

## Creating shift in the room

An excerpt from *Coaching, Mentoring and Organizational Consultancy: Supervision and Development*

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We frequently talk about the coach or supervisor's ability to create 'shift in the room'. For those unfamiliar with the term, it sounds like just another piece of professional jargon – one that has all the attributes of 'apple pie' and 'motherhood' but no immediate clarity as to what it is or how one can learn to create it.

When teaching this concept, some course participants, who are finding it hard to move from a more 'expert' style of coaching to the transformational coaching we advocate, have experienced us as browbeating a coachee into identifying a 'felt shift', when we have noticed it occurring. Initially, they are not sure what they are looking for and don't see anything that gives flesh to this idea. They do not yet have a concept, or an experience, of patterns being cut through by an intervention that creates palpable impact. At that moment of impact, the coachee experiences an emotional realisation of the complex shape of their situation, in a new and helpfully fresh way. From such an experience of visceral comprehension, a different way of being, doing or seeing things, more or less intuitively arises. Since the process that generates the shift is to a large extent non-rational rather than intellectual, it can be difficult to value, or cognitively grasp at first.

When we begin training coaches as supervisors, we start with the following key premises:

- Coaching / supervision is 'transformational' in intent.
- Working in the moment gets people to be, and do, differently.
- We aim to get people to feel the necessary change, not just think about it.
- It requires 'fearless compassion' on the part of the supervisor.

One of the central elements in our coaching dialogue is how we use the feedback we are receiving. This tells us whether a 'shift in the room' has been created.

### What does 'shift in the room' look like?

The first issue to tackle is 'what does it look like?' or 'how would we recognise it when it occurs?' Our long experience of working with this phenomenon shows that it is easily observable, once people understand what they are looking for. Apart from anything else it is something that will be felt physically by the coachee. The phenomena we typically observe when 'shift in the room' is achieved are:

- **Physical movement:** At the moment of shift, people are physically moved by the experience. I saw it most clearly when someone was asked, 'so why have you never done that then?' He had been operating from a belief system that assumed that others had the responsibility for change and not him. This question happened to be the remark that cut through his current limiting assumption. The person, who was sitting forward in his chair, leaned right back onto the back legs of the chair, put his hands behind his head and waited there a few seconds – as though fully absorbing the impact of the question – and then slowly moved forward again to say, 'You know, I had never thought of it like that – you're right – it is my job to make it happen, isn't it?' This person showed a typical physical reaction to a transformational challenge

that had truly connected. It is registered in the body, where we can observe it. Sometimes the shift is quite small, e.g. a slight flushing of the cheeks, or massive, e.g. the person rocks right back on their chair, but the impact is registered somatically and, therefore, observably.

- **A sharp intake of breath:** The body protects itself automatically from both physical and psychological external impact in similar ways. If one has been winded – either physically or psychologically – the body’s automatic response is to hold its breath, followed by a sharp intake of breath.
- **A change in mood:** Someone had been uncharacteristically closed and low in mood, when s/he was challenged that ‘you seem to be carrying the load for everyone else...’. This intervention triggered tears and a release of emotion that ‘cleared the air’ and helped the person to work through why they had become so stuck with their issue.
- **A change in the quality of the relationship:** Having been quite guarded and on edge with the supervisor, the supervisee relaxes and becomes much more engaged, open and warm, after some transformative work helped her to break through to a different ‘reality’, a significantly different perception about what is happening.

### Why do we need a felt shift?

‘Intellectual excitement’, ‘insight’ and ‘realisation’ modify the mental and emotional landscape, but only within the familiar range of behaviours a person already embodies. Transformational coaching or supervision is looking to expand the range of ways we can embody ourselves, and a measure of our success in engaging with this is the somatic recognition of such movement by the coachee or supervisee at key moments in the work. When we have created joint impact at physical, psychological and emotional levels with our intervention, then we have the beginning conditions of transformational change. For people who have not had much experience working in this way, the thought of trying to create impact at the physical, psychological and emotional levels may seem very difficult, if not impossible!

From one point of view they are right. The truth is that if we were to sit down to manufacture an intervention that will achieve all these goals, we are very unlikely to create such a complex change. We would be working from faulty assumptions that envisage:

- the coach/supervisor as the ‘expert’, who is using all his or her expertise to ‘fix’ the coachee’s issues;
- that the answers are, or should be, inside the supervisor’s head;
- That the coachee has, or is, the ‘problem to be fixed’.

However, we believe that both the problem and its solution are maintained in the space between people. By being fully ‘present’ in that space, we believe we will be presented with new possibilities for change. If you are not working to impose a solution, you have to work with and evaluate what is emerging between you. Each of you is giving the other feedback on what is working and what is not. Some of it is conscious and can be verbalized; and some of it can be picked up from non-verbal clues. The phenomenon of ‘shift in the room’ is part of that feedback between the people concerned, signalling that a specific sort of impact has been created. If we critically edit our responses to the other person, by evaluating whether the remarks will achieve the goals we have set, before we say them, that process would

effectively remove us from being in the moment and it would rule out the possibility of the situation itself suggesting its own solutions.

The situation suggesting its solution? This may seem 'New Age', and far removed from professional consultancy. For those who have experienced working closely with individuals or groups, whether as therapists or coaches, they know that if you can locate yourself 'in the moment', ideas, thoughts and questions arise from the situation, the quality of the dialogue, and the shared commitment of seeking new solutions for pressing dilemmas. Sometimes the ideas appear bizarre, inappropriate or plain crazy from a logical point of view. They are not manufactured, but pop-up in to the mind wholly formed. We know, however, that the more we trust these 'pop-ups', the more we can create 'shift in the room'. These thoughts or feelings often contain solutions to loosening the Gordian knot in front of us. Clearly, not every idea is a winner. Having a sense of what it looks like, when an intervention promises transformational impact, allows us to understand and develop potentially useful avenues of dialogue together.

This style of coaching/supervising appears highly risky from the 'expert' point of view, since we are committing ourselves to a situation where:

- we don't have control, because
- we don't have the answers, and
- we don't know where the conversation will take us.

However, when the transformational coaching process is allowed to unfold, it cuts through quickly and deftly to the core issue, and creates strong impact that engages busy people in learning, which reshapes the way they conduct themselves in the world. 'Shift in the room' is a key concept for transformational coaches, because it provides the systemic feedback that shows what to build upon and what to leave alone.