and alternately taps one shoulder or upper arm and then the other) is also effective.

As with all experiments, these need to be negotiated with clients to discover what the client can tolerate or feel comfortable with. As we are all unique, each of us will have or can discover strategies that work particularly well and others less so. The coach can be a useful resource in discovering the different ways the client can learn to regulate energy and remain in their window of tolerance.

Social Engagement

It is important also to remember the role of the coach and the coaching relationship in helping coaching clients to regulate their nervous system arousal. Being in the presence of a coach who can remain in their window of tolerance, think and communicate calmly and clearly when the client might be feeling anxious, can have a profound effect on enabling the coaching client to regulate their own nervous system.

Behavioural Drivers

Clients who enjoy using models and theories might find a model from transactional analysis useful to help them monitor their stress levels and functioning. It is the concept of Behavioural Drivers, first developed by Kahler and Capers in 1974 and elaborated by Kahler (1975). Under stress, trying to avoid anxiety, we often *stop feeling and thinking* to engage in our familiar Driver Behaviour. The drivers are:

- Be Perfect
- Try Hard
- Please
- Be Strong
- Hurry Up
- Take It (more recently discovered by Tudor, 2008)

What happens is that the qualities that are usually our strengths become knee-jerk reactions and we act as if our survival depends on us behaving in this way.

- Excellence becomes paralysing perfectionism.
- Perseverance becomes 'hamster-wheeling'.
- Friendly cooperation slides into mindless pleasing.
- A sense of responsibility turns into shouldering everything and burning out.
- Speed and multitasking becomes agitation and inability to complete.
- Entrepreneurial thinking becomes self-serving pushiness.

The effect of Driver Behaviour is not necessarily catastrophic for an organisation – indeed, it might be relying on its employees for that very behaviour; it may be the organisation's 'cultural Driver'. The damage, however, will be that in addition to being unhealthy for the individual, it is an old familiar pattern, so, by definition, nothing new and creative can come out of it. When the organisation needs to respond to a changing landscape, 'doing what we've always done' is only going to 'get us what we always got'.

It is important for our clients – and ourselves – to get to know our 'Drivers', both when they are the strengths and qualities (sometimes called 'working styles') that are part of our successful way of being in the world, and also when under stress they become signs of our being at the very edge of our Window of Tolerance (see Figure 3.3). Coaches can help clients to recognise their signs and become familiar with the triggers. That way, they can pause to think and find other ways of regulating their anxiety and then choose what they want to do. Gradually over time, the capacity of their window of tolerance can be increased.

Mindful Awareness

An important element here, which can appear counter-intuitive when set against linear and directional approaches to change, is that by becoming more aware of how we are organising our experience, we are increasing our capacity to notice and experience what **is**, which in turn can result in shifts in mental and emotional state, and perspective. As such, working with the core organisers provides a way of deepening awareness in service of change.

As mentioned earlier, the process of increasing awareness is in and of itself a powerful enabler of change. Once we and our clients become more aware of how we are constructing our experience moment by moment, the assumptions behind our actions, or the meaning of a particular niggling anxiety, it becomes easier to see what the best next step might be in service of our development and growth. For example, identifying anxiety and its sources can lead to exploring what forms of support might be needed by an individual to reduce anxiety. It will allow them to take a step into a new territory of being and acting. Surfacing a limiting belief about the consequences of a possible course of action (such as believing that questioning authority will lead to dismissal) allows for the belief to be acknowledged, its origins understood, and for it to be reality tested in the present situation a client finds themselves in.

CONCLUSION

Cultivating awareness is the cornerstone of a relational approach to coaching and the process of collaborative enquiry. Without awareness, coach and client will be limited by existing and familiar patterns of thinking and acting. With increased awareness, the relational coach can pay closer attention to not just the verbal content of the coaching, but also the felt sense of being with the client. All experience is treated as 'potentially relevant' by the coach. Focusing on the different

core organisers increases and deepens awareness of a situation. In terms of the paradoxical theory of change, increased awareness supports the emergence of new possibilities.

Research shows that real change happens when, with our prefrontal cortex firmly online (in other words, in the present, in awareness) acting as compassionate witness, we allow ourselves to experience some of our old pains and patterns. Exploring the core organisers in the way described above, is a very powerful way of achieving this.