

A Beautiful Way to Coach

Positive Psychology Coaching in Nature



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Foreword by Professor Peter Hawkins



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Three very senior partners in one of the ‘Big Four’ professional services firms were part of a group I was coaching. They were all sharing how ‘time poor’ they were and were competing for who was the most pressurised and exhausted. I reflected back to them how easily I could share their feelings and, despite the fact that all of us are in the most privileged 1% of humanity, we can feel like victims of the demands we have created. I mentioned that in the universe, there is infinite supply of time, and time was not something you save or bank, so invited them to experiment with reframing ‘being time poor’ as being ‘choice rich’. Suddenly, the whole dialogue changed in tone and texture. There was a deeper sharing of how we could help each other make better choices.

So many of the leaders I work with become exhausted, because they are working from effort, which is a limited energy supply, and not from source, which is a flow of energy that the more you use, the more it replenishes. To work from source requires an eco-centric rather than an individualistic ego-centric form of leadership. It requires us to work collectively with teams, so they become more than the sum of their members, and create synergistic partnerships across the organisation and between the organisation and all its partners and stakeholders.¹ Most of all, it requires a new relationship between the human and the ‘more-than-human’ world. To work from source is to recognise that we, as humans, are the youngest child of creation and have much to learn from all aspects of nature. They have all been on this planet much, much longer than we have. To see the wider ecology as not ‘something’ out there we can utilise and exploit, but as the infinitely generous living context we are all

nested within, and which flows through us and is part of us, in the same way we are an inextricable part of nature.

Executive coaching and leadership development, as it has developed over the last 40 years, has a wide continuum of approaches. At one end is the coming alongside and supporting leaders in the midst of their current challenges. This is often carried out in a short session of 1, 1.5 or 2 hours in the middle of their work day, often in their own office or on a video call. It has the strength of being ‘in media res’ – right in the middle of a busy life. Its weakness is that the individual is often coming out of other meetings and challenges, and then returning to their usual overwhelm of e-mails, meetings and demands. This can lead them to spend the time in coaching on the immediate, what is uppermost and recent for them, rather than being in a more reflective space, with a wider time horizon and more systemic perspective.

At the other end of the coaching continuum is the retreat or time-out. This can be completely away from all the normal triggers of the office setting for a day, several days or a week or longer. Time to step away from all the pressures that keep the leaders in their normal role and way of being and take stock, of their work and life. They have the time and space to work at depth on what needs to be the next transition in their life, and their way of thinking, doing and being. This is best in a retreat setting, where the leader can, albeit briefly, exit the crowded human stage and return to being in and learning from nature and the more-than-human world.

This latter type of coaching takes many forms. The School of Lost Borders provides ‘Vision Quests’ in the Arizona desert. These powerful retreats include periods of ‘soloing’, spending time apart from all other human beings, while deeply in relationship with the wider, more-than-human world around them. The participants are carefully prepared and helped to discover their own personal inquiry, and the most important question they can take with them into their solo time. Afterwards they are welcomed back into the community to share their newly discovered learning. This is a deep approach that builds on centuries of ‘rites of passage’ ceremonies of many indigenous peoples and spiritual lineages. My good friend Giles Hutchins provides Immersion Leadership Training in a woodland in Sussex, UK,² which provides parallel experiences where the participants can step back from their usual routines and be supported to go

deeply within themselves while going out into nature. Fiona Parashar, the author of this book, leads Vision and Purpose days for executives on the edge of Bath, UK.

We all need ‘time-outs’ to step back and reset our compass and our life’s path. I first read Sidney Jourard’s book *The Transparent Self* back in the 1970s when he was also making pleas for the creation of ‘time-out’ centres. But this is not a recent phenomenon. Christian Monasteries, Zen Dogens, Sufi Khankahs fulfilled this role for centuries. Time-outs, where leaders caught up in their work demands, and the many psychological entanglements that accompany their role, could cast off their labels, role costumes and work pressures and return to their simple humanity.

It is only in a well-constructed ‘time-out’ that we can step back from the immediate problems, issues and questions, and take a wider systemic view, where we can begin to see how local issues are just a small part of the wider interconnected web and see the flow of life over longer time horizons.

I was privileged to speak at a conference on new and old forms of leadership, taking the platform after a Native American Elder, who spoke profoundly of how true leadership comes when we can take decisions with the awareness of the seven generations that come before us and the seven generations that come after us, and all living beings with whom we share this moment in time. As I got up to speak, I was acutely aware how local, short-term and human-centric our approaches to leadership in the white privileged west had become.

So what are the key enabling structures, processes and tools of all ‘time-out centres’? They require:

- A deep holding of space, which has psychological safety, well-contracted boundaries and a clear intention from both parties.
- A deep compassionate and intimate listening from both parties, not just to each other, but to what is emerging in and from life.
- A humility to learn from everything that emerges and that life presents to us.
- A recognition that, although retreat guides, coaches and facilitators have an important role to play, that they are the junior partners, and the senior teacher is the wider ecology and the flow of life.
- A quest to find deeper meaning in our work and our lives.

Fiona Parashar has developed many well-crafted approaches and tools for assisting these processes, which have stood the test of time,

and enabled many leaders to find greater purpose, deeper meaning, more fulfilling engagement in their work and life, and to operate more from source than exhaustible effort.

She also has taught many other coaches to draw on these approaches, so the work could multiply and reach many others. Now she has created the wonderful gift of this book that provides the tools – approaches, guidance, encouragement and inspiration – for coaches round the world to expand and deepen their work.

Remember, the beauty of this work is that as you work deeper as a coach, you touch a life-giving seam, where both leader and coach leave the engagement deeply moved and replenished.

Professor Peter Hawkins, Barrow Castle, Bath

NOTES

- 1 Hawkins, P. (2021). *Leadership Team Coaching: Developing Collective Transformational Leadership* (4th ed.). London: Kogan Page.
- 2 Hutchins, G., & Storm, L. (2019). *Regenerative Leadership: The DNA of Life Affirming 21st Century Organizations*. UK: Wordzworth.
- 3 Jourard, S. (1971). *The Transparent Self*. New York: Van Nostrand.