

Coaching with a ‘Beginner’s Mind’

We have countless things on our minds in our everyday lives. A narrative evolves that causes us to see ourselves at the mercy of not having enough time, of being stressed and being overwhelmed by the load we have to carry in our professional and private lives. We see the world, our colleagues and ourselves through certain glasses and we act according to these. That is actually a quite limiting way of perceiving and of being in the world.

It is very difficult to take off these glasses all by yourself, that is why relational coaching can offer a path to new conversations. Every great athlete in the world has a coaching partner. In terms of acknowledging our blind spots and the need to have someone who holds us accountable in a non-judgmental fashion, the coaching relationship can make a difference. Challenging our thinking in a relationship with a coach that brings “ruthless compassion”¹, can help to make more sense in our private and professional ways.

A desirable mindset for this relationship can be found in the concept of ‘Beginner’s Mind’², a term I am borrowing from Zen practice which asks to hold biases and prefabricated thinking lightly in order to be open to what is emerging as a new and different conversation. To be susceptible to what is emerging, we need to listen well to ourselves and to others without judgement, with empathy, and curiosity.

‘Beginner’s Mind’ and ‘Expert Mind’ are parts of a dualism. You can think of them as a pair like Ying and Yang. It is not about setting aside everything one knows, but not to cling to beliefs and assumptions too tightly, so as to be open to new emerging patterns within the thinking processes and more specifically new ways of behaving if old behavior is not helpful. The coaching process supports the client in thinking more deeply about questions and the issues at hand to improve performance and to find the right areas for personal and professional development.

The coaching process usually happens in 5 phases.

1. GOALS: Determine what the coachee wants to see at the end of the coaching process
2. SITUATION: Assess the coachee’s current behavioral patterns and strengths/weaknesses in relation to the coaching goal/s
3. OPTIONS: Identify the most appropriate strategy, steps and practice experiments for achieving the coachee’s coaching goals.
4. EXPERIMENTATION: Support the coachee in his/ her practice experiments.

¹ Peter Senge, *The Dance of Change*, p.201

² Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 1970, p.21

5. LEARNING: Assess the coachee's insights from the experiments and his/her development progress. Determine next steps.

Experience with clients shows that it is valuable and beneficial to take the time to assess one's own issues to feel more comfortable in making decisions that feel right. This process needs mindfulness, patience and attention so that we not only react on a situation but that we are able to act in order to make things better. This distinction is based on a deeper understanding of our interactions and behavioral patterns. Organizations are complex responsive processes, where people interact with each other out of which patterns of behavior emerge. Grounded in this view and in what has been found in studies about the efficacy of coaching, a strong relational access to coaching is what makes the difference.