

Speaking the unspeakable: Reflections on coaching shame-prone clients

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Synopsis

In the world of business shame isn't a word you often hear, we are more likely to refer to the fear of humiliation, a close cousin. Shame is that sense of sudden exposure in front of others coupled with an overwhelming desire to hide. Whilst we may not encounter shame-prone clients in our coaching work as often as in the therapy room, I think that an understanding of the dynamics of shame and how to work with it are highly relevant to our work as coaches.

Shame has its roots deep in our early relationships. As a small child a proneness to shame can arise as a consequence of repeatedly experiencing being judged and found lacking. These individuals develop a sense of not being 'ok' at their core, and grow up with a heightened sensitivity to shame. In one way you can view this as serving a useful survival purpose; it causes the individual to withdraw from close contact with others as a way of protecting against further hurt.

Since shame is rooted in relationship, and coaching is a relational process, I believe that there are many implications for us as coaches in how we understand and work with shame-prone clients.

[...]

The very nature of shame means that it is often the 'big unspoken secret'. Whilst it's not always necessary or appropriate to 'name' it, I have found that it can be liberating to 'speak the unspeakable'. In the session described in the paper, my client discovered that by revealing the depth of his vulnerability to me he could be 'adequately received' and not judged but supported in finding a way forward. As a coach, being able to simply 'be with' the client whilst they face their shame in the session with you is challenging but necessary, and we need to acknowledge the huge risk that they are taking – the risk of our disapproval. Over a number of sessions we were able to look at what sense he made of what had happened, and how he could move forward.

As a final word, I dare say that many of you would argue that this work belongs in the realm of therapy. I would disagree. Our work focused entirely on the client in his work context. Truly transformational coaching requires working at the edge of our own competence, and as Carlson & Kolodny say "this is new territory for us... and for most others who work with organizations..."

References

Carlson, C. & Kolodny, R. *Have We Been Missing Something Fundamental To Our (consulting) Work?* In preparation (2007)

Marion Gillie has a background in organisation development, works internationally as a coach and organisational consultant, and is based in the UK. She is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist and Gestalt Psychotherapist, with Masters degrees in Organisational Psychology and Gestalt Psychotherapy. She is Programme Director of the Postgraduate Diploma in Advanced Executive Coaching and the Master Practitioner Programme at the Academy of Executive Coaching in the UK, and she is a coach supervisor for programmes at Oxford Brookes University Business School. Marion is also a 'Next Generation' Faculty member of the Gestalt International Study Centre in Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

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